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House of Commons

Thursday 16 January 2025

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Members will have seen that today's Order Paper carries a memorial notice of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Heilgers, Royal Artillery, Member for Bury St Edmunds. Throughout this year, which marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the second world war, we will commemorate on the Order Paper those Members who gave their life in service of their country during world war two.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mr Speaker: I call James Naish—not here.

Community Spaces

2. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the contribution of community spaces to civil society. [902174]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): The Government are committed to creating thriving community spaces, including community centres, youth clubs and sports facilities, that offer vital resources for communities across the country. My Department is allocating over £85 million of funding in 2025-26 to create fit-for-purpose, welcoming spaces for young people. That includes launching the better youth spaces fund.

Jim Dickson: I thank the Minister for her reply. Swanscombe pavilion in my constituency is at the heart of the Swanscombe community. It hosted dedicated lunch clubs for older people, provided a hub for local sports teams, and was a venue that local people could hire for parties. The building has fallen into disrepair, and the town council is searching desperately for the funds to rebuild or refurbish it, having been unable to obtain funding from the youth investment fund or the community ownership fund. What guidance could the Minister offer on bringing this crucial building back into community use?

Stephanie Peacock: I am pleased that my hon. Friend was able to meet the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), on Monday to discuss this issue, which falls under his remit. I know from my constituency the important role that community spaces play in supporting local groups; they bring a huge benefit locally. The Government encourage community groups seeking funding to use the tools available on the My Community website, which suggests funding sources. I hope this information will help the council to work out its next steps, alongside the feedback that it should have received on its unsuccessful application to the community ownership fund.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Community spaces are crucial hubs for so many people, and our churches play a key role in providing such spaces. All Saints parish church in Hertford in my constituency has been in its beautiful riverside location for almost 1,000 years. Over the past six years, it has been able to reclaim £50,000 of VAT using the listed places of worship grant scheme, including for repairs to the tower, refurbishment of the bells and rebuilding the church organ. Will the Government extend the scheme beyond 2025, and if so, what will the allocation be?

Stephanie Peacock: This issue falls within the remit of the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism. He will answer a question on this later, but the Government are working on it.

Short-term Lets: Regulation

3. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What plans her Department has for the regulation of short-term lets. [902175]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): We aim to get up a statutory registration system for short-term lets very soon, not least because we want to make sure that local authorities have all the data that they need to assess local accommodation needs, and so that there is a level playing field for different kinds of accommodation.

Joe Powell: I thank the Minister for his answer. My constituents in Kensington and Bayswater regularly raise this issue with me, and are looking forward to the registration scheme, not least so that we can better enforce the 90-day rule in London. Does the Minister have any further information on when that scheme will come online? Has he considered giving councils licensing powers, perhaps through the devolution Bill, so that where a high concentration of short-term lets is taking properties out of the private rented sector, we can consider the numbers?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend asks two questions. The first is about the timing. We have already done the initial phase. I hope that we will be able to make an announcement fairly soon about the technical elements, which we hope to get up and running this year.

The second point is important: what is the final purpose of this registration scheme? We are in discussions with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, because we want to make sure that the scheme works and delivers what people want, which is a really strong local visitor economy, but we do not want to undermine local housing strategies.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Holiday lets play an important part in the tourism economy; 20 million people visit the lakes every year, and they need somewhere to stay. Having said that, in the last five

years especially, we have seen a gobbling-up of the long-term private rented sector and local people forced out by a massive growth in short-term lets. Will the Minister speak more with the Minister for Housing and Planning about how planning law can be changed, so that councils and national parks can put a limit on the number of short-term lets in the community, and take action on second homes, too?

Chris Bryant: I agree with every single thing the hon. Member said, and I will do as he urges.

National Youth Strategy

4. **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on creating a national youth strategy. [902176]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): We have wasted no time in cracking on with the national youth strategy. We have almost finished recruiting to the youth advisory group and the expert advisory group, and I can tell the House that we have taken suggestions from Conservative Members and included a member of the uniformed youth groups on that youth advisory group, which will meet for the first time in late January or early February. My officials are reviewing the evidence base, which they will consider, and we are launching the strategy in the summer, with an interim report expected in the spring.

Luke Myer: My constituent Kylie is a teacher who works with excluded young people who have some excellent ideas about what we can do to address antisocial behaviour and improve youth provision. Can the Secretary of State provide an update on how the national youth strategy consultation will involve young people, so that we make sure that they are engaged in future policy decisions?

Lisa Nandy: We are absolutely determined to put young people back in charge of their destiny. They know better than we do the challenges that they face, and are often better at identifying the solutions. That is why we have put young people in charge of the strategy. We are co-producing it with them, and we will seek out a range of young people's voices from every part of the country and every background as part of the process.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Swimming is a really important skill for young people. I learned to swim at the Sovereign centre in Eastbourne, but so many pools across the country have closed—250 since 2015. It is critical that the national youth strategy refers to swimming pools, and support for young people when it comes to swimming. Will the Secretary of State ensure that is included in the strategy, and will she meet me and Eastbourne borough council representatives to discuss how we can best protect our pool in Eastbourne?

Lisa Nandy: I would be delighted to offer the hon. Gentleman a meeting with the Department on this critical issue; I would be amazed if it did not come up in the national youth strategy. The strategy is led by young people, and it is for them to determine their priorities, but I hear this point made by young people in my constituency of Wigan and across the length and breadth of the country. The Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), is working very closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and we are determined to address this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her answers. When she cancelled the national citizenship service and announced a consultation on the national youth strategy from the Dispatch Box, she started to lay out how she intended to fund the strategy. That was over two months ago. Since then, the cost of borrowing has reached its highest point since 1997, and it is quite clear that significant spending cuts are on the way. Can she tell the House in further detail what plans she has for revenue and capital spending under the national youth strategy? Can she guarantee that the Chancellor, in a desperate attempt to save her job, will not balance the books by putting the burden on the backs of our young people?

Lisa Nandy: This is getting a little bit tired. Young people should be the focus of this House. We have already announced that £100 million of dormant assets funding will be dedicated to the provision of services, facilities and opportunities to young people, and for 2025-26, we are allocating over £85 million of capital funding to creating fit-for-purpose, welcoming spaces for young people, including through the new better youth spaces fund. We are being driven by the needs of young people. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that in addition to leaving us with an incredible economic mess, the Conservatives left us with a series of commitments to young people that did not address any of their needs, and no single youth strategy. Frankly, they should be ashamed.

Small Music Venues

5. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to support small music venues. [902177]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): We have Arts Council England's supporting grassroots music fund, and in addition, we are pushing the live events industry to introduce a voluntary levy on arena and gig events to support small music venues.

Jayne Kirkham: I have a number of crucial small venues in my constituency, including the Cornish Bank, the Chintz Bar, the Old Bakery and the Princess Pavilion, to name just a few. They are vital for the cultural ecosystem of Cornwall; they foster new talent and bring bands from outside the county down to us. I am pleased to hear that the Minister is considering a scheme in which larger venues contribute part of their takings to smaller venues. He said it would be voluntary, but if that did not work, would he consider a mandatory scheme, and what would be the timeline? Can he confirm that the business rates scheme will be formulated to support small venues from 2026?

Chris Bryant: Everybody is getting in lots of questions. If the scheme does not happen voluntarily, will we make it statutory? Yes, but I am very hopeful that we will have a voluntary scheme up and running. I have already met industry representatives, and I think we are moving in that direction. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the provisions for business rates. Obviously, we have now introduced the 40% relief, and we have said that any business that has a rateable value of less than £500,000 will get an even better deal next year. I think that Roger Taylor from Queen went to school in Truro, and I am sure you will know, Mr Speaker, that it is Sade's birthday today. She is one of Britain's greatest singers—and I know you are a smooth operator.

Mr Speaker: I will leave it to the Chair of the Select Committee to come back on that.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I am grateful for the Minister's commitment to the issue. He will know that it was the cornerstone of the Select Committee's work on grassroots music venues, and he also knows that our music ecosystem is very finely balanced. Grassroots venues are still shutting at an alarming rate, and not one of the top 10 best-selling songs of 2024 was from a British artist. Will the Minister look again at another of our report's recommendations: the recommendation for a fan-led review of music? Will he ensure that we include the voices of artists and managers, as well as venues and promoters, in discussions on funding for grassroots music venues from, for example, the new LIVE—Live music Industry Venues and Entertainment—Trust?

Chris Bryant: That was four questions, and the answer is yes to nearly all of them, other than the one about the fan-led review. The Secretary of State has charged me with coming up with a 10-point plan for music this year, and I have turned it into a 12-point plan. I very much hope to work with the Select Committee on delivering that plan. Music is an important part of the UK's soft power around the world. There is nothing better than seeing a band that we first saw in a tiny venue many years ago playing in a massive arena. We want that success for all our musicians in the UK, and it starts with creative education.

Responsible Gambling

6. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking with the gambling and gaming industries to support responsible gambling. [902179]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): The Government are committed to reducing gambling-related harm and its impact. That is why we are introducing a range of reforms to ensure that people can gamble safely, including a stake limit for online slot games, financial vulnerability checks and tougher regulations on direct marketing. We are also aware of the concerns around the blurring of boundaries between gambling and video games, and we are paying close attention to novel and emerging gambling and gambling-like products.

Catherine Fookes: I thank the Minister for her response. We all know that 2.5% of the population are considered to be problem gamblers, and 44% of that population is at high risk of suicidal behaviour, according to the excellent charity Gambling with Lives. Of course, the loss of any life to gambling addiction is deeply saddening, and I give my condolences to all the affected families. The impact of problem gambling stretches far and wide across the UK, including in my constituency of Monmouthshire, and it should be considered a public health issue. What cross-departmental work is being done to tackle the concerning issue of suicide due to gambling?

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend for raising such an important question. Of course, any life lost is an absolute tragedy. When I was the shadow gambling Minister, I visited the Gordon Moody residential treatment centre, which supports people with gambling-related harm. On that visit and at other meetings, I heard at first hand about the devastating impact that gambling can have. We are committed to working across Government on this issue, particularly with the Department of Health and Social Care, including by establishing a comprehensive support and treatment system, funded by the statutory levy, and by strengthening messages in order to raise awareness of the risks of harmful gambling.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Minister will not be surprised to hear me raise the issue of the disproportionality of affordability checks on those betting on racing, and the reform of the betting levy. I am grateful for the positive tone taken so far, and the constructive engagement from her and the Secretary of State. Talks between the gambling industry and the racing industry about the betting levy continue, but I think ultimately Ministers will be required to make a decision. We need the betting levy to be increased overall, and applied to races held overseas that people are betting on here. We think there will be not just a fiscal forecast but a mini-Budget in March. Can those industries start working with the Treasury now to make sure that there are plans to reform the betting levy in the Finance Bill?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. He is a huge champion for the horseracing industry. Of course, the Government and I recognise the significant contribution that racing makes to British sporting culture and the rural economy in particular. We are disappointed that talks have not been successful. The Government have heard racing's concerns about the financial checks, and about the fact that there has not been an agreement. The Minister with responsibility for gambling and the Secretary of State continue to work on this issue.

Creative Education

7. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting creative education. [902180]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): My hon. Friend will know that the Education Secretary has launched a review of the national curriculum to put art, sport and music back at its heart, where they belong. We were appalled by the way that the previous Government ran down the creative subjects, leading to a huge drop-off in the number of young people taking those subjects at GCSE. Labelling them all as Mickey Mouse subjects is not just entirely offensive but incredibly damaging to the economy. The creative industries support

one in seven jobs in this country, and we are determined to equip our young people to get those jobs, contribute to this country and write the next chapter of our national story.

Chris Vince: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. Every young person deserves to experience the magic of music. Thanks to wonderful organisations in my constituency of Harlow such as Rock School and Livewire, many get that opportunity, but not all of them. What is she doing to work with the Secretary of State for Education to ensure that young people can discover their talent, wherever they come from?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not, and we are determined for that to change. I am not sure whether I have mentioned that I recently went on a visit with Ed Sheeran—*[Interruption.]* Thirty-eight times, says my hon. Friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism. In Ipswich, an entire ecosystem is being created that equips young people with those skills and that love of music at school, and goes all the way through enabling them to perform at smaller and larger live music venues, and to get the skills that they need to work in the music industry. We would like to replicate that model around the country. We are working with the newly formed Ed Sheeran Foundation and others to progress this model. As my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned, I have asked him to come up with a 10-point plan to support the music industry. By the time we have finished, it will probably be about 100 points, but we make no apologies for wanting to grip this issue and bring the magic of music to every child in the country.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): As the Secretary of State will know, Scotland's budget commits to a landmark £34 million uplift in cultural spending, with £20 million going to Creative Scotland to support creative education funding groups, such as Sistema Scotland and the Youth Music Initiative. Will she encourage her Scottish Labour colleagues to get behind this spending, and to vote for the budget?

Lisa Nandy: I recently met incredible groups from Scotland that are doing great work through charitable trusts to extend the power of music to every child in Scotland. They have a particular emphasis on children in care, which we really welcome, and would like to replicate. Scotland is also creating music libraries across the country to ensure that young people have access to instruments. I have discussed that with Angus Robertson, my counterpart in the Scottish Government. This Government want a much more constructive relationship with the Scottish Government. When it comes to music, party political differences should be laid aside, and we should work together to make sure that all young people can access the magic that music brings.

Grassroots Sports

8. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support grassroots sport. [902181]

10. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to support grassroots sport in Stevenage. [902185]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Grassroots sports clubs are the beating heart of communities up and down the country. The Government are acting to support grassroots sports through our ongoing investment in Sport England and the delivery of our £123 million multi-sport grassroots facilities programme.

Paul Davies: I recently met the Football Foundation, which is dedicated to transforming grassroots football in England by funding and developing community facilities. Its work includes building and refurbishing pitches, clubhouses and changing rooms, ensuring that everybody has access to quality football environments. By investing in grassroots football, it aims to improve participation, improve health and strengthen communities. What assessment has the Department made of the impact of biodiversity net gain requirements on investment in community sports facilities?

Stephanie Peacock: Biodiversity net gain is a legal requirement for all new developments and is not specific to sports facilities. The Government are working with Sport England, the Football Foundation and wider grassroots sport to help reduce the sector's impact on the environment. That of course includes supporting these organisations in meeting their obligations regarding biodiversity net gain. I understand that the Football Foundation will meet officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which oversees the implementation of biodiversity net gain, to discuss this issue further.

Kevin Bonavia: I thank the Minister for her response. Last year, in my constituency, the Stevenage Football Club Foundation delivered more than 9,000 hours of activity in grassroots sports and engaged over 15,000 participants, generating nearly £10.7 million-worth of social value. This did not happen only in my constituency. Last year, the 72 English Football League community club organisations delivered more than £1.2 billion-worth of social value across this country. Will the Minister commit to supporting local community club organisations, such as the Stevenage FC Foundation, in engaging local people and directly supporting communities?

Stephanie Peacock: I pay tribute to the Stevenage FC Foundation and the many other community organisations up and down the country for their important work. Local community club organisations use the power of sport to change lives through charitable and community activities, often through delivery across a range of areas, from health to wellbeing and employment. I have seen it in my own area of Barnsley, with Reds in the Community, which does brilliant work across my town.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): There are growing storm clouds in rugby union. At the grassroots, clubs are up in arms about what is going on in the leadership. They called for a general meeting, which was denied. One has now been agreed and will happen in March. When asked in writing whether there will be a review of the finances or governance of the Rugby Football Union, the Government said that there are no plans for one. In the light of what I have set out, will they reconsider whether there should be a review of the governance, and do they have confidence that the RFU will be able to solve this issue?

Mr Speaker: There is also rugby league.

Stephanie Peacock: Of course, Mr Speaker; we would not forget that. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that incredibly important point. National governing bodies are of course independent of Government, and it is for the RFU to answer for its approach. The DCMS notes that the chair of the RFU stood down recently. The Secretary of State and I meet regularly with rugby stakeholders, and will continue to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My eldest granddaughter loves football. She is 15 years old and plays in goal. The interest in girls and ladies' football in Northern Ireland is exceptional, as it is here on the mainland. I know that the Minister is committed to it. What has been done to ensure that girls and women's football is promoted across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to their advantage?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. A few years ago, I raised some eyebrows by having a photograph taken in this Chamber as part of the women's parliamentary football team. That certainly gained a bit of attention for women's football. As Minister for sport, I recently held a meeting with Karen Carney regarding the women's football review implementation group. We are keen to promote women's football and do everything that we can to encourage girls and women to get involved.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The previous Conservative Government invested over £400 million to support grassroots sport, recognising the vital contribution of sport to our communities across the country. The Minister will already be aware of our concerns about the impact of Labour's national insurance hike, and the impact that the schools tax will have on community access to sporting facilities. Equally concerning is Labour's decision to quietly cut the £57 million opening school facilities programme from March. Does she understand why grassroots sport organisations are so concerned about access to school facilities, and schools potentially having to close them to the community? Has she raised those concerns with Cabinet colleagues, and what measures are her Department taking to support access to grassroots sport for the more than 200,000 people who previously benefited from Conservative programmes?

Stephanie Peacock: I think that was six questions rather than one. I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman on the state of the economy and the inheritance that we received. The Government are a huge champion of grassroots sport, and will continue to be one.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Sport and physical activity must play a bigger part in the debate on our nation's collective health and the future of health services. Sport England reports that almost one in three children are classed as inactive. More than a third of adults do not meet the chief medical officer's recommendations for physical activity. Sedentary lifestyles are associated with one in six deaths, and obesity costs the economy £58 billion per year. Those are truly shocking statistics that we should all be ashamed of. What conversations are Ministers in the Department having with colleagues in other Departments, most notably Health, to ensure an increased focus on physical activity to improve our nation's physical and mental health?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that important question. Through our health missions, and the health mission board, we work really closely across Government. This is a pivotal issue. Sport plays a huge part in getting people more active. I know that from my own area: over 30% of people in Barnsley are inactive. Just yesterday, I met with the Richmond group of charities, which works on this sort of issue, and I continue to have both Government meetings and meetings with stakeholders. We really want to make progress in this area.

Public Trust in News Sources

9. **Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to support public trust in reliable sources of news and information. [902184]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): The Government take reliable sources of news very seriously. I have already started initial discussions with the BBC about the charter review and the future of the licence fee. We are also working closely with local media on a local media strategy. We saw the importance of local news over the summer in tackling disinformation during the riots and civil unrest. We are determined to provide a level playing field for local and regional newspapers to ensure that they can continue to thrive.

Uma Kumaran: In the past few weeks, we have seen the spread of disinformation using online platforms and the proliferation of misinformation on an industrial scale. Attempts to destabilise the Government and throw off public discourse do not have Britain's best interests at heart. I have been contacted by multiple constituents in Stratford and Bow who, like me, are deeply concerned about the unchecked ability of foreign billionaires to impact British democracy and news. As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I have heard witnesses talk about the impact of this globally. What assurances can the Minister provide my constituents that the Government are taking the threat of foreign disinformation seriously?

Lisa Nandy: That is precisely one of the reasons why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary provided an uplift to the BBC World Service this year. My hon. Friend mentions foreign billionaires. Unlike the Conservatives, we have no intention of conducting government by social media. While they amplify the noise and conspiracy theories, we are cracking on with delivering for people in the real world where most of us spend our time.

Topical Questions

T1. [902191] **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: Secretary of State?

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): We are moving very fast—it is almost like you have done this before, Mr Speaker.

We are wasting no time in standing up for people and fighting their corner. We are taking on the ticket touts, working with the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority to tackle harassment in the creative industries and working with Jewish leaders to tackle antisemitism in the arts. We will take every action necessary to progress the Football Governance Bill through the House of Lords and to deliver for football fans. We have launched the AI copyright consultation and convened the Creative Industries Council under its new chair Baroness Shriti Vadera. Tomorrow I will be in the great town of Gateshead to host the first creative growth summit to bring good jobs and growth to every part of the United Kingdom.

Rebecca Smith: Gables, an animal rescue charity in my constituency that I met before Christmas, and the Devon Mental Health Alliance have shared the negative impacts the increase to employers' national insurance contributions will have on their service delivery. For Gables, it is a £22,000 increase to its costs. For DMHA, it decreases the amount of services it can provide, which are needed to ease local NHS pressures. What hope can the Secretary of State offer them for the future?

Lisa Nandy: I reassure the hon. Member that the Government work closely with the charity sector. Only a few months ago, the Prime Minister threw open the doors of Downing Street to launch a new covenant with civil society to work hand in hand with them on the shared challenges we face. We are aware of the impact of the changes on charities. That is why we have more than doubled the employment allowance from £5,000 to £10,500 to protect the smallest charities, and we published an impact assessment alongside the autumn Budget process that sets out the impact on charities. We will continue to work closely with charities to support them.

T3. [902194] **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): The national youth strategy is a crucial step forward, and I welcome its progress. Will the Secretary of State outline how new youth programmes, such as the better youth spaces initiative, will help to rebuild facilities in Southampton Itchen, where years of Conservative cuts have impacted opportunities for our young people?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): We fully acknowledge the challenges faced by the sector and the challenging needs of young people. The strategy will help us move forward from a one-size-fits-all approach from central Government, bringing power back to young people and their communities and rebuilding a thriving and sustainable youth sector.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): January is traditionally a time when people commit to exercising more, and it is the perfect opportunity to encourage a more active nation—

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Go on then!

Stuart Andrew: Bingo! I knew he would do that.

I am proud that in government we had a sport strategy and set up the national physical activity taskforce, which brought together Departments, delivery partners and industry to work to increase activity rates. May I ask the Secretary of State when the taskforce last met, whether it discussed the impact of the jobs tax on the sector's ability to get more people active, and what alternative measures there will be for the school holidays when facilities will no longer be open?

Lisa Nandy: The shadow Secretary of State will know that we have regular meetings with representatives from sporting bodies and industry. We are determined to roll out grassroots sport to every part of the UK, and we have already signalled our intention as a new Government on that. When I returned from the Euros, we announced a whole tranche of funding for the coming years to ensure that those incredible grassroots sports facilities that support not just young men, but young women across the country continue. I would be happy to discuss this further with him to ensure—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, this is topical questions, and we have six minutes before I have to hand over.

Stuart Andrew: The murder of Jimmy Mizen sadly sticks in the minds of many of us. An investigation by *The Sun has* revealed that his killer, Jake Farhi, is the masked rapper who has shockingly been promoted by the BBC despite his lyrics sickeningly boasting about killing and other crimes. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling for an investigation into how the BBC allowed this to happen? I cannot imagine the pain and upset that it is causing Jimmy's family.

Lisa Nandy: I add my voice to the support for Jimmy's family. The shadow Secretary of State raises that matter in a particularly sensitive way, and I would be happy to consider it with him.

T5. [902197] **Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating local volunteers who are fundraising for a new roof for the grade I listed St Bartholomew's church in my constituency, and will he meet me to discuss the future of the listed places of worship grant scheme, which is so important for them to hit their fundraising target?

Chris Bryant: Yes, I congratulate the church. I know that lots of people are interested in the future of the fund. The best way of describing how the Department is approaching that is to quote a hymn:

> "God is working this purpose out,
> As year succeeds to year…
> Nearer and nearer draws the time,
> The time that shall surely be"

when we announce.

T2. [902193] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): The last Conservative Government left music education in a dire state. In Bath, the Orchestra of Everything Foundation is working against that tide with great success as 70% of the children it reaches take up a second instrument. What will the Government do to improve music education?

Chris Bryant: That will definitely be part of my 12-point plan for music. The hon. Lady is absolutely right: music education is a vital part of ensuring that every child in this country has a decent chance to prosper in life.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): This week, the great fight between Conor Benn and Chris Eubank Jr was announced. That is the best fight in British boxing and will showcase what a fantastic sport it is in the UK. Will the Secretary of State join me in wishing both fighters the best of luck and in showcasing that brilliant fight across the world?

Lisa Nandy: I absolutely add my voice to that. Certain sports in the UK, including boxing, darts and snooker, have been under-represented in terms of Government attention. We are determined for that to change because we know how much joy they bring to millions of people.

T4. [902195] **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Plans for a Universal Studios theme park in Bedfordshire are a huge opportunity to drive economic growth and private sector investment. What progress is being made, and when do the Government expect discussions with Universal Studios to conclude?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman knows, because we have had several discussions about it, that I cannot enter into the precise details of the negotiations, but they are going well, and I am hopeful that this will be absolutely transformational for the British tourism industry if we manage to pull it off. I am sure that he will urge everybody to co-operate with the Government in that process.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Members of the school council of Bromstone primary school in Broadstairs visited Parliament yesterday and wanted me to convey in the strongest terms to the Secretary of State the importance of learning art, not only because they love it but for the skills they learn from it. Is she doing all in her power to ensure that creativity will have a prominent and central place in the curriculum?

Lisa Nandy: May I reassure my hon. Friend's young constituents that we absolutely agree with them? We know that music, sport and art not only enrich young people's lives, but can unlock so much more. We will take their views seriously.

T6. [902198] **Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In Grimsby, we are fortunate enough to have a new youth zone under construction, which is good news for many of my constituents, but those in the rural part of the constituency face challenges in accessing it. How do the Government plan to help young people in rural areas access sport and leisure facilities?

Lisa Nandy: I was delighted to host representatives from Grimsby in Wigan to show them our amazing OnSide youth facility. I am delighted that the Grimsby facility is now moving ahead at pace, but I share his concern about people from surrounding areas, particularly in relation to transport. Some of the youth funding that we have allocated for next year will address precisely those issues so that existing youth facilities can buy minibuses, for example, to ensure access for all young people.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): The BBC has a responsibility to share content that licence fee payers can trust, yet the Asserson report found widespread evidence of bias in the BBC's reporting of the Israel-Hamas war, which, from what I can see, continues. What representations have been made to the BBC and Ofcom to ensure that impartiality is upheld in all areas?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. When I met representatives from the Jewish community recently about antisemitism in the arts, I was shocked and horrified by some of their experiences, and we are working closely with them to tackle it. I can confirm to my hon. Friend that I have raised this issue directly with the BBC director general. I am aware that the BBC gets criticism from all sides about its reporting and has a difficult balance to strike, but we are determined to work with the BBC and support it to get that right.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Tourism is very important to Burnham-on-Sea, Berrow and Brean in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State reassure business owners in those towns and villages that her Government have no plans to introduce a tourism tax?

Chris Bryant: We have no plans to introduce additional taxes. I want to get 50 million international visitors coming to the UK, because our tourism industry is an important part of what we do well in this country. That is why I will be hosting the first visitor economy advisory council on Monday morning.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): A tourism levy in York could raise £125,000 through a voluntary scheme, but if there were a comprehensive scheme, £1.7 million could go to my local community. Will the Minister not consider such a scheme so that we can raise that revenue for York?

Chris Bryant: Attacked on both sides in different ways—pushmi-pullyu, I think it was—but my hon. Friend makes a good point. There is of course provision for local mayors and local authorities to be able to introduce similar measures on a voluntary basis, as has already happened in Manchester.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): I think we in this House can all agree that the premier league is the world's most successful league. It has grown up under self-regulation, but there are now proposals to regulate it. The premier league transmits soft power across the world and raises huge amounts of revenue for the Government. Given the damage that the Financial Services and Markets Act has done to the London stock exchange and other markets, will the Government take responsibility if football declines after they introduce football regulation?

Lisa Nandy: Football is an ecosystem, and we work very closely with the Premier League. As a crown jewel of British exports, it brings joy to millions of people all over the world, but the fact is that far too many football clubs are currently unsustainable, suffering from poor ownership and poor financial flow. The Football

Governance Bill was in our manifesto and those of Opposition parties, and we will not be blocked by unelected peers from enacting what was a manifesto commitment and making good on that promise for football fans.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Kirkcaldy Community Football Partnership does an amazing job in my constituency, supporting a number of local football clubs including Kirkcaldy and Dysart football club and Templehall United. It also runs an over-35s walking football team, which is of particular interest to me. It badly needs funding for a new synthetic all-weather pitch; does the Minister agree that this is an important cause, and one that deserves support?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The issue she has raised is incredibly important, and I suggest that she reaches out to the Football Foundation. I would be happy to set up that meeting for her.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

1. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What assessment the Commissioners have made of the effectiveness of the listed places of worship grant scheme. [902199]

4. **Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment the Commissioners have made of the effectiveness of the listed places of worship grant scheme. [902202]

5. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What assessment the Commissioners have made of the effectiveness of the listed places of worship grant scheme. [902203]

11. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): What assessment the Commissioners have made of the effectiveness of the listed places of worship grant scheme. [902209]

12. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What discussions the Commissioners have had on the continuation of VAT relief under the listed places of worship grant scheme. [902210]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): The listed places of worship grant scheme provides support to religious communities with listed buildings by refunding the cost of VAT on repairs. The Church Commissioners view this scheme as an effective way to deliver transformational benefits to local communities, enabling restoration, repair and improved access. I welcome the support shown for the scheme by hon. Members across the House.

Dave Robertson: The listed places of worship grant scheme is essential to renovations and improvements being made by St Michael on Greenhill church in my constituency. Can the Second Church Estates Commissioner give any assurance to me and my constituents across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages that this grant and Government support will be available to support excellent projects such as the creation of a new community hub?

Marsha De Cordova: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this issue. It is so important to ensure that our local churches are supported and that churches such as St Michael's in his constituency can deliver the repairs they need so that they can continue to be a benefit to their communities. The National Churches Trust recently found that for every £1 of investment £16 is returned to the local community in the form of events facilities, warm spaces, food banks and so much more. He will not be surprised to learn that I have raised the issue of the listed places of worship scheme with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and I really hope that the Government are listening and will want to continue with this vital and essential scheme.

Kirsteen Sullivan: The construction of St Michael's church in Linlithgow began in 1424, and it is a significant centre of worship in the newly formed parish of Linlithgow and Avon Valley. As a category A listed site, it has benefited greatly from the listed places of worship grant scheme over the years. Can my hon. Friend advise what engagement the commissioners have had with representatives of Churches in Scotland on the importance and effectiveness of the scheme?

Marsha De Cordova: I know that St Michael's church in Linlithgow in my hon. Friend's constituency is a beautiful medieval church with strong community links and engagement. Although I am accountable only for the Church of England, I reassure her that the Church is working closely with its partners in Scotland, as they too want clarity on the future of this vital scheme. I would be happy to put her in touch with the head of church buildings for the Church of Scotland if she so wishes.

Liz Twist: St Ives church in Leadgate in my constituency is known as the miners' cathedral. The building is full of heritage, but costly maintenance issues are threatening its very survival. The church has secured grants to fund temporary fixes, but a long-term solution is desperately needed. It tells me that reclaiming tax can make all the difference, so will my hon. Friend reassure me that schemes like that will continue to help churches such as St Ives?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I know that St Ives church is a cornerstone of that community, and I congratulate the congregation on the funding they have raised to stabilise some of the church's structures. Grants from the buildings for mission fund are available from the diocese and may help with some of the future work. However, we all know the importance of the listed places of worship scheme, and I will continue to raise it with the Secretary of State. I hope that the Government are listening and will come forward, as the scheme is due to end in March, and we certainly do not want that to happen.

Ruth Jones: Over the past two years alone, Newport cathedral has reclaimed over £87,000 under the listed places of worship scheme. When it soon becomes necessary to repair the tower, at an estimated cost of £1.1 million,

a further £220,000 in tax will be added to that bill, and if that cannot be reclaimed the project will be delayed even further. The cathedral provides crucial support to schools, charities, refugees and the homeless. Does my hon. Friend recognise the importance of the scheme not only in saving significant heritage treasures, but in preserving those vital services?

Marsha De Cordova: I absolutely recognise the importance of the scheme and the difference that the cathedral's social impact projects are making in her community. I would be very happy to put my hon. Friend in touch with the director of property strategy for the Church in Wales, so that they can discuss this issue and, I hope, lobby together to ensure—to say it once again—that the scheme is renewed.

Gregory Stafford: The withdrawal of the listed places of worship scheme disproportionately affects rural churches. In my constituency of Farnham and Bordon, six listed churches saved nearly £43,000 in the past financial year through the scheme. Directors of St Andrew's in Farnham and of St Bartholomew's and St Christopher's in Haslemere have raised concerns with me this week about the oversubscribed nature of other grant opportunities, such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which combines heritage restoration under the same scheme as, for example, coastal protection in the Humber estuary. This dilutes the vital church funds needed for their heritage. Can the hon. Lady inform me how churches can be supported to preserve heritage in my constituency if the VAT relief for repairs is not reinstated?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the hon. Member for the question. As he will have heard throughout this Question Time, we are keen to ensure that the listed places of worship grant scheme continues, because we can see not only the immense benefits it brings to our communities, but how it helps to alleviate some of the challenges of raising funds. It is important that all our heritage buildings, including our churches, are preserved and that adequate funding is available for them. I would be very happy, if the hon. Member wishes, to meet him to discuss this further.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The scheme was designed to address a perverse incentive in the VAT rules that favoured demolition and rebuild at a time when we were unable to change those rules. Post Brexit, we can now do so. Will the Church Commissioners draw that to the attention of those on the Treasury Bench?

Marsha De Cordova: Yes.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will the hon. Lady therefore support my private Member's Bill, which is coming up in March and is designed specifically to exclude repairs to listed places of worship from the VAT regime?

Marsha De Cordova: I will have a look at the hon. Member's Bill.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I, too, want to refer to the land of Calvin, oatcakes, and sulphur—Scotland. In a village in my constituency where I used to live, there is a lovely old Church of Scotland church that has been bought by a former Member of this place. It is in bad condition and it is upsetting local people. Can best practice be shared north of the border with planning authorities and heritage organisations? I would be most grateful.

Marsha De Cordova: I will certainly share the hon. Member's thoughts, but I am happy to write to him with further details on other spaces where he can get more information on how he can support schemes in his constituency.

Makin Review

2. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): What steps the Church has taken to respond to the recommendations set out in the Makin review, published on 18 October 2024. [902200]

7. **Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): What recent steps the Church has taken to respond to allegations of child sexual abuse within the Church of England. [902205]

8. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What steps the Church has taken to respond to the recommendations set out in the Makin review, published on 18 October 2024. [902206]

Marsha De Cordova: The Makin report made clear the devastating abuse suffered by children and young people at the hands of John Smyth. In the meeting I had with representatives from the Archbishops' Council, I raised the need for the Makin review to be a defining and watershed moment for the Church. The review made 27 recommendations, some of which have already been implemented. I am awaiting a full and thorough update from the Church on the detailed progress being made on each recommendation. That work is in addition to the ongoing efforts to respond to the Wilkinson and Alexis Jay inquiries into child sexual abuse. Following these reports, the Church began developing potential new safeguarding models, which will be decided at the General Synod in February.

Chi Onwurah: I pay tribute to my ecclesiastical co-worker, the Right Reverend Helen-Ann Hartley, Bishop of Newcastle, for her leadership and courage in championing the voices of victims in the wake of the Makin review. Newcastle is proud of her. Are the Church Commissioners aware of her ongoing concerns about the implementation of the review? In particular, what can they do to ensure that dioceses have the resources necessary to implement a high standard of safeguarding and to ensure that the Church is focused on the interests of the victims and the vulnerable, rather than the career interests of leading clergy?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend rightly raises the work that her own bishop has been doing in her constituency on this issue. Following the Makin review, colleagues such as my hon. Friend and many represented here today and from across the House have rightly been raising their concerns about safeguarding in the Church. This week I met representatives from the Archbishops' Council, including the Bishop of Stepney, Joanne Grenfell,

who is the lead bishop for safeguarding in the Church, to raise my concerns. The House can rest assured that I did that robustly.

The Church's national safeguarding team is now at stage three of its four-stage process to assess and deal with the risk posed by those criticised in the Makin review, which is rightly welcomed. In addition, the Church institutions have developed the two model proposals on safeguarding, which will go to the Synod in February. Those independent safeguarding models will look at a scrutiny body and at safeguarding operations more independent of the Church. I will be at the Synod in February, and I will listen closely to that debate. Make no mistake, the Church has an enormous amount of work to do to create a cultural shift. That is what is required. It needs to rebuild trust and confidence. It is also important that everybody in the House feels as though they get the opportunity to raise their concerns. I thank my hon. Friend and others for ensuring that they have raised this issue here today.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I would very much like to pay tribute to the Bishop of Newcastle as well. What was so tragic was that so few senior voices were being heard in the Anglican Church. The Makin review named the Bishop of Lincoln and the bishop in charge of the Episcopal Church, but so few people have been held to account. Will the hon. Lady please ensure that more people are properly held to account and that some of the people who have been named are cleared out of those top jobs?

Marsha De Cordova: The right hon. Member makes a critical point. It is so important for the Church to view this as the chance to turn a corner and make it a watershed moment. We need change, and those responsible must be held to account. I would be happy to discuss this matter further with the right hon. Member if that would be of help, but he should make no mistake that I strongly believe that it is important that the Church is held to account. The Bishop of Stepney—the lead bishop for safeguarding—and the director for safeguarding both welcomed the Makin review when it was first published last year. We must ensure that its recommendations are implemented.

Richard Baker: The urgent need for independent scrutiny of the Church's safeguarding procedures was highlighted both by the Makin report and by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. What are the current arrangements for independent scrutiny of safeguarding following the dismissal of the Church's independent safeguarding board? What is the timescale for having a permanent system for independent scrutiny in place to safeguard against such appalling acts of abuse, as highlighted in both those reports?

Marsha De Cordova: Independent scrutiny of the Church's safeguarding work is extremely important. The Church commissioned a series of audits on dioceses and cathedrals by independent safeguarding experts, and several have been completed and published. The independently chaired national safeguarding panel, which includes victims and survivors among its members, currently scrutinises safeguarding, but as I have already pointed out, proposals to strengthen scrutiny in the Church will be voted on at the Synod next month, and the Church will then have to create a plan for implementation once the right model has been approved at that General Synod in February.

Hyde Park Estate

3. **Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Church is taking to improve the maintenance of the Hyde Park Estate. [902201]

Marsha De Cordova: The Hyde Park estate has been managed by the Church Commissioners for over 150 years, and they are committed to its long-term stewardship. As responsible landlords, the commissioners are committed to adopting best practice and have continuous investment programmes for the management of buildings on the estate to ensure that they remain fit for purpose both now and in the future.

Rachel Blake: I have been working for months with residents of the Quadrangle, the Water Gardens and Connaught Village on the scale of their service charges. They have managed to reduce their service charges by 10%. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating them on their hard work and agree that they should not have had to work that hard? Will she join me in a meeting with the Church Commissioners to improve the transparency and monitoring of service charge levels?

Marsha De Cordova: Of course I congratulate the residents on their hard work. I know from my constituency about the challenges around increases in service charges; it is so important that they are transparent to everybody. I would be happy to join my hon. Friend in a meeting with her residents on this issue, and I would recommend including those from the Church Commissioners' property services team. I hope that will be okay.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Hyde Park estate is an oasis of peace and tranquillity in the middle of the concrete and buildings and used daily by many. What steps will the Church take to ensure that there are sufficient waste disposal and recycling bins across the Hyde Park estate, for those with two legs, and indeed for those with four legs?

Marsha De Cordova: I am sure that those managing and maintaining the estate are looking at all those issues, but I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with further information.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Foreign Donations to UK Political Parties

6. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): If the Commission will make an assessment of the potential merits of banning foreign donations to UK political parties. [902204]

10. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent assessment the Commission has made of the adequacy of the rules on donations by non-UK citizens to political parties. [902208]

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam): When establishing the political finance regime, Parliament's explicit intention was to ban foreign donations. However, limitations of the current law mean that it is possible for money from foreign sources to enter the UK electoral system through donations from UK companies. For that reason, the Electoral Commission has called for the laws around company donations to be strengthened, to ensure that parties cannot accept money from companies that have not made enough in the UK to fund their donation or loan, to impose a duty to carry out enhanced "know your donor" checks, and to improve transparency over donations made through unincorporated associations.

Joe Powell: In recent weeks we have seen the unedifying spectacle of opposition parties trying to curry favour with one particular foreign billionaire. However, this issue is much bigger than Elon Musk. Transparency International UK estimates that £1 in every £10 in our system—£150 million since 2021—comes from questionable or unknown sources. When will these proposals come forward, so that we can debate them in the House and tackle this threat to our democracy?

Sir Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Member will understand, proposals to change the law must come from the Government—with whom, I gently suggest, he has more influence that I do—but he is right that transparency is crucial. It is important that we understand the source of the donations, so that the political parties that accept them can be properly held to account.

Mr Carmichael: Surely, even in these febrile times, it should not be difficult to build a consensus around the proposition that foreign money should not be in British politics. Can we not get the parties together now to make the strongest possible package of reforms, rather than reacting when it is too late?

Sir Jeremy Wright: As I mentioned, there is a consensus in this House that foreign donations should not play a part in British politics, but there are gaps in the law. As I mentioned, the Electoral Commission believes that those gaps can be properly closed through further legislation. It is speaking to the Government about that, and I know that it would be happy discuss the matter further with the right hon. Gentleman, if he so wishes.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church of England: Racial Injustice

9. **Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): What steps the Church is taking to tackle racial injustice. [902207]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): In 2020 the House of Bishops created the archbishops' anti-racism taskforce, followed by the archbishops' commission for racial justice, to continue the work of tackling racial injustice in the Church and society. Last February, the General Synod voted unanimously to continue efforts to address racial injustice across the Church.

Patricia Ferguson: The Church's work to recognise the importance of diversity and on proactive anti-racism is very welcome, but what steps is it taking to address its historical links to the slave trade?

Marsha De Cordova: The Church's role in slavery is truly shameful. It is only right that it takes action to recognise its links to the transatlantic enslavement of Africans. No amount of money would ever be enough to repair the horrors of the slave trade, but the Church Commissioners' project will set aside £100 million over nine years for a programme of impact, investment, research and engagement. It is hoped that this fund will continue to grow over time and will reinvest returns. Investments in grant funding will be directed towards communities that have been impacted by the enslavement of Africans.

Business of the House

10.33 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 20 January includes:

MONDAY 20 JANUARY—General debate on the impact of food and diet on obesity, followed by a general debate on financial education. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 21 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Deposit Scheme for Drinks Containers (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024.

WEDNESDAY 22 JANUARY—Motion to agree a money resolution relating to the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, followed by Second Reading of the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 23 JANUARY—General debate on Holocaust Memorial Day.

FRIDAY 24 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 27 January will include:

MONDAY 27 JANUARY—General debate on the creative industries.

TUESDAY 28 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Water (Special Measures) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 29 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Arbitration Bill.

THURSDAY 30 JANUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 31 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

For the convenience of the House, and in view of the three important statements that are taking place today, the motion on the draft Deposit Scheme for Drinks Containers (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024 will not be moved today.

Jesse Norman: I am sure that the Leader of the House and every Member will join me in welcoming the news overnight of a ceasefire in Gaza. Let us hope and pray that it is as effective, comprehensive and long-lasting as possible.

Back at home, all one can say is that it has been another extraordinary week for the Government, though possibly not in the way that they would have wanted. We have had the Government's anti-corruption Minister herself being named for corruption by another country in the face of an international investigation into embezzlement of development and other funds. We have had the unusually unlovely sight of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in a desperate search for growth that has taken her to Beijing and back—though with precious little result, it seems. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales said this week that stagflation—that toxic combination of recession and inflation—is now "a live risk". Even the very, very modest GDP growth reported for November was below expectations.

At some point, the Government's current spending splurge will doubtless start to nudge growth upwards over the coming year, but in the meantime we will have to look forward to the grim prospect of the national insurance changes in April and the horrors of the Employment Rights Bill, which even by the Government's own estimates will cost employers an extra £5 billion a year. So dire has the Chancellor's position become that she has been forced to ask Cabinet colleagues for ideas of growth. Given the galaxy of business talent around the Cabinet table, how can that possibly go wrong?

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister has been forced not only to express "full confidence" in the Chancellor—always a death knell—but to insist that she will remain in post for the full period of this Government. Let us see how that works out. It has been extraordinary, in particular, to see her attacked by her own colleagues, who have said:

"we're going back to austerity in all but name."

Luckily, the Government were able to announce some good news in the form of the latest results of the national wealth fund, which has apparently generated more than 6,000 jobs and £1.6 billion in private investment over the last six months—except that the announcement is, I am afraid, entirely disingenuous. As Lord Livermore said in a debate in the other House in October, the national wealth fund is, in fact, the UK Infrastructure Bank with a new name and a bit more capital. I know something about the UK Infrastructure Bank, because I set it up in 2021 when I was Financial Secretary to the Treasury. It has an absolutely world-class leadership team and I am not remotely surprised to see it doing so well. But the idea that its recent success is attributable to a Labour Government who have done little more than rebrand it is an embarrassing joke. Its success has been powered by good institutional design, a top team, tonnes of talented employees and more than four years of hard work.

One recalls the Government's attempt to claim credit for £63 billion of international cash in the October investment summit. I know the Leader of the House is a strong believer in transparency and accountability, so will she have the Treasury update the House on what form that investment has taken, how much of it has been received and where it is being spent? Frankly, it is more than doubtful that three months of post-election chaos in the Government had any such effect in boosting investment, but we will see when the Government publish the numbers, as I am sure they will. If it turns out like the so-called national wealth fund, we will know that the Labour Government are more than happy to take credit for at least some of the work of the previous Government, provided that they can put their own name on it.

Lucy Powell: I, too, am sure that the whole House will welcome the developments between Israel and Gaza over the past hours and days, with a long-overdue ceasefire and the release of hostages now looking like a real possibility, although that is still to be confirmed. This will hopefully now lead to much-needed aid getting in, the end of the killing, the hostages being released, and, I hope, what will be the beginning of a long-term political solution for the region. We will hear shortly from the Foreign Secretary with further details on that.

First, I will explain one of the pieces of business I have just announced, and set out why the Government will table a money resolution relating to the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill next week. In order for a Bill Committee to consider any clauses that could have spending implications, the Government must first table a money resolution. That is not the Government agreeing to fund the measures in a Bill; it is purely to enable the Bill to be debated in Committee. In the case of this Bill, this relates to one small component that is yet to be debated and agreed. Without the motion being agreed to, that debate could not happen and that component could not remain in the Bill. The Government have taken the view that that would act against our commitment to remain neutral on the Bill. The House should debate and decide on these matters for itself. I hope that, as with Second Reading, colleagues will focus on the substance and not the processes of this sensitive private Member's Bill.

It really has been quite incredible to watch the collective display of amnesia on the Conservative Benches over recent weeks—it is like the past 14 years did not happen. I see that the Leader of the Opposition is out today in what has been briefed as her finally telling the truth about the Conservatives' record: they did not have a plan for growth, they were not honest with the British people, and they negotiated a bad Brexit deal. However, it sounds like the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) did not quite get that memo.

It sounds like the right hon. Gentleman did not get the memo about the Conservatives needing to be honest about their record on standards either. If he wants to compare the previous Government's record on losing Ministers, I am quite happy to do so. Boris Johnson had 36 of his own Ministers resign in 24 hours—the highest number on modern record. Even the very nice right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) lost four of his senior Ministers in his first few months, including his party chairman and Deputy Prime Minister, for breaking the ministerial code. Even when there were investigations on Ministers, they were often ignored. This Government have strengthened the ministerial code and now have an adviser who is able to initiate investigations. We have brought in new rules for Members of Parliament on outside interests, and we will go further.

The right hon. Gentleman obviously did not get the memo on the Conservatives' record on the economy, and is instead trying to attack our plans. The Leader of the Opposition, his party leader, is now telling the country that they did not have a plan for growth. That is the truth of the situation, isn't it? The Conservatives had 14 years to do something about the fundamental weaknesses in our economy, and they did nothing. In fact, they made those weaknesses even worse: stagnant growth, low productivity, low wages, low skills, high mortgages, high debt, poor health, poor housing, woeful transport, deep-seated inequalities, and no ambition under the previous Government to gain the jobs of the future. We are beginning to tackle those deep-rooted weaknesses, and that is the truth that he and his party leader should be telling the country.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Community organisations are the backbone of many events in towns and villages across North West Leicestershire. For the past 10 years, the Rotary Club of Ashby de la Zouch Castle has organised our annual charity Santa fun run in Ashby, which I have had the pleasure of taking part in alongside hundreds of local people. Last week, the club presented cheques to LOROS hospice, Rainbows hospice for children and young people, and Staunton Harold Sailability Trust. It was great to hear that the fun run has now raised over £100,000 for local charities that support residents in need. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the volunteers for their commitment to support our communities, and could the House be granted an opportunity to discuss what further support could be provided to volunteers to ensure that they continue to thrive?

Lucy Powell: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking the volunteers in her constituency for what sound like fantastic local fundraising activities. I thought she was going to ask me to go on a fun run—to which the answer was going to be no—but otherwise I welcome her question.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): On the Liberal Democrat Benches, we have been delighted by the recent groundswell of support from across the House for Liberal Democrat policies. In particular, I cite: the support for our Youth Mobility Scheme (EU Countries) Bill; the warm response for the sunshine Bill—the New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill—from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), which is coming tomorrow; and the House endorsing a fairer voting system. Will the Government answer this clear yearning by Members across the House for Liberal Democrat policies and provide parliamentary time to ensure those Bills become law?

Lucy Powell: I notice that this week there was further public support for the Liberal Democrats: I understand that 90% of respondents to a review of their general election campaign thought their party leader's eye-catching campaign style was very effective. I concur, so here's to even more bungee jumping and paddle boarding, but perhaps less of the tight wetsuits—I'm not sure I really want to see those! I am pleased that we are able to support a number of the measures coming forward from the hon. Lady's colleagues. I look forward to continuing to work constructively across the House with Liberal Democrats.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): As the junction 28 parliamentary champion, I report that residents across Bolsover are really frustrated by congestion. Can we have a Government statement on what we are doing to tackle congestion across Bolsover?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of congestion in Bolsover, and I congratulate her on doing so today. She will know that this is one of a number of issues the Government are seeking to tackle through their transport and roads strategies.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Will the Leader of the House please ask the Secretary of State for Transport to come urgently to the House and give a statement on the destruction of trees and vegetation along the Liberty line, which runs from Romford to Emerson Park in my constituency? There has been an

[Andrew Rosindell]

extreme lack of accountability and communication from Network Rail. It has not consulted local residents or elected representatives, despite promising to do so in 2022 when a similar incident occurred. This is devastating for the local environment and wildlife. Cutting down healthy trees is wrong and Network Rail needs to be held to account for its actions.

Lucy Powell: I am sure that many colleagues across the House recognise that the felling of healthy trees causes a great deal of local interest from constituents, wherever it occurs, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise it. I am not aware of the particular case he raises, but I will ensure he gets a ministerial response.

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): Gary, a constituent of mine who lives in Thrapston, had his driving licence suspended for six months due to a medical condition. During that time, his employer supported him getting to and from work, but shortly before his licence was due to be renewed it was, once again due to his medical condition, suspended for a further six months. In the light of that and in order to continue to work, Gary applied for support from the Access to Work grant scheme. Following his application, Gary was advised that there was a 30-week wait before his application would be dealt with. Does the Minister agree that the Government have prioritised supporting people who wish to continue to work whenever they can, and that delays in granting applications like this are totally unacceptable and could lead to people losing their jobs? Can we get Gary's case looked into as soon as possible?

Lucy Powell: It is completely unacceptable for people to have to wait as long as that. This Government are committed to significantly reducing the waiting times for Access to Work and other programmes, and I will ensure that a Minister looks into Gary's case and it is resolved as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for allowing protected time for this afternoon's Backbench Business debate, and also for allowing time next week for the annual Holocaust Memorial Day debate. In addition to the business that she announced for Monday, there will be two Select Committee statements on behalf of the Treasury Committee and another on behalf of the Defence Committee. Those Committee statements are important, so I trust that the Government will try not to schedule too many Government statements that would squeeze the time available. We always like to satisfy colleagues, and on Thursday 30 January there will be a debate on proportional representation for general elections.

In Westminster Hall, next Tuesday there will be a debate on the provision of auditory verbal therapy, next Thursday there will be a debate on the United Nations International Day of Education followed by a debate on innovation in the field of rare retinal diseases, on Tuesday 28 January there will be a debate on road safety for young drivers, and on Thursday 30 January there will be a debate on medicinal cannabis.

In addition, may I point out that the Palestine Solidarity Campaign has organised hate marches across London over many months since 7 October? The Metropolitan police have finally decided that it is unacceptable for the campaigners to form up at midday 100 yards from a synagogue where Jewish people were threatened when leaving or joining the Shabbat service, and have insisted that the route of the marches must not go near any synagogue. However, the campaigners have said that they will defy the police and form up outside the synagogue again. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary reinforcing the view that if that happens, those individuals should face the full force of the law and the cost of policing the demonstration to ensure that public order is protected?

Lucy Powell: Let me first thank the hon. Gentleman for listing a number of future debates. I was pleased that, after he had raised the matter with me in during business questions last week, I was able to protect time for this afternoon's debate, and that we were able to find Government time for a proper debate on Holocaust Memorial Day next week. As ever, I thank him for his continued work as a very diligent and good Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

As for the other issue, the hon. Gentleman will know that decisions about the policing of protests and demonstrations are a matter for the police—they are operational matters—but he is right to say that public safety should be at the fore, along with ensuring that no one is subject to antisemitism or any other kind of hate as a result of any demonstration.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): May I pick up some comments that were made a little earlier? Many of my constituents have written to me expressing their concerns about campaign finance laws following media reports that a certain foreign billionaire will be providing very large donations. Will the Government introduce legislation to cap individual donations, close existing loopholes and enhance the powers of the Electoral Commission?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right: foreign money and foreign donations have no place in UK politics and are prohibited under current law, but the existing legislation may need to be tightened. As he will know, we have a manifesto commitment to look at donations to political parties, and we will be introducing a Bill on elections, probably in the next Session.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Yesterday, along with many other Members, I attended an oversubscribed debate in Westminster Hall led by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on compensation for WASPI women. It is clear there was no consensus on the Government side in relation to the outcome of the Government's decision. Given that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman sent the report to Parliament for Parliament to decide, when will the Government provide time for a debate and a vote?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that question. As she said, a debate did take place yesterday, and there are many mechanisms for debates to be brought forward in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. I know it is of great disappointment to people that the Government have taken this decision, which was quite a specific one

about that report. Many women were communicated with over that time, and an apology was issued, but we did not feel that the compensation being proposed was proportionate or would be a fair use of public funds at this time.

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): We have a housing crisis across the UK, and I am pleased that the Government have announced a plan to build 1.5 million more homes. Does the Leader of the House agree that councils have an important part to play in fixing this crisis by updating their local plans and delivering the homes that are so desperately needed, including social housing and affordable homes? Without these plans, our green-belt spaces are at risk, such as Whyburn Farm in my constituency, which Ashfield Independents on the district council are failing to protect by having no plan. Does she agree that it is vital that councils use their local plans to meet the needs of communities, while also protecting our green-belt spaces?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this country faces a housing crisis. That is why this Government have an incredibly ambitious target to build 1.5 million homes over the course of this Parliament, and we are changing the national planning policy framework to ensure that local councils have ambitious targets for their own local areas in order to meet that target.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In the 2024 new year's honours list, Stuart Hogg was awarded an MBE. Since then he has been charged, convicted and sentenced for domestic abuse. Does the Leader of the House and Lord President of the Council agree that he should be stripped of that state honour?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important matter, which I know is of great concern to him and to many other Members across the House. Let us be clear that domestic abuse is abhorrent, we condemn it, and it should not be, or be seen to be, rewarded by any of us. It is completely understandable and appropriate that he and others raise questions about whether this honour should continue. He will know that I cannot comment on individual honours. However, recommendations to remove honours are considered by the Forfeiture Committee, which he might want to raise this with.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I am deeply concerned about a local decision by our hospital trust to cut the bus route between Burnley general teaching hospital urgent care centre and Royal Blackburn teaching hospital, which is a huge loss to staff and patients. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on transport operators, the county council, East Lancashire hospitals NHS trust, Blackburn with Darwen borough council and others to get round the table and find a solution to save our shuttle bus and keep this vital service running?

Lucy Powell: Shuttle buses such as the one my hon. Friend describes in his constituency—especially those that go to hospitals and other local services—are vital. For too long, local areas and communities have not had a say in the bus routes they need in their area. That is why we have brought forward the Bus Services Bill, which is making its way through the other House and will ensure that his constituents have more of a say over the bus routes in their area.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As I am sure you know, Mr Speaker, my constituency is the source of a number of globally significant chalk streams, not least and most famously the River Test. A number of Members were pressing the previous Government to bring forward a chalk stream recovery pack, to help get those rivers back to their best state of health, so you can imagine our disappointment when we learnt in the media before Christmas that this pack was being abandoned, as was subsequently confirmed in a ministerial statement. Could we have a statement urgently from the Secretary of State about what he will do to replace that pack and bring these rivers back to the state of health they should be in?

Mr Speaker: We have to help Sir Charles Walker's fishing—come on, Leader of the House.

Lucy Powell: I pride myself on knowing lots of things about what the Government are doing, but I have to admit that this is not something I am aware of or can offer the right hon. Gentleman any particular advice on right now. However, I assure him that I will raise it today with the Minister and ensure that he gets a full response. If that is not sufficient, I will ensure that the Minister comes to the House.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Back in September, I hand-delivered a letter to the Home Office regarding critical concerns about our asylum hotel and about so many vulnerable families being put in such a deprived area. I had a holding response in October, as did my council, but can the Leader of the House secure me a meeting with Home Office officials to discuss this vital issue?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend consistently raises the issue of asylum hotels in his constituency, and I am really sorry to hear that he has not yet had a response from the relevant Minister. I will ensure that he gets a response and the meeting he has asked for.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My question is about a rather disturbing matter, and it regards the latest issue of *The House* magazine. On page 14, there is an article entitled, "State of the union". There are depictions of the United Kingdom, and each country has its flag. The flag over Northern Ireland, contrary to what the rest of the world knows it to be, is the flag of the Republic of Ireland, as opposed to the Union flag or the Ulster banner. This is absolutely outrageous and must be corrected in a suitably clear manner.

The flag of our nation—my nation—is precious. When I look at the red of the St Patrick's cross in the background of that flag, I think of the blood of those whose lives were given in the defence of Northern Ireland and this great nation. When I see the publication's mistake, it grieves me to see how we are regarded by so many. I wish to make it clear that we do not live under the flag of the Republic of Ireland, despite the view of those who do not take their seats here. However, it seems that their influence is greater than that of those in this

[Jim Shannon]

Chamber. The flag of Northern Ireland is the Ulster banner or the Union flag, and it means something to many people.

We cannot allow this disgraceful incident to pass. I ask the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, to ensure that there is a correction. Perhaps the staff at *The House* also need to be educated about the basics of the state of the Union, including its geography; they need to understand the wee simple things, given that it purports to be a political magazine that is focused on the business of this House. Will the Leader of the House show her displeasure with the erroneous depiction? May I ask her to ensure that a correction is made immediately, and that geographic training for staff at *The House* magazine will take place?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely share the hon. Gentleman's displeasure, and I thank him for raising this matter today. It is a very disturbing mistake for *The House* to have made. He will be aware that I am not responsible for the magazine, but I hope that the editors and the editorial board are watching this exchange and can offer the hon. Gentleman a full explanation and a full apology. They need to put this situation right with immediate effect.

Mr Speaker: Given that I have been brought into this matter, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that *The House* is not a publication of the House, but it does trade on the House's name and use the House's coat of arms. There are questions to be asked, and the hon. Gentleman has raised a very important question. The Leader of the House and I will look at what we can do and what should happen next.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Right across my constituency, there is plenty of support for this Government's ambition to do far better when it comes to transitioning to clean, green renewable energy. However, there is also a lot of frustration when my constituents see new houses going up, because we are not making use of rooftops and making sure that homes have the highest energy efficiency standards. Can we have a statement from the Housing Minister about how we can make sure that we are far more ambitious than the last Government in the requirements on developers?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. Solar panels on new homes will be a vital component in meeting our clean energy superpower ambitions. He will be aware that the previous Government actually pulled back from including solar panels in the new building regulations. Had they done so, we would already have a much higher level of solar energy coming into the grid. We are already putting that right.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Post offices provide vital services in our rural communities, such as banking. In my Thornbury and Yate constituency, however, there are concerns about the future of the post office in Tytherington community shop, following the announcement that its partner post office in Cromhall will close at the end of February. Will the Leader of the House agree to give us a debate in Government time on how we can support community post offices in the future?

Lucy Powell: The issue of community post offices regularly comes up in these sessions, and I know it is a matter of considerable importance to the House. It would make for a good Backbench Business debate, and I see that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is still in his place. The hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) is right to raise these issues. I know that colleagues are concerned about plans to close all the current Crown post offices, too. She should know that no decisions have been made on that, and I would encourage colleagues to raise the matter very strongly in the House, with Ministers and, indeed, with the Post Office itself.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Sadly, many places across England have been impacted by flooding in recent days. The ground floor of Meadow Mill in my constituency was flooded on new year's eve, which meant that residents in 213 apartments were not only stranded but left without water, electricity or heating. I thank all the emergency service workers and Stockport council staff for supporting the residents. Can we have a debate in Government time on the impact of flooding on insurance premiums and service charge costs for apartment block residents?

Lucy Powell: As a near constituency neighbour of my hon. Friend, I am well aware of Meadow Mill and all the trauma and difficulties suffered by residents during the recent flooding. Many other colleagues' constituencies were affected, too.

This Government inherited really poor flood defence systems, which is why we have put in place a floods resilience taskforce. My hon. Friend is right to highlight insurance costs and other issues, and I will ensure that the House is kept constantly updated on flooding and its impacts.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Could the Leader of the House use her great influence to improve the tone and quality of ministerial responses in this place? On Monday, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology responded to the question I asked on behalf of the creative industries, which are very worried about the Government's consultation on artificial intelligence and copyright, by telling me that I do not

"understand the idea of a consultation."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 55.]

I hate to admit it, but I am long enough in the tooth to say that I genuinely do understand what a consultation is and how to recognise one that does not appear to be genuine and that has a foregone conclusion.

The point is that we need to be able to articulate questions on behalf of our constituents and on behalf of sectors that contribute so much to the UK economy, and receive a response that has dignity and respect at its heart. I am sure the Leader of the House agrees that this place should be no place for mansplaining.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for all the brilliant work she does on behalf of our creative industries as Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I know that AI and copyright are to the fore among the issues about which the creative industries are concerned.

I am happy to apologise on behalf of any Minister who may have inadvertently not used the appropriate tone. I know that the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology respects the hon. Lady greatly, and I am sure he did not mean to cause any offence. I am sure it was meant humorously, which is obviously not how it has been taken. I will ensure that the hon. Lady's comments are passed back.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Seemingly unending roadworks in Rossendale and Darwen are causing massive disruption to residents and businesses. Lane rental schemes, in which companies are charged for the time that their works occupy the road, can be a game changer, yet highways authorities such as Lancashire seem to be unwilling to use the powers available to them. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we can get the action that we need to free up our roads?

Lucy Powell: I think we can all identify with the plight of constituents who are experiencing unnecessary and badly co-ordinated roadworks, and all the congestion and disruption they cause. The Government want to see more local authorities introduce lane rental schemes, and I will ensure that the relevant Minister supports my hon. Friend's call for such a scheme in his constituency.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Last week, I met representatives of the Environment Agency at Knaresborough lido, which was granted bathing water status last year thanks to the hard work of local campaigners and the former MP, Andrew Jones. The Environment Agency has said that, unlike other rivers with sewage and pollution issues, which are usually due to adverse weather events and heavy rain, the issue on the River Nidd looks to be continuous, regardless of the weather. It is particularly bad during dry spells, which leads the Environment Agency to believe that it is down to housing developments that might be inadvertently, or deliberately in some cases, tapping into existing sewerage networks. Will the Leader of the House speak with her colleagues in the relevant Department to ensure that, when we look at the issue of water quality, we also consider how it is affected by housing development?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member is right to raise that issue. Core to the conversations that are happening between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is that nature, including the issues of water supply, sewage and so on, is vital when we consider housing plans. None the less, I will ensure that he gets a reply on the case that he raises.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The good news is that 185 apartments around Wembley Stadium in my constituency are ready to be occupied. The bad news is that nobody can move into them, because the Building Safety Regulator has sat on its gateway 2 applications for six months and its gateway 3 applications for two months. We have a housing shortage. Can the Leader of the House ensure that we have a debate on the delays and dysfunctionality of the Building Safety Regulator?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend will be aware that, through the Building Safety Act 2022 brought in by the previous Government, we do now have a Building Safety Regulator. It is right, given the context in which that regulator came about following the Grenfell fire, that we ensure that buildings are signed off as safe, and are able to be signed off as safe, before they can be occupied and sold. I am happy to look into this particular case to see why it has taken so long for that to happen.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): We face an emergent healthcare crisis in towns and communities across the country as demand for non-surgical aesthetic treatments, including botox and dermal fillers, rises. This is fuelled by social media and societal pressures on young people. Such treatments often take place in unregulated high street environments and place pressure on the NHS. When will the Government bring forward legislation to introduce a mandatory licensing regime, and will they allow for a debate in Government time on the Floor of this House?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member raises an important topic, which I know affects many of our constituents. We have seen a number of very high-profile cases lately where things have gone terribly wrong in a sector that is completely unregulated, as he says. I know that there have been plans in place for a while to bring forward the measures he describes. I will ensure that the House is updated when those measures are ready, and that, in the meantime, he gets a ministerial response.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): London Southend airport has taken time to bounce back from the pandemic, but I am delighted to see that, over recent months, a number of new routes have been established. EasyJet has announced its new base at the airport and, just in the past week, Eastern Airways has announced its new route to Newquay. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is positive news for the local economy and a sign of growing business confidence on the back of the Government's mission to kick-start economic growth? Will she join me on a visit to the airport to hear more about its future plans?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in commending the great efforts of London Southend airport. I commend him and other local leaders for taking this airport from strength to strength in recent years, particularly over the past year. I know that easyJet is looking at opening a base there soon. It is clear that this airport is now going from strength to strength, which is something that his constituents will strongly support.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Office for Environmental Protection published its annual report today on our progress in protecting the environment. Unfortunately, it is not good news: we are off-track on 20 out of 43 targets, and only five out of its 52 recommendations last year have been implemented. The report, which deals with the period under the previous Government, shows that progress was slowing on nature protection in that year. This Government have announced that they will review the environmental improvement plan. Can the Leader of the House tell us when that review will be

[Ellie Chowns]

published? Can a Minister come to the House to make a statement on how the Government will turn this around to protect nature?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is right: that report shows how little was done to protect nature under the previous Government, despite many announcements to the contrary. Nature protection is a core part of our clean energy mission, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is central to that mission. She will be aware that it will take a while to turn things around, but we are committed to doing so. I will ensure that she and the House are updated regularly on where things are up to, and on when the reports will be responded to.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): We are a proud cathedral city. Everyone in Peterborough has a story to tell about our cathedral, whether it is attending a carol service, going to a graduation or community event, or even remembering the Foreign Secretary singing there as a chorister when he was a schoolboy. For over 900 years, our cathedral has been there for us. Now, in the words of the Very Rev. Chris Dalliston, our dean, we need to be there for the cathedral, because it has a funding crisis. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the cathedral well with its appeal, and ensure that we have time in this House to debate these wonderful places, which are not just of local importance but national heritage assets?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for his constituency. I strongly welcome his question, and fully support what he says about Peterborough cathedral, and all the cathedrals of this country. What a national asset they are. He will be aware that the Government have in place a range of support programmes for places of worship, such as the listed places of worship grant scheme and the Churches Conservation Trust. Next week, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on the listed places of worship grant scheme, in which he may want to participate. Finally, I join him in strongly supporting the campaign to raise the funds that Peterborough cathedral needs.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is nearly three years since the passing of the Down Syndrome Act 2022, yet the guidance that would bring it to life has not been implemented. People with Down's syndrome really need support in areas such as healthcare, education and employment, so could we have a debate in Government time on support for people with Down's syndrome, and ensure that this vital legislation is fully enacted?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, which has not been raised with me before. The Down Syndrome Act was an important piece of legislation, recognising the amazing contribution that those with Down's syndrome make to our society and our country, while recognising the challenges that they face, and the extra support that they need to flourish. I will find out for him where we are up to with the implementation of the Act, and ensure that he is updated.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Grimsby's Green Futures on its very successful wassail last Saturday? When will we have time in the House to celebrate great English traditions such as Morris dancing, folk music and indeed wassailing?

Lucy Powell: I thought for a moment that my hon. Friend was going to ask me to do some wassailing; I would need to look it up and get some training. I will absolutely support her in promoting these great English traditions, and all the great work that is happening in Grimsby to keep them alive. I am sure that it would make a very good topic for a debate.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I, too, am delighted that wassailing has been mentioned, because there was a wassail in my village of Hurstpierpoint last Saturday.

Constituents across Mid Sussex really enjoy and appreciate having access to our coastline and seas, and they rightly expect our oceans to be clean and healthy. The UN global ocean treaty is the world's only road map for protecting at least a third of the world's oceans by 2030. The UK has committed to ratifying the treaty, but the next step is for the Government to introduce a short Bill to pass it into UK law. Will the Leader of the House please update us on when the Government plan to introduce the legislation?

Lucy Powell: I am sure that, like me, the hon. Member received many specially written Christmas cards urging us to consider introducing that legislation, so this is something I am very much aware of. She will know that we are committed to ratifying the agreement, and legislation will be brought forward in due course. I cannot give her a more specific timetable, but the legislation will be brought forward before we need to have ratified the treaty.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I invite the Leader of the House and all hon. Members to join me and the Samaritans on Monday for a brew. Blue Monday may have been invented by the travel industry to encourage us to book holidays in January, but the Samaritans has converted it to Brew Monday, when we can highlight the importance of talking to each other in an effort to prevent suicide. Can we have a debate in Government time on the national suicide prevention strategy and look at what else we can do to prevent suicide?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in the efforts to rebrand Blue Monday as Brew Monday. I am sure that is something we can all participate in and support. She is absolutely right to highlight the issues of suicide and mental health support. I know that they are a real personal priority of the Health Secretary, and I am sure that he will keep the House updated on any progress.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Center Parcs is planning an exciting new development in my constituency in the Scottish Borders. It will be the first Center Parcs in Scotland, and it will bring £350 million of investment and create 1,200 extra jobs for the area. However, due to under-investment by the SNP Government in Edinburgh, there are concerns about the capacity of the road network, particularly the A7 through Selkirk, to deal with the extra visitors and

tourists. Would the Leader of the House allow time for a debate to consider how rural communities can attract greater investment when there are concerns about the adequacy of the transport system and road network?

Lucy Powell: Again, I thought I was being invited to Center Parcs. I am very partial to a water slide, should colleagues ever want to invite me to a Center Parcs. The hon. Member raises the serious point that when much-needed investment and great new facilities or services come into a constituency, we need to ensure that we have the infrastructure and roads to support them. The SNP Government in Scotland have just got a record settlement in the Budget, so they have no excuse not to support the road he talks about.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Despite community efforts from Hexham rotary club and the Hexham Wombles litter pick, the old bus station site in Hexham remains an eyesore, and the developer is sadly slow-walking on redevelopment. Can we have a debate in Government time on the need to make best use of disused sites on market town high streets, and on how we can improve them and boost town centres, which are crucial to our economy?

Lucy Powell: Breathing new life into our high streets and town centres is a real priority for this Government. After years of neglect and decline, that is much needed. We will bring forward an English devolution Bill later this Session, which will grant communities a new right to buy derelict buildings such as the one my hon. Friend mentions. I hope that will help him and his constituents to take back control.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Scottish Labour Members like nothing more than getting to their feet to drone on about the Scottish Government, and asking the Minister questions about matters that have absolutely nothing to do with them. Can we have a debate about the spectacular fall in the polls of Scottish Labour, and we could perhaps determine whose fault that is? Is it the hapless Anas Sarwar, or is it because the Scottish people have seen a Labour Government in action?

Lucy Powell: It is not Labour Members droning on—in fact, none of them has today raised a point of the kind he mentions—but we would all welcome a debate in this House on the performance of the Scottish Government and whether they are delivering for the Scottish people, because they now have the powers and the funds, so they have no excuses.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks of the Leader of the House about welcoming a long-overdue ceasefire. My constituent Dr Ryann Sowden has been working tirelessly to support survivors of that crisis. I commend the Bolton Council of Mosques for its unwavering advocacy of peace. The House should reflect that determination. Will the Leader of the House work with colleagues across Government to get vital aid into Gaza before more lives are tragically lost?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue, which she has raised consistently in the House—it is a matter of deep concern and importance for her. We all very much welcome the developments in Israel and Gaza over recent hours and days, and we all want a long-lasting ceasefire and for the hostages to be released. Crucially, as she says, it will be important to surge much-needed aid into Gaza, so that we get people back to living there safely, with water and food.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It may be helpful to Members to know that I will run this session until 11.45 am. It would therefore be very helpful if we had short questions and answers, so that I can get in as many Members as possible.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Leicestershire was one of the areas hit by significant flooding. Fortunately, my constituency is relatively okay, bar pockets such as Shenton, Barwell, Sheepy Magna and Witherley. The problem is that they do not hit the Government's threshold for funding because they are too small and often experience flooding only to roads and connectors, rather than houses. Will the Leader of the House write to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ask him to reconsider the formula, and to provide for isolated communities that are cut off but do not get breaches into houses? That problem is fundamentally difficult to solve.

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The changes in global weather as a result of climate change mean that flooding incidents are more frequent and more acute, and are often hyper-localised, rather than widespread. He makes a compelling point about the impact of localised flooding not just on homes but on local infrastructure. I will certainly ensure that that is considered by the Secretary of State.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): May I invite the Leader of the House to commend the hard work of the One Love Project in my constituency? It is a community-run non-referral service that supports those most in need, including the street homeless. Its provides food, warm showers, clothing, clothes-washing facilities, sleeping bags—the list goes on. It is, above all, the welcoming and non-judgmental approach of Sharon and her fabulous team that makes the work most inspiring. I invite the Leader of the House to visit the project and see its work at first hand, and to visit sunny Southend and Rochford to experience all that we have to offer, from our coastline to our cultural heritage landmarks, such as Rochford town square and the medieval St Nicholas church in Great Wakering.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend paints a compelling picture of Southend and Rochford, and I would certainly be happy to visit one day. He also mentions the amazing work of the One Love Project on homelessness. This country relies greatly on such organisations. The Government are committed to tackling the root causes of homelessness and ensuring that funding is there to support people at the darkest time of their life.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Families of British citizens who are murdered abroad do not have not the same rights as families of homicide victims in the UK. Often, families coping with the trauma of that news must arrange to pay for their own translators, so that they can speak to local police and read legal

[Mr Joshua Reynolds]

documents—all while trying to negotiate the criminal justice system of a foreign jurisdiction. Those families deserve the same rights as those of homicide victims in the UK, but at the moment they are not even entitled to a police family liaison officer. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on that, so that we can build consensus across the House on a way forward?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising such an important issue, and for giving me notice that he was going to do so. The Ministry of Justice is working with the Victims' Commissioner and others in the sector to explore how families in the situation he has described can be better supported with the information and financial assistance they need. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman is updated on that work.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minton tiles in our Central Lobby, the plates in our Tea Room, and even the chandelier in the Pugin guest room are all wonderful examples of Staffordshire craftsmanship, yet at the moment in this place, we are seeing creeping numbers of foreign ceramic imports in place of British products. Can the Leader of the House, in her capacity as the Government's representative on the House of Commons Commission and the restoration and renewal board, say what the Government's policy is for ensuring that artisans and creators from all corners of our nation are showcased in this place?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a very strong advocate for the craftsmanship and ceramics of Stoke, and of Staffordshire more widely—he has given us some good examples. Sometimes I do not want to have dinner alongside my hon. Friend, because he inspects all the ceramics and all the things we are using to eat our dinner, rightly so. I will absolutely raise the points he has highlighted with the House authorities and ensure we are doing more to support the great craftsmanship that we have in this country.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Yesterday, along with Members from across the House, I attended the launch of the latest report from the charity Open Doors, which highlights Christian persecution in many countries. Many of the countries on that charity's watchlist are countries that the UK has close relations with. Could the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time on that Open Doors report and what greater influence the UK can bring to bear on those rogue nations?

Lucy Powell: The report that the hon. Gentleman has highlighted is a really important one, and he has raised some very important topics. I will ensure that if he does not get a full ministerial reply about those topics, they are considered as important issues. He might want to raise them in an Adjournment debate or elsewhere as well.

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I was deeply saddened this week to see new data from the Office for National Statistics and Health Equals, which has ranked my constituency as having the lowest life expectancy anywhere in the UK. My constituency also has a higher than average poverty rate—there is undoubtedly a link between those two stats. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in Government time to explore the factors that contribute to a lowered life expectancy, including the impact of poverty, to help my constituents live longer, happier and more financially secure lives?

Lucy Powell: The link between health inequality and poor health outcomes and poverty is absolutely clear. Eradicating those things is at the heart of our health mission, but also at the heart of what this Government are seeking to do more widely, because we recognise that only by sharing prosperity and growth around the country, tackling the roots of poverty, and seeing health as both a public health issue and an economic issue will we tackle some of these core challenges.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Many of us will remember the devastation that the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001 caused in rural England. I am pleased that the Government have restricted commercial imports of susceptible animals and personal imports of animal products. However, I was reminded yesterday by James, a farmer in my area, that last time, our high biosecurity standards saw the dipping of vehicles and footwear. Can we have a debate focusing on the movement of people and vehicles into the UK from affected areas—whether by road, rail, ferry or air—to prevent transmission of the virus, and particularly the installing of large notices at airports for incoming and transit passengers to declare such products?

Lucy Powell: The Government will do whatever it takes to protect farmers from the risk posed by foot and mouth. We have already brought in restrictions on animal products from Germany, and we will not hesitate to add additional countries to that list. I reassure the hon. Lady that there are currently no cases here in the UK. We did have an urgent question on this matter yesterday, but I will ensure that the House is constantly updated on any further developments.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. May I encourage all Members to reduce the length of their questions by 50%, and then everyone will get in?

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Last Friday, I had the privilege of meeting those at the Foyer and Doncaster Housing for Young People to discuss how we can best support 16 to 25-year-olds who are homeless or vulnerably housed. Having experienced homelessness as a child, I know how challenging that can be, so I really welcome the measures in the Renters' Rights Bill. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating organisations such as Doncaster Housing for Young People on their vital work and in praising the measures in the Bill?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. The Renters' Rights Bill—the Conservatives voted against it this week, shockingly—will see the end of section 21 no-fault evictions, which is an important measure, along with many others, towards ending homelessness in this country and tackling the root causes of it. I strongly support my hon. Friend's support for the Bill.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): I think one thing we can agree on across this House is that life in our constituencies across the country is enriched by the work of volunteers. I am thinking of the volunteers in my own constituency of Nanu football club, Garforth Town football club, LS14 Trust in Seacroft, Chapel FM and CATCH—Community Action To Create Hope—in Harehills, to mention just a few. Every 5 December is International Volunteer Day, so will the Leader of the House consider guaranteeing an annual debate on international volunteers so that we can celebrate in this House the work that volunteers do in our constituencies?

Lucy Powell: This gets raised with me very often because volunteers do enrich our communities and our society. Without them, we would not have the country and the communities we have. I will very much look at the suggestion of an annual debate to celebrate their contribution to our constituencies.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Currently, there is no statutory right for time off work for fertility treatment, which causes so much stress to so many people. Many employers do offer this voluntarily, which I welcome, but does the Leader of the House agree with me and campaigners such as Fertility Matters at Work that it is really important to support people seeking fertility treatment? Can she update us on the timetable for the Employment Rights Bill, so that we have a chance to discuss reproductive health in the workplace?

Lucy Powell: As my hon. Friend will know, I am very sympathetic to the question she asked. It is one of the reasons why I ensured that Members of Parliament could get proxy votes for fertility treatments, which I know many Members will take advantage of. We have the Employment Rights Bill going through Committee at the moment. It will soon be coming back to the House on Report, and I think she should raise these matters during the passage of that Bill.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): My constituents in Barking were delighted to hear the news that the train operator c2c would be brought into public ownership later this year, a decision that will see a more reliable train service. It is currently refurbishing Barking station in my constituency, but the works have suffered delay after delay. Will the Leader of the House seek a statement from the Government about public transport infrastructure that may be affected by their decision to nationalise train operators to reassure my constituents that such refurbishment plans will get done and will be delivered soon?

Lucy Powell: The Government's plans to take back our railways into public ownership will improve reliability, investment and the passenger experience, so I assure my hon. Friend that those plans will be of great benefit to her constituents in the way she describes.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Next week, the commission for palliative care and end of life care will start taking oral and written evidence, and I really hope that Members will ask their specialists and their constituents to participate in that. Will the Leader of the House ensure that, when the commission reports, we have a debate on its findings so that we can optimise palliative and end-of-life care?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for all her campaigning on the important issue of palliative care, which so many in our country rely on at the very worst stage of their lives. I will ensure that the House is constantly updated on these matters, which I know are particularly important to the Secretary of State for Health.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Several homes in my constituency were badly flooded, with more than 500 homes flooded internally across the east midlands. I express my sympathy to all those impacted. It was especially concerning to hear about the verbal abuse directed towards flood wardens, who work exceptionally hard to protect their communities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is unacceptable? Will she ensure that the House considers how best to protect these fantastic volunteers?

Lucy Powell: It is completely unacceptable that volunteers acting as flood wardens in these difficult times are on the wrong end of abuse from anybody. I will ensure that these matters are raised in government and that we send a strong signal that it will not be tolerated and that action will be taken against the perpetrators.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Thirty years on from the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, there are still train stations in my constituency that are not fully accessible, including Burntisland and Cowdenbeath stations. This creates unacceptable daily barriers for disabled people, families with prams and buggies and those with heavy luggage. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need support from the Access for All fund and action from Network Rail, Transport Scotland and ScotRail so that stations are made accessible? Will she make time for a debate on railway accessibility?

Lucy Powell: Accessibility on our railways is raised many times with me in these sessions and across the House. Let us be honest: the accessibility of many of our stations, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, is deeply inadequate for those with buggies, in wheelchairs or whatever else. The Rail Minister is carefully considering the best approach to the Access for All programme, but I will ensure that the House is regularly updated.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Establishing joined-up health hubs in towns such as Saltash and Liskeard could bring routine services from across the Tamar closer to home, easing pressure on Derriford hospital. While recent debates have addressed broader rural healthcare issues, will the Leader of the House provide Government time to discuss how integrated, localised healthcare can better serve rural communities by relocating routine patient care from hospitals to community settings?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend knows that we inherited a national health service on its knees, as she describes. As part of our mission and our endeavours to turn that around, she will know that getting care back into communities, early intervention, prevention and primary services are critical, and I hope that will better serve her constituents in the future.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My constituent Angie has raised with me the serious issue of shortages of attention deficit hyperactivity

[Luke Myer]

disorder medication. Her son is struggling in school, and he is not the only one, as the shortages have been affecting the country since 2023. Can the Leader of the House set out the Government's position on this issue and how we can ensure that this medication is made available?

Lucy Powell: The Department of Health and Social Care is working hard with industry and NHS England to help resolve the supply issues with ADHD medicines, which is a global problem. I will ensure that he and the House are updated on any progress.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): In March last year, Members discussed the need for improved personal protective equipment for women, an issue brought forward during the pandemic. Arco Professional Safety Services, which has a safety training centre in my constituency, recognised the need and told me during a recent visit that it is trialling women's sizes as standard. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time to debate legislating for the mandatory provision of women-specific and inclusive PPE?

Lucy Powell: Despite great progress in recent decades, we are all still well aware that too many products in the world are designed by men, for men, and we still need to address some of those issues. I am sure it would make a very good topic for a debate.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): The Conservative council that ran Barnet for 20 years left Hendon's roads in a dreadful state with terrible potholes and pavements. Since it was elected, the Labour council that took over has been investing record amounts in tackling the large backlog that the Conservatives left. I am pleased that the Government this week announced that they would invest £1.6 billion in fixing potholes this year. That is a huge increase over the previous Government. Will my right hon. Friend grant a debate on how we can put our foot down and drive forward the Government's plans as quickly as possible to help motorists in Hendon?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right. We have a plan to fix the potholes of this country, with huge investment going in. We want councils, such as Hendon, to get on with using those funds to fix the problem of potholes.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Unregulated and uninsured souped-up electric scooters have been a real source of antisocial behaviour in Derby. Our police and crime commissioner Nicolle Ndiweni-Roberts has been working with Derbyshire constabulary to clamp down on illegal e-scooters, seizing and disposing of more than 200 since November. Will the Leader of the House ensure that a Home Office Minister and a Transport Minister meet me and other Members who have been raising such concerns to ensure that we are pushing forward with regulation and enforcement in relation to e-scooters?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which I know blights many communities. We are taking action to deal with e-scooters, making it easier for those vehicles to be seized where necessary, and other measures are coming to tackle antisocial behaviour as well.

Middle East

11.45 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, I will update the House on the deal announced between Israel and Hamas. Last night, US President Biden and Qatari Prime Minister Al Thani confirmed that negotiators had reached an agreement. While we await political approval for the text, the agreement is expected to come into force shortly after midday Israel time on Sunday 19 January.

After months of despair, there is now hope; a glimmer of light in the darkness; a darkness that had seemed all-consuming since Hamas's barbaric terrorist attack on 7 October 2023. I am sure that the whole House remembers the agony as we learned the full horror of what had unfolded and the grief as we mourned those who were lost. For the hostage families, the agony has gone on and on. Members across the House will have met many of them, including the relatives of British citizen Emily Damari, and Eli Sharabi, Oded Lifschitz and Avinatan Or. I know that we have families with us in the Public Gallery. I pay tribute once again to them for their bravery, humanity and commitment to bringing the hostages home.

I invite the House to join me in remembering those murdered in captivity, including Nadav Popplewell and Yossi Sharabi. May their memories be a blessing.

I say to all those now waiting anxiously to see what this deal means for them: we are with you in the days and weeks ahead. In Gaza today, civilians will be waiting anxiously to see what this deal means for them. I say to them, too: we are with you as you begin to rebuild your lives.

After 15 months of conflict, the level of suffering defies belief. Gazans have truly been trapped in hell on earth—over 46,000 killed, so many children's lives extinguished, schools, hospitals and homes destroyed, and hunger and disease. Almost 2 million have been forced to flee their homes, with northern Gaza cut off from the rest of the strip. A generation have been scarred by the savagery of war.

Among the victims was Hind Rajab, a five-year-old Palestinian girl killed alongside members of her family and the paramedics who came to rescue her. Among the victims were many journalists dedicated to documenting the horrors around them. Among the victims were aid workers dedicated to serving others, including British citizens John Chapman, James Henderson and James Kirby. I invite the House to join me in remembering them all. We mourn every innocent victim of this appalling war.

Beyond Israel and Gaza, the conflict has brought yet more tensions and conflict into the wider region, with unprecedented Iranian attacks, a renewed conflict in Lebanon and Houthi strikes in the Red sea and into Israel. At times, our own communities—and indeed this House—have been divided by this war. This is a moment of hope for us all, to unite in support of this ceasefire.

The agreement as negotiated has three stages. In the first six-week phase we expect that both parties will stop fighting. Thirty-three of the hostages will be freed: children, women, those over 50 and the wounded. Israel will start to redeploy to the edge of the strip. Palestinians will return to what is left of their homes. The Rafah crossing will reopen. Israel will allow 600 truckloads of aid into Gaza each day. On the 16th day, negotiations will begin on the detail of the second phase. In the second six-week phase, the male hostages under 50 will be released. Israel will complete its withdrawal from Gaza, and there will be a permanent ceasefire. Finally, a third phase will see the return of the bodies of any remaining hostages and the lifting of economic restrictions on Gaza.

As President Biden said, the elements of this deal were endorsed by the United Nations Security Council last May. It has taken tireless efforts to reach the agreement of both sides, with reports of final talks this week lasting an intense 96 hours. I congratulate all those who have contributed to getting to this stage: in particular, His Highness the Emir of Qatar and Prime Minister Al Thani; Egyptian President Sisi and Foreign Minister Abdelatty; and President Biden and Secretary Blinken, as well as President-elect Trump. The UK has been supporting them throughout.

From day one in office, the Government have pressed at every stage for an immediate ceasefire, to free the hostages, to get more aid into Gaza and to open up a path to lasting peace. I visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories for the third time as Foreign Secretary just a few days ago, meeting Foreign Minister Sa'ar, President Abbas and hostage families, to press for an end to this war and a plan for the future.

We have also played a leading role in the humanitarian effort, restarting funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, funding field hospitals that have treated more than 300,000 Gazans, and providing more than £100 million in support to the Palestinians this financial year. I pay tribute to Foreign Office Ministers in the last Government for their work to deliver aid to Gaza. Now I am in this role, I know how hard they worked. That intense effort must continue in the days and weeks ahead.

Much remains to be done. It is critical that there is final approval of the agreement. As the Israeli Cabinet meet, I urge them to back this deal. Now is not the time for any backtracking. Both sides must implement each phase of the deal in full and on time. The history of this conflict is littered with missed opportunities. It would be a tragedy to let slip the chance before us—we must grab it with both hands. It is the chance not just for a ceasefire but for a lasting peace, and to break the cycle of violence that has inflicted so much suffering on innocent people on both sides.

The Government are committed to sustaining momentum, however fragile the process at first may be. Every hostage must be released, as set out in the agreement. Every ounce of aid promised to Gaza must reach those in need. I am sending my representative for humanitarian affairs to the region, to work closely with aid agencies, the Israeli Government and our partners to deliver on these promises.

Palestinians must also be free to return to their homes and, crucially, they will need to rebuild: rebuild their homes, rebuild their lives and rebuild their communities. They cannot possibly do that on their own. They need to feel safe and they need the international community to deliver the funds they will require. The UK had already begun to convene partners on the financing and co-ordination of recovery and reconstruction.

[Mr David Lammy]

It is essential that the coming surge of assistance is properly co-ordinated, with the access and security to get to people all that they need.

The Palestinian Authority has a crucial role to play. We want donors to support its plans for recovery, and I discussed that with President Abbas on Monday. We are providing technical and financial assistance to the PA, including to support the urgent recovery of basic services. Working with the Palestinian Authority and civil society will help lay the groundwork for an inclusive Palestinian governance in Gaza. That is the best way to re-establish local order and security. It is therefore a crucial first step in achieving not only better lives for Palestinians but a future for Gaza no longer under the control of Hamas.

Ultimately, it will take time to rebuild Gaza and rebuild trust between the two sides. I must warn the House that there are risks at every turn. But we must try to use the agreement to establish a credible pathway to a two-state solution, with equal measures of security, dignity and justice for Israelis and Palestinians alike. The decades-long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians cannot be managed; it must now be resolved.

We are not yet there and there is much negotiating still to do. As we debate in this House, fighting continues. The agreement awaits full political approval. The hostage families wait for the hostages to come home. Gazans wait for the horrors to be lifted. However, we must still recognise the significance of this moment. It has been long-awaited—frankly, it has taken far too long—and I sincerely hope it is now the basis for progress: progress on bringing the hostages home, progress on bringing relief, reconstruction and hope to long-suffering civilians, and progress towards a two-state solution with Palestinians and Israelis living in peace and security; a better future for all. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

11.57 am

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): All Members recognise the fragile and sensitive nature of the current situation. There is a long road ahead at one of the most important moments for the middle east, which we all hope will usher in a sustainable end to the dreadful conflict in Gaza. It is a conflict that we should never forget was triggered by the horrific Hamas terror attacks of 7 October 2023—the worst terror attack in Israel's history and the most murderous pogrom against the Jewish people since the Holocaust.

We have in our thoughts today the victims of that appalling massacre: those who lost their lives, including the hostages murdered in captivity, and those whose lives have been changed forever. Every single hostage must be returned safely home and reunited with family and friends after 15 months of the most unimaginable cruelty at the hands of Hamas. Even in the midst of that unimaginable pain and anxiety, the families of those held hostage have kept the torch burning for their loved ones, with publicity highlighting their plight with such resilience and tremendous bravery.

We are joined in the House today by the families of hostages who we know will not be eligible for immediate release. I recently met Emily Damari's mother Mandy and Dani Miran, whose son Omri is also in captivity. We all pay tribute to them all for their unceasing campaign to secure the release of their loved ones and all those in captivity. This will, of course, be a time of great emotions for them—mixed emotions—and in the coming weeks, we must continue to wrap our arms around those hostage families.

Like the Foreign Secretary, I acknowledge the important role of Qatar, Egypt and the United States in getting us to where we are today in these talks. We will all follow these developments closely in the days ahead, and we will expect the UK Government to be fully engaged and involved in the heavy lifting that is required at this crucial time to make this agreement work and last.

To that end, can the Foreign Secretary to tell the House specifically what role the UK Government have played in these negotiations and about their contribution to reaching this agreement? Can he give assurances that the UK will help Israel in any way possible to support the safe return of the hostages, which will be so critical in ensuring that the agreement endures? Can he inform the House—it may yet be too early—whether any of the Palestinian prisoners being released were responsible for the death or injury of British nationals, and about the steps being put in place to manage the potential risk of dangerous individuals being set free? On the question of humanitarian aid to Gaza, what work has he undertaken to unpick the awful bottlenecks that we have seen over months and months, while we have seen innocent civilians suffer? Will civilians now receive the vital aid that we have been told will get through to bring essential relief to communities across Gaza?

On the future governance of Gaza, we have so far heard little about the "day after" plan, but this is extremely important; I know the Foreign Secretary will come back to this House in due course, but I would welcome his thoughts on the matter. Is it the Foreign Secretary's position that Hamas must have no role in the future of Gaza? We want to see an end to the brutality with which they have conducted themselves. Does he agree that if the Palestinian Authority do indeed assume responsibility in Gaza, in order to have an enduring and lasting peace, they must undertake the most comprehensive reform in their history, with serious shifts not just in their behaviour but on education and welfare, and that they must bring the course of democracy through to the end that we would like to see? Has he this week delivered that unambiguous message to the Palestinian leadership?

The right people must be involved to ensure that solid foundations are put in place on which Gaza can rebuild and to ensure a lasting, better future so that every generation can live their lives in peace, with the opportunities that have been denied to them for too long. In the days ahead, our focus needs to be on securing the release of the hostages, getting the aid into Gaza and working for that lasting peace.

However, there are some related points that the Foreign Secretary will also need to consider. On Israel, for example, that includes whether the changes to the approach on the International Criminal Court arrest warrants will happen and what should happen from the Government's position; it also includes the arrangements for the future reconstruction of Gaza. He has just touched on this,

but what contribution does he think the United Kingdom should make? His thoughts would be welcome. There are many complexities here. Will he also commit to inserting the UK's enthusiastic approach to fresh discussions on the Abraham accords and the role that will play in the peace, stability and prosperity in the region?

Finally, we have seen for over a year the world's only Jewish state being ruthlessly attacked from all sides, from the Hamas terrorists in Gaza to the Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, from which Iranian-linked militias in Iraq have been directing their course of action, while Iran and its proxies have used innocent Palestinian civilians as human shields without any care for their welfare or wellbeing. We need to know that this Government will step up when it comes to addressing the root causes, which rest in Tehran. The Government, the international community and all of us will want a robust strategy towards Iran if we are to build a lasting and sustainable peace in the middle east.

Mr Lammy: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her remarks and for her tone. Doing this role, one understands the effort that one's predecessors have put in, so I want to put on the record once again that the right hon. Members for Braintree (Mr Cleverly) and for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and Lord Cameron, before me, made tremendous efforts on behalf of the UK Government to get us to this point. I know that they, like me, will sincerely wish that we could have reached this point sooner. This is indeed a day on which we can be grateful for the UK's diplomacy in getting us to this point.

The right hon. Lady asks about the role that the UK has played. She will know that it was quite right that Qatar and Egypt, with their proximity to Hamas, should be central in bringing about the ceasefire; and that the United States, with its particular relationship with Israel, should also stand alongside them. But she will know, because of our complex foreign policy relationship with all those parties, the tremendous effort that UK diplomats have put in to get us to this path. Indeed, I was with them in Israel and in the occupied territories on Monday this week.

It was very important to be with British hostage families in particular, to assure them and counsel them that my judgment was that we would get to this point, as fragile as it is—I want to emphasise the fragility—at this time, but also to be in the occupied territories, the west bank and east Jerusalem, to spend time with President Abbas, to discuss with him what now needs to happen in Gaza in terms of its reconstruction and the reform that the right hon. Lady rightly emphasises is essential for the Palestinian Authority.

The right hon. Lady knows that we have Sir Michael Barber working with the Palestinian Authority to lift up that capacity in the reforms that will be necessary to play that role—alongside others, clearly—in Gaza. When I think of others, I think about the international community as well, but alongside them it is important that the UK plays its part. I will come back to the subject of reconstruction in a moment.

The right hon. Lady rightly talks about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. We have provided £112 million in this financial year, including £41 million specifically for UNRWA. We want to see the number of trucks increase and the figure that has been set in the ceasefire agreement met. I will say this, though: the situation will require proper governance in Gaza if we are to achieve that. At the moment, we have gangs. There is a possibility, as the space opens up, that actually we will get an increase in gangs and less aid to the people who need it. This is the first phase of the deal. There will still be hostages left after the first phase and into the second phase, and potentially into the third phase. We know that able men are not part of the first phase. They need humanitarian aid at this time and hostage families press me to ensure that their loved ones are getting access to that humanitarian aid. So this is a fragile moment and the UK is pressing for a political process, because only a political process will get not just the ceasefire, but the long-term stability that means Gazans can truly rebuild their lives.

The right hon. Lady talks about a "day after" plan. The UK is ready to play a leading role in this process, with international and regional partners. It should be predicated on tangible progress, in our view, towards a Palestinian state, with Gaza and the west bank united under one Government. The Palestinian Authority's role in Gaza must therefore be front and centre. Planning needs to advance security both for Gazans and for Israel, and Israel's security will be fundamental if we are to bring this to an end. That will take intense negotiation and discussion. There clearly will be an important role for the international community in the coming days but, in this fragile moment of phase 1, if we are to complete phase 3 then we will need that intensity in terms of negotiation. My view is very clear: there cannot be a role for Hamas. The terrorism must come to an end. Trust has to be rebuilt. There cannot be a role for Hamas.

Only with that candle that we keep alight for a two-state solution can we actually reach the normalisation that is at the heart of any building on the Abraham accords and the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel that can bring a lot of prosperity for people in the middle east.

The right hon. Lady is right that Iran remains a malign force. This week, British diplomats were discussing with Iran its nuclear programme and what needs to happen if we are not to see the snapback of our sanctions as a consequence of the joint comprehensive plan of action later this year. We will do all that we can diplomatically. This is the moment when the Iranians need to step up and do the right thing, and I know that is acutely in the minds of the incoming US Administration.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and support every word that he has said.

No one wants a ceasefire more than I do. I cannot describe the tears that I and others in the House have shed for all the innocent civilians who have been murdered and maimed. I cannot think what the families of the hostages are going through, and, to be honest, I do not want to think of what the hostages themselves have endured. But the ceasefire is far from certain, the peace following it is far from certain, and

[Sarah Champion]

the two-state solution is very far from certain. What is certain is that on 28 January the Knesset's legislation that effectively bans UNRWA comes into force, and I am unable to see how the aid, the stability, the health systems and the schools can be implemented if that happens. My Committee will publish a report on this subject tomorrow, but can the Foreign Secretary speak now about what he is doing to urge Israel to ensure that that legislation does not come into force and that aid can flood in where it is needed?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all her endeavours on these issues on behalf her Committee, and on behalf of this country. She is right that colleagues in all parts of the House, in this Parliament and the last, have shed tears about this most heartbreaking of conflicts. In my 25 years in the House, I have not seen such emotion from UK parliamentarians in relation to this central challenge.

As for the position of the UK Government, in the midst of this conflict, when there are so many children out of school, so many children orphaned and so many hospitals lying in rubble, when there is disease and famine, we cannot see how there cannot be a role for the central UN agency at this time if this peace is to hold. On Monday, I made that point to the Israeli Government again. Along with my French and German colleagues, I wrote to the Israeli Foreign Minister, making that point and pressing him on the winterisation plan that we believe must be implemented. The clock is ticking down to that Knesset legislation. What we do not want is the undermining of the peace that begins on Sunday by that legislation just a few days into its passing.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement.

This ceasefire is welcomed by all who have watched with horror as the suffering that began on 7 October 2023 has worsened for so many, and I add my thanks to all those who have worked so hard to deliver it. I am thinking today of the Palestinians and Israelis I have met whose lives have been torn apart by this conflict, and to whom this news brings a moment of hope; of the British families of Israeli hostages who continue to live with uncertainty and fear about the fate of their loved ones; and of the Palestinians whose daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, mothers and fathers have lost their lives and homes. The priority must now be ensuring that humanitarian assistance floods into Gaza, and that all possible efforts are made to secure the release of the remaining hostages. I urge the Foreign Secretary to do everything in his power—as he has just said—to persuade Israel not to implement the Knesset's resolution on UNRWA, which would do so much harm and would undermine the progress that is being made.

I am grateful today for the fact that a deal has been reached, but I am also angry that it has taken so long. In the months of delay, there has been no relief for the hostage families. So many more lives have been lost, and so much more destruction has been visited on people in Gaza, including further deaths even since the ceasefire deal was announced. The blocks to progress have been extremists on both sides, the terrorists in Hamas and the supporters of annexation in the Israeli Cabinet: people who do not want peace, but want to erase another population from the land. So I ask the Foreign Secretary these questions.

Will the UK Government isolate the extremists and empower the majority of Israelis and Palestinians who want peace? Will he commit the UK to working tirelessly for a lasting peace through a two-state solution with a recognised Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders? Will he redouble efforts in diplomacy and through financial measures against the backers and enablers of Hamas to cut off their funds? Will he now proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps? Will he spell out to the Governments of Israel and the United States that settler violence and illegal annexation in the west bank must stop, and will the UK Government now recognise the Palestinian state?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his tone and for raising those issues. He is right about UNRWA. As I have said, this first phase is a critical period, and I believe that withdrawing UNRWA would destabilise it. I would ask Israel to think very carefully about how we can achieve a surge in humanitarian aid if that is the direction of travel.

There are extremists on both sides. The hon. Gentleman is right. This deal was substantially on the table last May, put down by President Biden. It has taken a Herculean effort. It is important that President-elect Trump was there to apply pressure to get the deal over the line, and I think that all of us in the House would applaud the bipartisan spirit of envoys from both the current and future Administrations of the United States in Qatar over the last few days to get it over the line. However, the hon. Gentleman knows that the Israeli Security Cabinet is meeting over the next few hours to decide whether to proceed with this deal. He knows, as a politician, that there are politicians currently in the Government of Israel who are threatening to resign and bring down that Government, so he knows how fragile this moment is—I urge our friends in the Israeli Government to do the right thing and get this deal over the line now—and he knows, too, that we applaud the work of Egypt and Qatar and their mediation with Hamas, but there have been problems between those outside Gaza associated with Hamas and those inside Gaza associated with Hamas, and that makes this first phase delicate as well.

Of course, we want to see a two-state solution. My party is committed to Palestinian recognition at the right point. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the challenges on the west bank. The unravelling of UNRWA would make the west bank even more fragile than it currently is. I was there on Monday, and security issues, expansion and settler violence all got worse in 2024—it is the worst year on record for violence and expansion. There is much to do.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and I thank everybody who has been involved in getting us to where we are now. I appreciate how fragile it is, but it is still fantastic news. I particularly want to commend the dignity and grace of the Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost loved ones or are waiting for news about them. I wonder what lessons we can learn

from them, in terms of their commitment to peace, their recognition of our common humanity and their desire to live alongside each other in peace.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has been on this issue day after day; I cannot think of a colleague who has pressed me more on it. She is right to centre the families on both sides and their dignity and grace, and these historic peoples, all of whom want a home, all of whom want security and all of whom have been horribly affected by this most horrendous of wars. Our responsibility to them is to continue to press for the political process that gets us to the two-state solution that we all know is the only way to achieve lasting peace.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I think the Foreign Secretary has spoken for the whole House today with his tone. I am sure he would agree that it is possible to be four-square behind the Israeli Government in their right to defend themselves and defeat Hamas and at the same time to care about the suffering of the Palestinian people. Will the Foreign Secretary use his charm or whatever influence he has on the incoming Trump Administration to persuade them to use their power to convince the Israeli Government that these illegal new settlements in the west bank must stop, and the pressure on the Palestinian people in the west bank must stop, because it is fuelling a sense of despair and future extremism?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing his tremendous experience in the House to bear. He is absolutely right. He will be pleased to know that when I discussed these issues with President Abbas on Monday, he was complimentary about the conversation he had had with President-elect Trump on these matters, and of course, he has an existing relationship with President-elect Trump. That left me very hopeful indeed.

The right hon. Gentleman is right: the expansion particularly undermines the 1967 settlement, and it makes it very difficult to achieve the two-state solution. Those who try to thwart the possibility of a two-state solution are saying that their belief is either in no state at all, which is entirely unacceptable, or it is in one state, in which case they had better get on and ensure equality for all.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the incredible bravery of the hostage families. We are joined in the House by the families of Tal Shoham, Nimrod Cohen, Ohad Yahalomi, Omri Miran and Shay Levinson. I met with them this morning. Their suffering continues—the uncertainty, the sleepless nights—while they wait for a final deal and to know whether their loved ones will be coming home. What reassurances can the Foreign Secretary give to them and to the House that the UK will do everything in its power to make sure that their loved ones come home, that all UK-related hostages come home as a matter of priority and that all hostages come home as soon as possible, to end their suffering?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of hostages. I pay tribute to the 17 British nationals killed since the abhorrent attack on 7 October. Our hope is that three of the UK and UK-linked hostages will be released in the first phase, as they fall into the criteria for that release, which we anticipate will be agreed later today. Of course, it is our sincere hope that as we get to the second and third phases, all hostages will be released.

We continue to work with all UK-linked hostage families. I was with many on Monday, and our representatives and diplomats have been in touch with them overnight and in the last few days. This is the most difficult of times, as they wait to see the fate of their loved ones. My hon. Friend will recognise that there was fighting yesterday, in which nine Israel Defence Forces soldiers lost their lives, there was fighting this morning, and it is likely that there will be fighting right up to the ceasefire on Sunday. This is the most challenging of moments, as those hostage families wait and, in the coming days and weeks, pray that their loved ones are returned.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I would like to put on record my gratitude to the Foreign Secretary for his kind words about the work that was done prior to his party forming a Government. I echo the praise that he has given to the US State Department and the Egyptian and Qatari Foreign Ministers for the work they have done to get this deal over the line, but as he said, it is not there yet, so I want to ask two things. To ensure that the hostages are released promptly, what can we do to make sure this deal gets over the line? Sadly, we have seen too much aid diverted away from the Palestinian people in Gaza and used to facilitate attacks against Israelis, so what will the Department do to ensure as best it can that the aid gets to the people who need it and is not used to murder Israelis?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman centres the important work of the United Kingdom in relation to humanitarian aid in particular at this time. He will know that in order for the aid to get in, we have to have security. He will also know that there is a critical role for the United Nations, which can achieve about 250 trucks. It is my sincere hope that Israel is able to restart the use of commercial organisations to increase that number even further, but he will recognise that this presents a massive challenge, as has been set out by the head of UNRWA and the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The challenge is that this is taking place against a backdrop of huge displacement of Gazans over this time and of gangs roaming the streets, so there is a worry that they could get access to the aid as the space opens up. There is a lot to do, and how we achieve that security with the Israelis withdrawing and how Gulf states get the confidence to step in and begin reconstruction—they do not want to put money in if it will all be torn down a few weeks or months later—is critical. The UK has said that we are ready to play that role on the day after and in reconstruction. We want to work alongside the region and the United States to co-ordinate and build that. He will also know that while a lot of emphasis was placed on the ceasefire, when it comes to what happens next, there is much, much more to do and negotiate.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): As the Foreign Secretary said, today there are the first embers of hope after what has felt like perpetual agony for the

[Uma Kumaran]

people of Israel and Palestine. He mentioned that Gazans have been trapped in hell on earth, and it has been a living nightmare for the families of the hostages. I know that the Foreign Secretary and his team will not rest until we see all the hostages released and a ceasefire taking full effect. He spoke of the uncertainty around the path ahead. What more can the UK Government do to play our role in working towards the shared goal of a two-state solution, and when will be the right time for us to recognise a sovereign state of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: We hold out that a two-state solution must be the way forward. We believe that normalising relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is key, and that there must be Palestinian component. We will press to achieve that, and we will work alongside President-elect Trump and his team in the coming days to hopefully bring that about.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): May I thank the Foreign Secretary for his kind remarks and applaud his expression of cautious optimism? It is cautious because the agony of the hostages continues and the urgent need for a quantum increase in humanitarian aid remains unrequited. The deal must be implemented in good faith, and I very much welcome his comment that Hamas can never again govern that space. I pay tribute to his diplomats and officials for their extraordinary hard work and effectiveness, and I underline that Britain has a very important role to play in what comes next. Will he bear in mind that abject devastation can lead to unforeseen breakthroughs? Following the Yom Kippur war, we saw Israel make peace with Egypt, and significant progress was made on the Oslo accords following the intifada.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman brings to bear his tremendous experience of these issues, which has been built up over many years and many different roles in Government and beyond. He is right to focus on the fact that Hamas cannot play a role, but he probably agrees with me. I never believed, as some in the Israeli Government did, that they could eradiate Hamas solely by military force. What eradicates extremism is diplomacy, a political solution and a political horizon that pulls the rug from under the terrorists. That is why it is hugely important that the UK now plays its full role in reaching a political solution and a political horizon that brings about peace, not another generation of militant young men with terrorism and pain in their hearts.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I have dared to feel some hope that this ceasefire could be the beginning of the end of Israel's 15 months of pain and suffering since the appalling Hamas attacks, and the end of 15 months in which the entire population of Gaza has wondered day in, day out whether they will survive another day of bombing.

The humanitarian situation is dire. Staff at the Al-Awda hospital, the only partially functioning hospital in the north of Gaza, report that they have been entirely cut off from aid supplies. The long-awaited and so far failed flood of aid is absolutely necessary, but the success of aid efforts must be measured not just by how many trucks get in, essential as that is, but by how many lives are ultimately protected and saved. What urgent measures is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure that that is the case?

Mr Lammy: Half a million people in Gaza have received essential healthcare as a result of UK funding, and it was very important to support UK-Med when we came into office. Over 600,000 young people in Gaza have received food as a result of our efforts, but there is a tremendous amount to do, as my hon. Friend knows. The threat to UNRWA could thwart these efforts in the coming days. It is about how we get the number of truckloads up, how we deliver security for the Gazan people and how people can return to their homes, which is now the hope. But she will understand that many of them are returning to rubble. Actually, they are returning to camps in the surrounds of their homes, and they will need aid and support for many, many years, and probably for decades to come.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): As we hope for this ceasefire deal and for the release of the hostages, we continue to mourn all of those who have been killed since the vicious terrorist attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023. In that respect, my mind is very much with the six little babies who did not see this proposal because they froze to death in Gaza just a few short weeks ago. The collective punishment of the Palestinian people will not be forgotten by history, just as all of those who sat silent, and who encouraged and armed extremists in the Israeli Government, will be judged by history. The ceasefire deal is not yet certain; it has been widely reported this morning that the Israeli Cabinet has not yet signed it off. Can the Secretary of State please elaborate on what the consequences would be if either Hamas or, indeed, the Israeli Government reneged on this deal?

Mr Lammy: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the Labour party has always stressed the seriousness of Israel's security in the toughest of neighbourhoods, because Iran and its proxies have so much malign intent. But we have always insisted that what it does must be within international humanitarian law, and we have raised our concerns at every turn when we have felt that it is being breached. As the Israeli Cabinet meets to approve the deal at this most serious of moments, it is my sincere hope that they hear what President-elect Trump has said about his expectations of this deal, that they hear the expectations of this united House of Commons, and that they do the right thing.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary rightly says that we must use this agreement to establish a pathway to a two-state solution. Steps along that pathway were set out in the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice that was handed down last July, and they would provide the reassurance and security to allow for reconstruction in Gaza. When will the Government publish their response to that opinion?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all his work over the last few months to focus on the plight of people in Gaza. I know that he has tremendous legal expertise in these matters, and I assure him that this issue is being studied in depth by the appropriate legal minds in Government. We hope to be able to say more when that process is complete.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Every Friday since 7 October, many people have gathered in Borehamwood, in the heart of my constituency, with a simple message: "Bring them home." May I urge the Foreign Secretary to use all the diplomatic efforts of His Majesty's Government to bring that vision to bear? The first thing to do is to secure agreement from the Israeli Cabinet. As he says, the deal could go wrong at each stage of the process. Can we keep a focus on bringing the hostages home? If we have an enduring ceasefire, as we all hope and pray, will he update the House on the role that our friends and allies in the Gulf states can play in rebuilding Gaza? That will be crucial in ensuring that peace endures.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing the experience of his constituency to bear. We have a family of constituencies in north London where a candle has been lit for the hostages every single Friday, including in the Stamford Hill area of my constituency, which he knows is one of the historical homes of the Jewish community, many having migrated to Borehamwood and Hertfordshire over the years.

The right hon. Gentleman is also right to mention the importance of the Gulf states. They can do so much for the reconstruction and rebuilding of Gaza. They can do so much to support a rehabilitated and reformed Palestinian Authority. They can do so much to support the monitoring and security arrangements that will need to be put in place if Israel is to be assured that it can withdraw and that Hamas will not attack again.

We should remember the rocket fire that Israel has experienced over many, many years, including, of course, the attack on 7 October. There is a key role for the Gulf states, but they will not take up that role unless there is renewed and continued negotiation beyond phase 1, which begins in 16 days' time. They will need a political horizon, too.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I welcome the ceasefire, after 15 months of relentless bombing of hospitals, schools, refugee camps, and women and children. For the ceasefire to last, it is important that Israel is compelled to recognise that Palestinians have a right to freedom, justice and self-determination.

What steps are being taken to thicken the thin layer of ice on which this ceasefire agreement is skating? Will the Foreign Secretary tell us what steps are being taken to negotiate a two-state solution, which goes to the heart and root cause of this problem, and to ensure that East Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Lammy: I am conscious of how many Members are on their feet. I will attempt to go a little quicker.

The Palestinian cause is a just cause. A two-state solution is where we have to be. A political process is necessary. I will play my full part, and I reassured President Abbas that we will do that over the coming days and weeks.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): We live in hope of a ceasefire and the release of the hostages. However, we cannot forget everything that has come before: the mass atrocities on 7 October were followed by 15 months of destruction waged against Gaza's civilians by the Israeli Government. The Foreign Secretary mentioned how we eradicate extremism. Extremism is also eradicated by justice. Only justice can redress crime. What steps is he taking to support the International Court of Justice and the ICC to hold all perpetrators of war crimes to account? Will he publish the full record of the UK's political and military involvement in the conflict so far?

Mr Lammy: We have always been clear about the importance of international humanitarian law, and we have always been clear about the importance of its being determined by international courts. Let me be crystal clear: many men and women from this country died in the second world war to achieve the settlement that gave us international humanitarian law and the architecture on which we all rely. It is for that reason that the Labour party will never renege on our responsibilities in relation to international humanitarian law.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary rightly mentioned the Houthis and their attacks. We must not forget that peace in the region will come about only if the Yemenis receive the same privilege as the Palestinians. There has to be a peace solution for the Yemenis.

A two-state solution has also been mentioned. My constituents and I believe that these are only warm words. I do not believe that this Government will recognise Palestine as a state in this Parliament. Can the Foreign Secretary prove me wrong?

Mr Lammy: The Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), is currently travelling to New York to meet the Yemeni Foreign Minister to discuss these issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali) is absolutely right about the Houthis. Their horrendous behaviour, sabotaging international trade and killing people in the Red sea, is entirely unacceptable.

This will be very interesting. Now that we have this ceasefire, will the Houthis hold to it in the Red sea? We will act where we need to, to deal with the problems we are seeing in the Red sea. This is a moment to have hope for those two states, and to keep that alive. With the incoming Trump Administration's previous commitment to the Abraham accords, I ask my hon. Friend to be hopeful about achieving that full recognition and those two states.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's tone, content and, above all else, caution. There are clearly concerns that Hamas are trying to resile from the commitments they have made in this deal. In fact, overnight, their leader praised the events of 7 October, vowed to keep repeating them until Israel is eliminated and called upon all his followers to continue the fight.

Equally, the Foreign Secretary has not mentioned that part of this deal, as I understand it, will see the release of Palestinian prisoners who have been convicted of terrorist offences. The risk is that they will return and cause more problems. What can he do to ensure that Hamas are eliminated from government in Gaza, so that the Palestinian Authority can take control and

[Bob Blackman]

ensure that peace is restored to the region? We look forward to the release of the hostages and, indeed, the cessation of hostilities.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right that, over this period, we could see up to 1,500 prisoners released. It will be weighing very heavily on the hearts of many Israelis that among those prisoners will be people who have committed murder, and it will weigh heavily on their hearts that those people are returning to Gaza.

Our view is that we need a political process if we are to undermine seasoned terrorists who, by necessity, are swapped to get these hostages out. This is a delicate process. There is a process within Israel in which some of the affected families can object, but the hon. Gentleman is right to recognise the balance that has been struck to achieve the hostage deal and the necessary ceasefire over the coming days.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): As a former aid worker, I was in Gaza last April and witnessed the enormity of the horror and destruction for Palestinians there. The scale of the human trauma of the last 15 months is a gaping wound on the conscience of the world—Israeli babies held hostage, some 20,000 Palestinian children killed.

The Foreign Secretary has made it clear that he agrees that it is desperately important that this ceasefire agreement holds and goes ahead, and that the deal is implemented in full, including the reconstruction of Gaza. He is absolutely right. Does he agree that the Palestinians of Gaza, including my friends and former colleagues Mahmoud, Mohammed, Moe, Fikr, Wasim and so many others displaced within and outside Gaza, must have free movement to return to their homes—or what is left of them—and that this must include the reopening of the Rafah crossing?

Mr Lammy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who, I know, has lost friends and colleagues over the course of the past 15 months. I also pay tribute to her for her work before coming to this place and for her work now. The Rafah crossing with Egypt must open. That is part of this deal, and it will allow 2.3 million displaced civilians to return home on foot via a coastal road. My hon. Friend, I know, recognises the tremendous medical support that is still necessary across the country; there are many, many children without parents. As a parent of an adopted child, I am particularly concerned about the many orphans and about how we provide for them in the coming days and months.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Let me place on record my appreciation and gratitude to all the nations—especially Qatar—that have participated in securing this deal. Last year, I, along with Members from both Houses, was in Qatar during the Doha forum. We all know that there have been many deals and ceasefires that Israel has withdrawn from, and that, as the Minister quite rightly says, this is a fragile deal. Other than urging Israel, what tangible steps will the Government take to ensure that it sticks to the deal, instead of going back to the mass killings of innocent Palestinians?

Mr Lammy: I was with the Qatari Foreign Minister on Sunday, and we were in touch overnight. I of course thanked him for his tremendous work to get this deal over the line. I think that, while working together over the past few months, we have become friends. There is much that the UK Government can and will continue to do. As I said on the radio last week, diplomacy is failing until it achieves success. The hon. Member will know from his experience and wisdom that success has many fathers and mothers.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of this long overdue ceasefire today. My thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones on and since 7 October, the families of hostages anxiously awaiting news, and the tens of thousands of families in Gaza who have suffered bereavement, displacement and destitution. My thoughts are also with all those for whom the announcement is bittersweet; I think particularly of Rachel Goldberg—the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin—whom I met in East Jerusalem in February. She has campaigned with such dignity for the release of her son, who was tragically killed in August. I think, too, of the families in Gaza who are losing their loved ones even now as this ceasefire is being announced. But while the war has raged in Gaza, the settlers have dramatically increased their activity in the west bank, taking land that does not belong to them in a systematic attempt to undermine the possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

As our thoughts now turn to the peace process ahead and the aim of a two-state solution, what action is the Foreign Secretary taking to address illegal settlement? Without a more robust approach, a two-state solution simply cannot be achieved.

Mr Lammy: May I pay tribute to my hon. Friend? We have worked together over many years. Her constituency, in so many ways, is not dissimilar from mine, and I know how heart-rending this has been for her constituents. I also know the grace, the manner and the fortitude with which she has represented their interests very strongly within the Labour movement.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to centre the west bank, the expansion and the violence that undermines the two-state solution. It was very important for me to be able to discuss these issues with President Abbas. One hugely important role that the UK Government play is in relation to reform and supporting the Palestinian Authority. That work must continue. We stand by the 1967 borders that we think can achieve the two-state solution that is required. We worry about the security situation in the west bank. We worry, too, about the arms and the supplies that are coming in from malign forces, particularly from Iran and some neighbouring states. But we are also in an intense dialogue with the Israeli Government about what we think are breaches of international law in relation to how the area is properly secured and policed. We certainly do not want to see the language, the rhetoric or the behaviour that undermine the possibility of the two-state solution.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The return of hostages and the end of daily massacres of civilians is profoundly to be welcomed. While the Foreign Secretary has attributed much of the work to diplomats, it is obvious that, whatever we think about him, the critical intervention, by all reports, has been that of

President-elect Trump. Although he has issued public threats to Hamas, he has quite obviously—again by all reports—outlined a series of consequences and accountabilities to the Israeli Government. Therefore, as we look towards the worsening situation in the west bank, can we find a lesson here for British foreign policy. Talking, as many of us in this House have urged over the past 14 months, does not work. Unless it is followed up with sure and certain consequence and accountability—whether that is bilateral or indeed through international institutions—there will be no movement.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman follows these issues very closely, and has sometimes been a lone voice on his own side. He will know that the Labour Government have had to take very difficult bilateral decisions because of our concerns about breaches of international humanitarian law. My own reflections are that, in some ways, this has been the most challenging of political environments for this conflict, partly because there was an election campaign in the United States for much of 2024. Had we been able to achieve a more bipartisan approach sooner, we might have seen the pressure that was necessary to bring both parties to the deal that we have finally reached. None the less, I am very pleased that the President-elect's envoy was able to work with Joe Biden's envoy and bring this deal over the line, but it is fragile and I await the decision that will necessarily come from the Israeli Security Cabinet at this time.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): May I thank the Foreign Secretary, the Minister for Development and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend, the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), for all the hard work that they have done both in public and in private to secure today's attempt at a ceasefire, to bring the hostages home, and to get as much humanitarian aid in as possible? Tom Fletcher, the UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, has said today that the deal could have been done a year ago, and that the ferocity of the killing by Israel and Hamas has been "a 21st-century atrocity". Does my right hon. Friend agree that there will be lasting peace in the middle east only if the Israeli Government and the international community treat all lives—a Palestinian child's life and an Israeli child's life—as equal?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that he has done on these issues both before coming to this place and within the context of his new constituency. I thank him very much for bringing to mind the role of my dear colleagues, the Minister for Development and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer). Let me thank also previous colleagues and shadow colleagues with those portfolios. Many of us have played a part to ensure that we get to this end. My hon. Friend is right, too, that there will be time for a lot of reflection on how we got here and why we got here, but the critical thing at this moment is that the ceasefire holds, that we get beyond the first phase to the second phase, and that we get to the third phase. The third phase, it seems to me, can hold only if we have a political process. That is where attention must be paid to bring about a lasting peace.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I echo those who have thanked the Foreign Secretary for the tone that he has taken, and the way in which he has reflected the relief of the whole House that there is at last some hope for the families of the hostages, members of which are here today, and for the population of Gaza. He spoke of the need for a political process to ensure that the deal succeeds, and of the hope that needs to be part of eradicating extremism in the middle east. Does he agree that this is perhaps the appropriate time that he has talked about for holding out hope of a two-state solution, and that now might be the perfect time for the Government to recognise a state of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady is right that a two-state solution is the only way to a stable peace. She knows, too, that recognition in itself does not achieve that. It has always been my view, and that of important international partners such as France, that this is an important issue. If we are serious, and achieve that political process, recognition might properly be part of it, to cement the two states that are necessary. This Government, and I suspect previous Governments, fully understand the importance of the UK's role in applying that at the appropriate moment, precisely because we have the distinguished responsibility of having a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I know that for the next couple of days everybody in this House will hold in their hearts my constituent Sharone, whose father Oded is the oldest hostage we are awaiting news on; we hope to hear some this weekend. Oded is 85. I hold out hope for him, because we do not know what has happened to him. Oded spent his life as a peace activist, campaigning for a two-state solution and driving Gazans to hospital. In the spirit of Oded, and the work that he has done, will the Foreign Secretary work with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to offer young Palestinians who urgently need medical help the support that they need here in the UK?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that she does, and for our friendship over many years. Oded is a retired Israeli journalist who was taken from his home. His wife, Yocheved, was also taken, but she was released in October 2023. Oded's daughter Sharone is a British national who resides in my hon. Friend's constituency, and she has tirelessly campaigned for his release. That is what we want to see over the next period. There is a role for our own medical services where appropriate, and I will continue to work with my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary on these issues. My hon. Friend should be reassured that he raised the very same issues with me this week on how we can do more in relation to that matter.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): The Foreign Secretary is right that both Israel and Hamas must ensure that the deal is successful and stick to the terms that have been outlined, but as the Foreign Secretary came to this House the Israeli Prime Minister said that he wants to delay a vote in Cabinet because there have been last-minute changes to what Hamas are requiring. Has the Foreign Secretary been briefed on what those perceived changes or accusations are, and could he outline some of them to the House, bearing in mind national security implications? Can he tell the House

[Paul Holmes]

how he will make it clear to both sides that it is this deal or no deal, and that if they do not get the deal through we will enter a further period of grave instability in the region, and more lives will be lost?

Mr Lammy: Let me be crystal clear: the UK Government's position is that the deal is now final and needs to be implemented. I urge colleagues in the Israeli Government to do the right thing in the hours available before Sunday, and get on and sign off the deal.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): Israel denied that it was holding Dr Hussam Abu Safiya, the director of Kamal Adwan hospital, only to confirm that it had in fact detained him. There are reports that he is currently being tortured in prison. The Foreign Secretary mentioned that the history of this conflict is littered with missed opportunities. Can he take this opportunity clearly to condemn Israel's indefinite incommunicado detention of Palestinians, en masse and without charge or trial? What action are the Government taking, in the light of the ceasefire offer on the table, regarding their close ally's pattern of deadly attacks on healthcare, which is clearly part of an intention to destroy and degrade Palestinians as a group?

Mr Lammy: We have raised those issues with the Israeli Government, and did so through the Christmas period. We recognise that there is pain, and that there are concerns about international humanitarian law, but all of us in this House have a responsibility to do all that we can to bridge the divides if we are to ensure that the deal holds and the people of Gaza get the respite for which I know the hon. Lady has been campaigning for many months.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I warmly welcome this ceasefire agreement, and like colleagues across the House, I fervently hope that the Israeli Cabinet will approve it, but I think we all recognise that, while the ceasefire may bring an end to the current extremes of violence, it will not end the conflict. A number of conditions need to be met for lasting peace, so will the Foreign Secretary set out a timetable for UK recognition of the state of Palestine, and the concrete steps that he will take to end the occupation and ensure that all those who have committed war crimes are held fully accountable?

Mr Lammy: I cannot set out a timetable because the UK Government alone cannot be responsible for a timetable that will necessarily involve the Israeli Government, the Palestinian Authority, our friends in the United States, and Arab partners particularly. It will not be possible for me to set out a timetable on these issues, but I ask the hon. Lady to have faith. I sat down with President Abbas this week to discuss these very issues. On the question that she rightly raises of accountability, that must be a necessary matter for our international courts. I have set out from this Dispatch Box why we in this party hold dear the importance of international humanitarian law.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): I applaud the Foreign Secretary for today's very welcome statement. While bricks and mortar are crucial to rebuilding Gaza, what more can he say about investing in the democratic, judicial and security institutions to underpin the movement towards a possible two-state solution?

Mr Lammy: The United Kingdom has unique capability and experience in governance issues particularly. We have unique partnerships with not just Israel but the Palestinian Authority and Arab partners, and of course the special relationship with the United States, so we are uniquely positioned for the next phase. I look forward to discussing these issues with the incoming Secretary of State Senator Rubio in the coming months to see what more the United Kingdom can do.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): May I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and express hope that the ceasefire is agreed and implemented and that the humanitarian aid we want to see follows on from it? In that light, does he share my concern about the evidence that UNRWA has been penetrated by Hamas and that the curriculum in schools run by UNRWA has propagated hate? Does he agree that the job of reform of UNRWA has not yet been finished and needs to be looked at so that UNRWA does not act as a place where terrorists can hide and hate can be promoted?

Mr Lammy: I was horrified by the allegations against UNRWA, and it was entirely proper and appropriate that the United Nations got someone of eminence and importance to look at those issues. I know Madame Colonna, and I spoke to her following her review. In re-establishing funding to UNRWA, we gave £1 million to the UN to assist the implementation of her plan. The hon. Member is right that the process is not yet complete, but we heard again this morning from United Nations representatives that they are reassured that the process is under way and that UNRWA cannot and can never be a hiding place for those who commit terrorism.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): May I bring the Foreign Secretary back to the issue of the recognition of the state of Palestine, because I agree we have to maintain momentum of hope for all concerned? Although he cannot give us a timeline today, could he set out the criteria that the Government will use to judge that the time is right for the recognition of the state of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend will know that, in some ways, this is a moment of peril for that political process. On the one hand, we have the potential for Saudi normalisation and two states, for the Palestinian people. On the other hand, some in Israel will never be committed to two states and talk instead of annexation. Those two are opposites, and that is why the next few months are so important. It would be folly for me to stand at this Dispatch Box and give timetables.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Obviously, we hope that the Israeli Cabinet makes a rapid decision to support this ceasefire agreement, but that is only a ceasefire agreement, and one hopes it will be rapidly followed by the release of all the hostages and prisoners, as agreed. However, there have been some major developments over the past two years, particularly on the legal front, where the International Court of Justice has recognised that acts of a genocidal nature have

taken place and has called for Israeli withdrawal from the west bank and an end to the settlement policy. Will the Foreign Secretary commit the British Government to demanding that all the ICJ recommendations are carried out and that Israel has a programme of withdrawal from the west bank and an end to the settlement policy? There cannot be any peace for the Palestinian people while they remain under occupation. They have suffered so much, lost so much and lost so many, and the mental scars of the people of Gaza will now be intergenerational. They will need a lot of support to get through this and, above all, international recognition of the state of Palestine.

Mr Lammy: Let me begin by recognising the unique way in which the right hon. Gentleman has raised these issues in the House over a lifetime of work and his commitment to justice and accountability in this era. It is right and proper that international humanitarian law is followed and that the international courts do their work. Let me also be clear that this Government do not believe in illegal occupation and are committed to two states. I repeat again: we cannot tolerate the violence; we cannot tolerate the expansion. We recommit ourselves to continuing to work with civil society on the ground in the west bank and the occupied territories that is documenting these things. Both this Government and the previous Government have continued to support such organisations over many years. Clearly, when we get to that settlement, it will essentially come down to swaps and very serious negotiation over that land, on both sides. We recognise that, and that is why expansion is so thoroughly unacceptable.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The ceasefire is good news. It has been welcomed around the world, and it will be welcomed by my constituents. It is a time of relief, but also one of great grief for the many tens of thousands of lives that have been lost. In November, I visited the west bank and met the director of UNRWA, who said he had no idea how aid would get into Gaza if and when the Israeli ban on UNRWA passes. What more can the Government do to ensure that the ban is lifted and aid gets into Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I, too, met the director of UNRWA in the occupied territories this week. He repeated that to me, and I recognise his assessment. I spoke to the Israeli Government about this issue, and they said—of course, this was prior to the ceasefire being reached—they believed that other UN agencies, non-governmental organisations on the ground and international parties could step into the breach. I reminded them about their legal responsibilities, as an occupying power, about our long-standing concerns anyway about humanitarian aid, and about the prospect of undermining an agreement that I had hoped would be reached when I was with them on Monday. For all those reasons, I do hope that they will reflect and step back from implementing this Knesset legislation.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The celebrations in Gaza that welcomed the ceasefire were matched only by the relief of the hostages' families that their loved ones were finally coming home. In the hours that followed, however, scores of Palestinian civilians were killed, and the Israeli Government declared that they will not meet today to ratify this deal in what is an unspeakably cruel blow to those seeking peace and the return of the hostages. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) and the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) have both asked this question, but in the absence of a reply, I will ask it again: if Israel does not agree this deal and continues to prosecute this conflict as it has to date, what will the consequences be for Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Government?

Mr Lammy: This is a moment—I say this having met those hostage families, having prayed for the life of Emily Damari in particular, and having met Palestinians with family in Gaza—where I insist from this Dispatch Box that I will hold out for hope and for that deal being implemented on Sunday. I have been really clear about the responsibilities that I believe the Israeli Government need to meet. We are meeting here in this House on a Thursday, so there are days before Sunday. I believe a settlement will be reached. We will continue to work with the current Administration in America and, indeed, the President-elect's Administration. He has made his views clear. I will not give in to the cynicism that we will not get to that deal on Sunday and that this process will not begin.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I trust the Government will do all they can to ensure that the ceasefire leads to a lasting peace—a peace based on a two-state solution that addresses the root causes of the violence and creates a future in which the rights and security of people in the region are respected. Will the Foreign Secretary redouble his efforts in urging his counterparts in Israel to grant full access to humanitarian organisations, such as the UN, that are urgently seeking to deliver aid in Gaza, as well as to ensure that journalists have unfettered access to report on the situation?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; journalists now need to be able to get in and report on what is happening on the ground. I thank him for giving me a moment to call to mind the many aid workers who have died in this conflict—more than in any other conflict in history—and to thank them for their humanitarian efforts. I repeat again that part of the settlement that came out of the second world war was that there was deconfliction for aid workers working in the most severe of circumstances. That is the expectation of the international community, and we deplore the fact that it has not been met so egregiously in this most horrendous of wars.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and I also pay tribute to all those who have helped to bring about this agreement to stop the killing. I pray that Israel accepts and honours the agreement and subsequent stages.

The Foreign Secretary spoke about darkness, and 7 October was indeed a dark day for innocent Israelis and Palestinians, and for humanity. However, it would be unjust not to acknowledge that the Palestinians have been suffering dark days every day for over 75 years, with the UK and the international community turning a blind eye—and many aiding and abetting. We all welcome the announcement of this ceasefire to suspend hostilities in Gaza. Although we hope and pray that the

[Iqbal Mohamed]

temporary pause will free all hostages on both sides, save Palestinian and Israeli lives, and alleviate some of the unspeakable suffering that the Israeli military has inflicted on Gaza, it marks the beginning, not the end, of efforts to restore health, dignity, justice and freedom to the Palestinian people, who have suffered beyond words.

Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the UK will oppose any attempt by Israel to annex or settle parts of Gaza or further parts of the west bank? Will he confirm the UK's commitment to ending the long-standing root causes of violence and humanitarian need in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including Israel's illegal occupation, blockade and widespread violations of international law?

Mr Lammy: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman and I might sometimes disagree on matters of politics, but I have always respected him in the short time that he has been in this House. I felt again today the humility and faith that he brings to the strength of his questions. Let me be absolutely clear: we stand opposed to expansion, to the violence that we see, and to any talk of annexation, which would breach international UN resolutions that successive UK Governments have supported. He is right that it was the case for some years—particularly in the period after the Abraham accords—that this House had stopped talking about a two-state solution, but I think Members across the House recognise that that is the only way out of this crisis.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): I, too, thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, particularly his words about how we break out of the cycles of violence, which many of us worry will be replicated in future, and move towards a peaceful future. This is a bitter-sweet deal, in many ways, because the reality is that overnight we have seen Hamas putting their uniforms back on, waving their rifles and celebrating. They are still there. One of their leaders said just this morning that they would do 7 October all over again; the international community must unite to ensure that they cannot, and to free the people of Gaza from Hamas. What steps can the Government take to change the reality for Hamas by stopping weapons from Iran and funding from states such as Qatar, and to promote genuine soul-searching and reflection among international agencies on the ground, to ensure that they are doing everything they can not to repeat mistakes or turn a blind eye to collaboration with Hamas?

Mr Lammy: It is important to continue to remember the tremendous trauma in Israel as a result of 7 October—the worst atrocity for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. It is important to remember, in the wake of this deal, which we want to see over the line, that, yes, Hamas fighters have been on the streets firing their rifles and saying that they would do it again, and that does not lead to a context in which the Israeli people feel safe in their own land. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Iran continues to destabilise the region through its political, financial and military support for Hamas and other partners in the region. Very sadly, if we do not do all we can to come together here in the United Kingdom, play our role internationally and get to that political process, it is my judgment that in 25 years' time, another generation of politicians, including some younger politicians in this House, will be here again debating the same issue—more violence, more pain, more loss of life, and still no two states.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his sombre tone and for his soft but strong words—we all appreciate them. I very much welcome the fact that a ceasefire is imminent and that the hostages will soon be returned home. Will the Foreign Secretary outline what discussions have taken place with our American allies to ensure that aid gets to where it is needed in a safe and concerted effort, and what does he imagine our role to be in ongoing negotiations to support Israel and find a peaceful way forward?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is always on top of these issues, particularly terrorism, conflict and peace. I have worked very closely with the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and I pay tribute to him—I suspect for the last time—for all his work. I sent him a message last night saying what a pleasure it was to see him standing behind Joe Biden. More than many, I know—as do my predecessors—how much work he put into getting this agreement over the line. I also know how important it was that President-elect Trump and his team stepped up in the last few days. There is a critical role for the UK for the reasons that I have set out, and we will play that role.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): It has been a long and painful road to get to this point, but today's welcome news of a ceasefire deal is finally a sliver of hope. It has always been clear that the release of hostages and a ceasefire were necessary steps to pull the middle east from this abyss, which has cruelly taken so many lives. I will touch on the point that the Foreign Secretary just made about another generation of politicians, including younger politicians in this House, debating the two-state solution in 25 years' time. I have said to him many times that the recognition of a Palestinian state is not a by-product but the route to a resolution. Will he be brave, will he be bold, and will he, so that we are not here in 25 years' time debating the two state-solution, recognise the state of Palestine much quicker than that?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the way she has championed these issues, pressing them again and again, on behalf of her constituents. There is a real dilemma on Palestinian recognition. There are some who want recognition essentially because they believe that two states is years away and will never be achieved, and they want the UK Government to say, "We will do it now"—to put a marker in the sand, despite the fact that it is years away and will never be achieved. There are others who recognise the importance of the UK's role in relation to our responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and therefore understand that we will do that, but we will do it when we know that it will happen and it is in sight. This is one of those critical moments, and believe me, I will play my part.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Yesterday on the streets of Gaza, mothers came out to celebrate the news of the impending peace deal. Today, many of those mothers were crouching over loved ones, as news came in of a further 73 Palestinians having been killed.

That is 73 added on to the thousands and thousands who have already been killed, but when it comes to the number of Palestinians dead, that is all it seems to be—a number. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that no justice and no meaningful peace can be achieved if we continue to allow the cries of the oppressed to go unheard? I ask this not as a political rival, but as a fellow human being. The Palestinian people and, indeed, the families of the hostages have no more time for rhetoric, platitudes and words. What are we going to do to ensure that this peace deal goes ahead and justice is given beyond words, so that no more innocent blood is shed?

Mr Lammy: The Palestinian cause is a just cause, which is why we recommit to two states. You can hold in your heart the pain of the Israeli people and the plight of those hostages and their families, and at the same time, you can hold in your heart the awful damage, pain and suffering that this has wrought on Gaza, with well over 45,000 Palestinian people having lost their lives. You can hold those two things at the same time, which of course is what the UK Government attempt to do as they try to bring about conciliation and uphold international humanitarian law. Ultimately, we want to get to a process that brings about genuine peace, where these two countries can live side by side with security and peace.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. The news of a possible deal is very welcome indeed, and I associate myself with the hopes of colleagues across this House that the hostages will be released and returned, and that humanitarian aid will flood into Gaza as soon as possible. We know that the only way to ensure a lasting peace is that two-state solution, so can my right hon. Friend outline what steps the Government will take to support the creation of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace?

Mr Lammy: We absolutely support that, and we will continue to work towards it.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): I join in with the sentiments of relief and hope for peace after a horrific 15-month-long ordeal. However, a ceasefire cannot take away from the fact that Israel is on trial for genocide and its leaders have arrest warrants in their names for their crimes committed against the people of Gaza. A ceasefire does not change that fact; justice and accountability must be realised in the face of some of the most horrific war crimes of our times. Will the Minister therefore confirm that the Government will stand by their commitment to treaties under international law and uphold the requirements of the arrest warrants already issued?

Mr Lammy: We are signatories to the treaty of Rome, and we will comply with our legal obligations—not just because we should, but because we believe in them.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the Government will not lift the limited ban on arms sales to Israel until he or another Minister has come back to this House and explained why the danger of those arms being abused has receded?

Mr Lammy: As my hon. Friend knows, that is a quasi-legal process that is gone through with all sobriety, examining the facts on the ground. The ban is in place at this time; arms are not currently being sent to Israel under export licences, for reasons that have been discussed at the Dispatch Box for many months. I suspect that until we get to a secure and stable Gaza, it is unlikely. The fighting has got to stop.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I welcome the news of a ceasefire deal after 15 months of devastation, destruction and loss of life. The release of hostages is vital, ensuring their safety and swift return to their families. There has been unimaginable suffering, and the ceasefire must be a turning point. It is imperative that the UK leverages our diplomatic influence to ensure stability while urgently stepping up humanitarian aid in Gaza; food, medicine and fuel must reach those who desperately need them without delay. Can the Secretary of State tell the House what diplomatic contributions the UK will make to ensure the ceasefire's stability when we move towards the latter and more fragile stages of a multi-stage agreement?

Mr Lammy: I pray in aid some of my statements earlier in this session.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I urge Members to make their questions short, or we will simply not get everybody in.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): We all hope that the ceasefire happens and that it holds, and we all resolve that if it does, never again—never again by anyone. For the most part, that means accountability, which is where the ICC and ICJ come in. Journalists, forensic experts and rescue teams must be guaranteed unrestricted access to investigate mass graves, locate the missing and document the atrocity crimes committed by Israel, so will the Foreign Secretary commit to supporting this? Otherwise impunity, not accountability, will reign, which will prevent us from making sure that what we have seen does not happen again.

Mr Lammy: We continue to support non-governmental organisations and to call for journalists to be allowed in. Of course, it is important that the appropriate authorities properly document what has happened and that, where necessary, people can be held accountable.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): The ceasefire deal gives families in Israel and Palestine, as well as their relatives in my constituency, hope for longer-lasting peace and security. However, there can be no security without accountability, and there is no accountability without scrutiny—scrutiny, for example, to ensure that the funding the Government have pledged for UNRWA reaches its intended destination. This war has been the deadliest on record for journalists, so what can the Government do to ensure that all journalists in Palestine, including my former colleagues, can do their job without fear for their lives?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has represented the interests of those journalists very well in her question. I repeat again that I deplore the number of journalists who have lost their lives. It is important that any democracy engaged in conflict of this kind allows journalists to

[Mr Lammy]

cover what has truly happened. As we head now to this ceasefire and the stability that is required, the time has come, I hope, for journalists from all corners of the globe to be let in.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): Last November, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant for crimes against humanity and war crimes, including targeting civilians and using starvation as a weapon of war. The British public deserve clarity, so I will ask again: will the Foreign Secretary confirm that should Benjamin Netanyahu step on British soil, he would be immediately arrested—yes or no?

Mr Lammy: I say to the hon. Lady, as I think has been said before, that we have a legal process in this country were that to come to pass, and that process is important. Ultimately, it will be a decision for our courts, so it is important that, from this Dispatch Box, I leave that matter for them. However, I have said in terms that we are a signatory to the statute of Rome, not just because we are but because we believe in it. Therefore, as the hon. Lady would expect, this Government will comply with the law if that were to come to pass.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I know that I speak for everyone in my constituency when I say that after so much death and unthinkable horror, this ceasefire—this peace—offers hope for a long-term political solution, security for the people of Gaza and of Israel, a two-state solution and a sustainable peace. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that what we now need is a flood of aid to stop civilians suffering now in Gaza? Also, I know it is very early days, but what hope does he have for a new normalisation deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia going forward?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the question. Having spoken to the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister at length on Sunday and to the Israeli Foreign Minister at length on Sunday as well, it is my sincere hope that we do get that normalisation deal. There are many steps before we get there, but I think this is a critical moment, and I really hope we can achieve it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): After such unimaginable suffering, I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. However, I recognise the fragility of this moment—not only the fragility of making a decision around this deal, but the fragility of lives in Gaza, where the suffering continues at this moment. Will he ensure that we provide the very best medical support, given that many specialties no longer exist in Gaza, and that we use the expertise in our country to send teams into the region and indeed into Gaza to ensure that people with diseases and infections and those who need urgent surgery have the very best services?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on medical support. We will continue to support UK-Med, and we made a decision to give it more funds when we were just a few days into office. Half a million people have received essential healthcare as a result of that funding, and UK-Med has supported over 300,000 people across Gaza. It is hugely important work, and I suspect we will have more to say in the coming days about what more we can do.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his very measured statement. I have met dozens of constituents in Rushcliffe who I know will wholeheartedly welcome yesterday's news. However, I have received a lot of emails specifically about the decimation of medical facilities in the northern part of Gaza. Can I ask the Foreign Secretary what steps are likely to be taken to ensure immediate improvements to healthcare access as a result of this week's announcement?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. For the reasons I have set out, security will be essential if the aid is to get in and if international partners are to be reassured, so that the reconstruction of hospitals can properly begin.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, and indeed to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), who has played such an important role in working tirelessly for justice. Following on from the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) about recognition of the state of Palestine, what role will the British Government play in creating the conditions that mean a two-state solution is finally in reach and we could declare that we recognise the state of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the question. The role that we must play is the critical juncture between phase 2 and then phase 3. We will only really get to phase 3 if there is a proper political solution. I think the United Kingdom has a particular role to play because of our relationship with all the parties, and our unique role on the United Nations Security Council alongside France. She is absolutely right that there must be a process, that we must engage in that process and that recognition is a key part of the process. Ultimately, however, that must lead to a two-state solution.

Let me say, finally, that in my discussions at the weekend in Saudi Arabia, it was very clear to me that we are no longer in a place where Gulf colleagues would satisfy themselves with some promise that feels years and years away, or generations away. We are really talking about the immediate lifetime of many parliamentarians in this House at this time, and this is therefore a very critical issue.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Now really is the moment when we all do need some hope, as the task of helping people to rebuild their homes and communities is truly daunting. To allow for reconstruction of hospitals, schools and homes to take place, the supply of construction materials into Gaza will need to happen on a huge scale. Can I please ask the Foreign Secretary what discussions are taking place right now to help facilitate that access for important materials?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. The World Bank has been doing a lot of thinking about that, with a rapid needs assessment of the materials that are now necessary.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): As the Foreign Secretary has said, this is a glimmer of light for the hostages, their families and civilians in Gaza—many of them children living in hell—and all our thoughts are with them. We have spoken a lot about the importance of access for humanitarian aid, but can I ask the Foreign Secretary about volumes? Can he update us on the funding for the UN humanitarian appeals, whether we are considering an uplift in our aid, and what pressure we are putting on other UN member states to make sure they play their role in not only providing that aid, but pushing for access?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to put on record the issue of volume. At the moment, the agreement is for 600 or so trucks. That is ambitious, and the situation on the ground will need to change quite a lot if that is to be achieved. The need is absolutely there. The UN must play its part, but I think some of the decisions that may come on UNRWA would fundamentally undermine that. I think commercial trucks have to come back in, and the security has to be there. Clearly, what we want to see—and it is here in the deal—is Israel being able to draw back, which raises further issues about security. That is why I say that this deal is fragile and that negotiation continues and there is much still to do. She is absolutely right that we have to see the volumes, or I think the people of Gaza will say that there have been lots of fine words, but things have not actually changed very much on the ground.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): Now that there is hope of a ceasefire, will the Secretary of State redouble his efforts to seek justice for the family of my constituent John Chapman, whom he mentioned in his statement, who was murdered by the IDF last April when working for the World Central Kitchen? Will he meet me to discuss what the UK Government can do to hold the Israeli Government to account for their actions?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question. I raised this issue with the Israeli Foreign Minister at the weekend. We do want to see accountability, and we do want to see a process from the Military Advocate General in Israel. The loss of life breaks our hearts. I have spent time with the families that have suffered so much as a result of the atrocity against World Central Kitchen, when there was a tremendous loss of life. There must be justice, there must be accountability and there must be a process. It is now for the Military Advocate General in Israel to do that, and we will continue to press this issue. Of course, I or the Minister for the middle east will meet him and his constituents.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): We all welcome the announcement of the possible ceasefire and hope that the Israeli Cabinet ratifies the agreement. The toll on civilians has been horrific: over 46,000 Palestinian civilians, including children, have been killed, and 1,200 Israelis were killed on 7 October and many hostage families are hoping that their family members are returned. I, too, pay tribute to British citizens John Chapman, James Henderson and James Kirby, who were killed delivering aid in Gaza. The EU has announced €120 million in new aid for Gaza, so will the UK announce a further package of aid soon? I agree with the Foreign Secretary that Palestinians must be able to return home safely. What role will the UK play in that?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We will be making a further assessment of the humanitarian need and what more we can do in the coming weeks, given the changed circumstances. Let us get this deal over the line, and let us assess where the UK can play a particular role alongside other partners. It is important that we co-ordinate, and it was important for me to be in Saudi Arabia with Kaja Kallas, the new High Representative of the EU, because we were able to travel together and to discuss these very same issues.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): In addition to the appalling suffering of civilians due to this conflict, for far too long there has been a sense of hopelessness in the region, which is mirrored by a sense of hopelessness here about what we can all do practically to help secure peace and rebuild Gaza. Does my right hon. Friend agree that British companies, particularly those in construction, and NGOs should be at the vanguard of the Herculean task of rebuilding Gaza? As we get—we hope—towards phase 3 on the future, does he agree that making more information available about the support we can provide in this area will help the peace process, because reconstruction is vital?

Mr Lammy: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): On behalf of so many of my constituents in Ealing Southall, may I wholeheartedly welcome this news about a potential ceasefire in Gaza and the return of the hostages? I thank the Foreign Secretary and his ministerial team for all their hard work to get us to this moment of hope, but this is only a beginning. Can the Foreign Secretary tell me how he will use our hard-won experience of brokering a lasting peace in Northern Ireland through the Good Friday agreement to help achieve a two-state solution and long-term peace, security and prosperity for the people of both Palestine and Israel?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning Northern Ireland and the essential role that was played in particular by the last Labour Government. She will no doubt have noticed that the new National Security Adviser is Jonathan Powell, who played such an important role in that. Our National Security Adviser always does a lot behind the scenes on these issues, and I look forward to working with him on this issue.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary is right when he recognises that this ceasefire, although fragile, offers a real glimmer of hope. He is also right to emphasise the need to go further to ensure a two-state solution with a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable sovereign Palestinian state. Will he set out what he sees as the next steps in getting us to the ultimate goal of a lasting peace in the region?

Mr Lammy: As has been said, there are two possibilities here. One is a situation in which Israel does not withdraw from Gaza and there is still a lot of fighting. Displaced people would vaguely be able to return to their homes, but we would not see the reconstruction or the international community able to come back in, because there would be no guarantee that the efforts they put in will not be destroyed in another 10 or 20 years' time. The other possibility is that we get to phase 3 and we see not just a ceasefire, but a political process that brings about stability and ultimately peace, and alongside that we see Saudi normalisation with Israel and the prospect of two states.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): We all welcome the news of the ceasefire deal after 15 months of devastating conflict and suffering in Gaza. The Foreign Secretary knows how important the recognition of Palestine and the two-state solution is to my constituents in Luton South and South Bedfordshire. Does he agree that in our Government's commitment to a two-state solution, Gaza must form part of a future Palestinian state, with no reduction in the size of its territory, no ongoing occupation of Gaza and no forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the work that my hon. Friend has done in her constituency and the manner in which she lobbied hard on these issues when I was shadow Foreign Secretary, which she continues to do now. I can confirm that Gaza must be part of the two states and a home for the Palestinian people.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): It is with hope and fear that we await news of this ceasefire deal, and that will be felt particularly strongly by the families of the hostages. We have heard of the British hostages—of Emily Damari, Avinatan Or, Oded Lifschitz and Eli Sharabi—and the work of their families. For them, until they are holding their loved ones, this deal will not be real or done. Can the Foreign Secretary please assure them that at each and every stage of this deal, he will be pressing for the hostages' release, so that we can deliver that for their families, bring this war to an end, and bring the hostages and their families together?

Mr Lammy: Emily Damari is a British national. She spent her 28th birthday in captivity. She was taken from her home in the Kfar Aza kibbutz. Emily enjoys watching football and is a Tottenham Hotspur fan. I keep her in my heart every single day. I have a plastic flower from her mother in my office reminding me of her plight. I pray and hope that I see her emerge in the coming days. Oded Lifschitz is a retired Israeli journalist and we hold out a torch for him. Eli Sharabi is a family man, and his wife Lianne, a British citizen, and his daughters Noiya and Yahel were murdered on 7 October. Yossi Sharabi was killed in captivity last year, and we pray for his family at this time. Avinatan Or is a 31-year-old man, and therefore will not be in the first phase of this activity, but we want to see him freed as we get to the second and third phases.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Human rights organisations such as Gisha, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel have been working hard to get more aid into Gaza since the beginning of the conflict. What steps is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office taking to support human rights groups to help rebuild Gaza and the lives of the Palestinian people?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to raise human rights and human rights defenders, particularly those on the ground. She should be assured that the UK under this Government continues to fund those important organisations. They are part of the exercise of allowing very vulnerable people to have their rights advocated for and their dignity upheld in the most horrendous of circumstances. Those organisations are also part of the accountability mechanisms we have signed up to and believe in.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right that this is not a day for celebration; it is a day for prayer—prayer that this deal is seen through and prayer that hostages and ordinary Palestinians get a chance to rebuild their lives after the atrocities and horrors of the past 15 months.

My right hon. Friend is right to say that this peace deal is fragile, but it is also right to say that many in the world, including in my community, think that the world community's grasp on humanitarian values has been fragile these past 15 months. We have failed the hostages, failed the Palestinians and failed in the quest for peace by taking so long to do that. He will know that this issue is important to the community I represent. Nearly two years ago, the Foreign Secretary had lunch with me and some of my constituents, and we talked about previous crises where we have solved the crisis but given up on the peace. What reassurance can he give us that this time it will be different and the British Government will lead the way, once we get this deal in place, to ensure that there is a two-state solution and that dignity and respect are given to Israel and Palestine?

Mr Lammy: Eighty years on from the second world war, my hon. Friend is right. He is a dear friend, and I know his constituency well, having spent seven years of my life living in the great city of Peterborough. There is no doubting that when we look back on those 80 years, there are key moments that shook the foundations of the rule of law that men and women in this country fought for. I suspect that people will look back on this war as one of those hugely challenging moments. People who believe in democracy recognise that we are here as parliamentarians in one of the great homes of democracy to fight to keep hope alive. The Palestinian cause is a just cause. The plight of the Jewish people is also a just cause, and a homeland for them I think is right. We have got to achieve that peace. Just as I have for many years campaigned for peace in countries such as Northern Ireland and South Africa, we can get peace in the middle east if we redouble our efforts and the whole of the international community stands true to international humanitarian law.

More than two hours after I started this statement, I am grateful for the opportunity this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Foreign Secretary for a long, two-hour statement.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Act 2025

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Act 2025

Financial Assistance to Ukraine Act 2025.

Covid-19 Inquiry

1.59 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): I would like to make a statement on the Government's response to module 1 of the covid inquiry. In July last year, Baroness Hallett published her report from the first module of the inquiry. It concluded that the UK was not as prepared as it should have been for the pandemic and that more could and should have been done. In my statement to the House immediately following the publication of her report, I committed to responding in full within six months.

Before I turn to the Government's response, I want to place on record once again my thanks to Baroness Hallett and her team for the work they have done so far in the inquiry. I also pay tribute to the families and friends who lost loved ones during the pandemic, some of whom are with us in the Gallery. Earlier this week I visited the national covid memorial wall just across the river from here. I am grateful to the friends of the wall who have so lovingly cared for it and maintained it over the past few years.

As I said in my statement in July, the Government's first responsibility is to keep the public safe. That is why since we were elected, we have taken steps to strengthen the UK's resilience. I announced a review of national resilience. Work on that review is proceeding, and I will update the House on its conclusion in the spring.

The Prime Minister has established a single Cabinet Committee for resilience, which I chair, which meets to ensure clear and rigorous ministerial oversight. We have adopted the 2023 biological security strategy to protect the UK and our interests from significant biological risks.

In April, the new UK Resilience Academy will be launched. It will train over 4,000 people in resilience and emergency roles every year and help them plan for and manage a range of crises, including pandemics. I should also acknowledge, as I did in my first statement back in July, that in some areas these improvements build on work carried out by the previous Administration.

The improvements that we have made to our resilience have been put to the test over the last six months. Those include the Prime Minister chairing a number of emergency Cobra meetings to address the violent disorder that occurred over the summer and working across our four nations to anticipate and contain clade 1 mpox cases in the UK.

Since July, we have also sent two emergency alerts to provide advice to the public in life-threatening situations. During Storm Darragh, because of a very rare red—danger to life—warning, an alert was sent to over three million people in affected regions. More recently, we issued a very localised warning over flooding danger. The Government will carry out a full national test of the emergency alert system later this year. That will ensure that the system is functioning correctly, should it need to be deployed in an emergency.

The covid module 1 inquiry found that years of under-investment meant that pandemic planning was not a sufficient priority, that our health services were already suffering and beyond capacity, and that there were high levels of illness and health inequalities. All of that meant that the state was ill-prepared to manage a crisis on this scale. Therefore, apart from the specific

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recommendations, delivering on the Government's missions—particularly in this context, building a national health service fit for the future—will contribute in important ways to the UK's resilience.

Pandemic planning and resilience are about not just specific resilience measures but ensuring the underlying fundamentals of our country are strong. I thank the devolved Governments for their co-operation in preparing our response today. We will continue to work together for the safety of the communities we serve.

I turn to specifics. There are three new commitments that I wish to highlight. First, the inquiry recommended that the UK Government and devolved Governments should together hold a regular UK-wide pandemic response exercise. We agree and will be undertaking a full national pandemic response exercise later this year. It will be the first of its kind in nearly a decade. It will test the UK's capabilities, plans, protocols and procedures in the event of another major pandemic. It will be led by senior Ministers, involve thousands of participants and run across all regions and nations of the UK. Alongside the Health Secretary, I have written to all Cabinet Ministers to ask for their commitment to full participation. The exercise will take place in the autumn over a number of days. The Government will communicate the findings and lessons of the exercise as recommended by the covid-19 inquiry.

Secondly, the inquiry found that the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups and continues to affect many people in those communities. A new national vulnerability map created by the Cabinet Office with the Office for National Statistics will geographically map population numbers of those who may be vulnerable in a crisis. It will do that by sharing data including age, disability, ethnicity, and whether someone is receiving care. The map will improve the Government's understanding of the scale and location of disproportionately impacted populations ahead of and during crises and enable targeted local support when required.

Thirdly, as the inquiry reminds us, the risks we face are changing more quickly than ever before, and we live in an increasingly volatile world. It therefore recommended a better approach to risk assessment across the board, which we accept. Today, I am publishing an updated national risk register: the public-facing version of the national security risk assessment, which provides businesses and the voluntary and community sectors with the latest information about the risks they face to support their planning, preparation and response. We will ensure that it continues to be updated regularly. A significant proportion of the risks will be subject to reassessment over the next few months, and we will publish a further updated risk register as needed once the process is complete.

I want to mention two further recommendations where the Government accept the underlying objectives and propose to take them forward in specific ways. First, the inquiry recommended Cabinet Office leadership for whole-system civil emergencies in the UK. We agree with that, as for whole-system emergencies such as a pandemic, the centre of Government needs to play a lead role. But for lower-scale emergencies, we believe that the lead Department model still has value. It remains important for Departments with the day-to-day responsibility for an issue to lead the work to identify serious risks and ensure that the right planning, response and recovery arrangements are in place. Therefore, in some circumstances we will retain the lead Government Department model, because, in those cases, responsibility and oversight should sit with the body with the best understanding, relationships and mechanisms for delivery to identify and address risks. There will be an enhanced role for the Cabinet Office to improve preparedness and resilience for larger-scale catastrophic risks.

Secondly, on the question of independent input into whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience, we agree with the need for independent strategic advice and challenge, including the use of so-called red teams. We are establishing eight expert advisory groups to combat group-think in our understanding of risks. Alongside that, through the crisis management excellence programme we will increase training in red teaming. We want to work with the local resilience forums that exist around the country who provide critical knowledge and expertise.

The Government are also committed to introducing a duty of candour on public authorities as a catalyst for a changed culture in the public sector to improve transparency and accountability. We also welcome and will draw on the expertise of multidisciplinary pandemic science institutes that provide world-leading academic and scientific expertise such as the excellent Pandemic Institute in Liverpool, which I was pleased to visit yesterday. In the end, the Government must remain responsible and accountable for the policy and resource allocation decisions they take, but we believe that the external input of those bodies can add value to that decision making.

The impact of the covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented in modern memory. It caused the loss of far too many lives. My thoughts, and the thoughts of the whole Government, continue to be with all those who lost loved ones during the pandemic. Many of them feel not just grief but anger that, as Baroness Hallett's report sadly confirmed, the country was not as prepared as it should have been.

My Department will monitor the implementation of the commitments made in response to the covid-19 inquiry. In all this, we must remember that the next crisis may not be the same as the last. There is a need for flexibility in our planning and learning, and we will build that into what we do. The Government also remain committed to engaging fully with the inquiry, and await Baroness Hallett's findings and recommendations in subsequent module reports as she continues her important work. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

2.10 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, and I join his tribute to Baroness Hallett for her report.

We all know how challenging the pandemic was. Sadly, far too many lives were lost—I pay tribute to all the victims from across our country and the world. That is why the Conservative Government put in place the inquiry, and former Ministers have been co-operating with its work—I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for acknowledging that. It is clear from the

inquiry's investigations and findings so far that response times and processes were too slow and disjointed—we recognise that—but it is also clear that there was an incredibly challenging process and no easy answers.

Module 1 examined our country's pandemic resilience and preparedness, so I will focus on that. The Government's response has identified a number of overarching implementations from the module recommendations. We are broadly supportive of the Government's direction. As the inquiry report notes, it is important to strengthen cross-governmental communication and data sharing, and communication and co-ordination between devolved Administrations. I appreciate that the Government recognise that and are taking forward the recommendation to ensure that the Cabinet Office has a clearer and stronger role in crisis and resilience co-ordination.

The Government have clearly signalled their intention to build on the work started under the last Government, who put together the resilience directorate within the Cabinet Office with the goal of ensuring clear accountability and leadership for long-term resilience and crisis planning. I hope that the steps that the Government have set out will successfully build on that. I am also thankful that they are building on the last Government's work to lay the foundations of the resilience academy, and I look forward to tracking that progress.

It is important to note that the Government intend to strengthen the articulation of requirements for resilience and emergency training qualifications. I am thankful that they are building on the work that we implemented to establish a new national exercising programme, and are planning a full pandemic exercise for this year. Importantly, we need to recognise that the risks that we will face will be dynamic, because we do not know what the future will hold. I hope that the pandemic exercise will involve cross-cutting segments of microbial resistance and technology infrastructure, which will be key challenges that continue to grow in importance.

The Government have also emphasised the holistic work that can be conducted across all types of organisations as a result of the highly transparent risk register that we first published in 2023. I appreciate that they are setting out their intention to build on that, and offer a wider range of scenarios and frameworks to the register in future. However, they do not seem to fully recognise that there is far too much complication in the system, which risks masking fundamental matters of cross-governmental co-ordination with political measures. I recognise in the Government's response the desire to ensure independent input into the whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience and, in doing so, establish a number of expert advisory groups, but I caution them that that must be backed up by real accountability and progress tracking, to ensure that the work conducted by those teams is enacted transparently and for clear reasons. They must not be just talking shops.

The Government have announced a significant number of reviews, consultations and taskforces, but without real accountability and framework clarity, they risk being only a temporary solution to long-term issues. That is a particular concern when it comes to national resilience. Although we support the Government's direction, I want to raise a couple of questions. On recommendation 3, the Minister mentioned mapping, which is very welcome, but will he expand a little on the combined impacts of different vulnerabilities for certain groups and how they can be overlaid in that mapping process?

On recommendations 4 and 5 on the whole system emergency strategy and, crucially, that data element, is there data to support the strategy? What confidence does he have in that at the moment? Will he use the UK Biobank for that? There are critical issues around academic freedom as we look into very complex issues, and overlapping issues within communities across the country.

On recommendation 6, what response has the Minister had so far from the devolved Governments? He said that they have been very positive, but could he go a little further? In response to recommendation 9, the red groups sounded good, but I was a little worried when he said, "We are establishing eight advisory groups to combat group-think." That sounds a little like a tautology. I want to ensure that those groups will be properly independent and that the Government are challenged on their plans. On recommendation 7, there was an important point around reporting back the findings of the nationwide investigations. On the publishing and timeliness, the report asked for three-month publications—will the Minister speak to that? The Cabinet Office said that it is scoping and testing solutions to resolve multi-agency reports. Will he speak to that?

Finally—thank you for your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker—we must not lose sight of the fact that there are shifting landscapes, and our response will be a long-term thing. I appreciate the Government's response today, but they have not yet responded to last year's House of Lords Statutory Inquiries Committee report on reforming the process by which public inquiries are conducted. That is slightly overdue, so if the right hon. Gentleman could update us on progress on that, I would be most grateful. We must ensure that the tracker is in place so that on issues such as this, the Horizon scandal or the infected blood scandal, we are always in the right place.

Pat McFadden: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's response and for his broad support for our response, including on the resilience directorate academy and the full pandemic exercise. Let me turn to his questions.

On mapping, the data is getting better. The Government's ability to gather and use data has improved over time, and it is important that we do that as well as we can. Data has been described as the new oil, and it is important that the Government, which have access to good data around the country, use that to map vulnerabilities and to make sure that the next crisis does not expose cracks in our society, as was the case the last time around.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about work with the devolved Governments. Around those tables, people are not always of the same political party or outlook, but in my experience in the last six months, the spirit has been good and one of co-operation. It has been underpinned by the common understanding that, on an issue such as public protection, the public do not really care about political differences. They expect all of us, whatever our political stripe, to work together for their safety and the common good. That is what we should do.

Red teaming and challenge are important, but they have to be put into context. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned accountability; I said in my statement that accountability for policy and resource allocation decisions ultimately has to rest with the Government. We are all for challenge and all for independent input into that,

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but at the end of the day, that is where the accountability lies and that is who has to take the resource allocation decisions. We will publish the findings of the pandemic exercise. I want to see inquiries come to conclusions more quickly so that victims of injustices can get justice more quickly.

The final thing I say in response to the right hon. Gentleman is that he is right to say that the future may not be the same as the past; that is why flexibility has to be built into all this.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): While listening to my right hon. Friend's statement and the shadow Minister's response, I have been reflecting on those friends who sadly died during the pandemic. I am sure everybody in the House will have their own experiences.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the need for a new national pandemic planning exercise. After the last one, one of the press reports suggested that a recommendation was for senior Ministers to act quickly if a pandemic hit us. Can he confirm that one of the ways in which improvements will be made in our preparation on his watch will be that senior Ministers will be ready and will make decisions in a timely fashion?

Pat McFadden: That will all be tested in the exercise we have planned. Past planning exercises have sometimes planned for the wrong thing—that is the danger. That is why I say all the time that we have to make sure that we learn from what happened throughout the pandemic of a few years ago, but not make the assumption that the next pandemic or the next crisis will be exactly the same. That is what we have to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The findings of the inquiry are a harsh confirmation of what we already knew. They are that the UK was woefully unprepared for the pandemic: the focus was wrong, the leadership was lacking and the lessons from past crises were not learned. I am sure I speak for all hon. Members when I say that our hearts remain with those who lost loved ones during that tragic time, and I thank the family members who are in the Public Gallery today.

To do right by them, crucially, we must ensure that this is a turning point. It is essential that the new Government take swift and decisive action to prepare for next time. I therefore welcome the Minister's announcement of a pandemic response exercise this autumn; however, will that be a one-off or are further exercises planned and, if they are, how frequently?

As well as the different, more proactive approach to disease outbreak preparedness that Baroness Hallett cites in her report, we must invest in public health, rather than simply throwing money at crises when they materialise. One of the key findings is that health inequalities and a less healthy population has left the nation less resilient. Does the Minister agree that public health should be a priority and that the public health grant, with a proportion set aside for those experiencing the worst health inequalities to co-produce plans for their communities, would be a step in the right direction?

We need to help more people live more years of their life in good health. When I think back to those covid years, I think of the appalling loneliness and isolation of those in hospital or in care homes. Do the Government agree that patients and care home residents should be given a new legal right to maintain family contact in all health and care settings?

Finally, on resilience forums, will the Minister confirm what funding plans there are in future for resilience forums? I was aware before Christmas that there was some lack of certainty about that—certainly, that is what I was hearing from my own Sussex resilience forum. We cannot risk our country not being ready for the future, and those are important questions.

Pat McFadden: The most fundamental thing, apart from specific recommendations or specific changes, is the underlying strength of the country and its services. That is true nowhere more than in the national health service. That is why the Budget, which has been attacked a lot, put in the resources to begin to turn the health service around. We can have the forums, the structures and the processes, but the underlying strength of the country is the most important thing.

The hon. Lady asked about the exercise this autumn. I very much hope it will not be the last; the inquiry recommended that they happen on a regular basis. It will be the first for many years and we want to make sure we learn as much from it as possible. In terms of funding for local resilience forums, they play an important role and we were able to put some increased resources into local government in the next financial year. That area, like others, will have to be considered in the round in the spending review that will be published later this year.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I am less sanguine about the report than my right hon. Friend. The report, or what is part of a report—it is difficult to assess when we do not know what the rest will say—has been too expensive and has taken too long to produce. From reading it, it does not seem to me to include some of the fundamental questions that I and my constituents would like answered. What was the cost-benefit analysis of the decisions taken during lockdown, for instance? What about lockdown itself? Was that a benefit or a disbenefit? What was the cost of effectively closing down the NHS, apart from for covid patients? Where did the virus come from? Did it come from China, which most of the evidence seems to indicate? Those questions are not being answered. Furthermore, I do not believe that setting up a new quango in conjunction with the Cabinet Office, which has no experience of service delivery, will be the answer to any future epidemic. The report does not answer the questions I would like answered.

Pat McFadden: I hope my hon. Friend does not think I am sanguine; I am not sanguine at all. Anyone who reads the national risk register should not be sanguine because, as I said in my statement, we live in a world of risk and vulnerability. As for the inquiry's work, the inquiry is independent and is not instructed by the Government on the specific areas it goes into. It has 10 modules, as decided by the inquiry because it is independent.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) by expressing concerns about the inquiry? The Minister has been clear that he wishes it was not taking quite so long. It is taking far too long.

What can we learn from other countries about how they have conducted their lessons-learned exercise, in order to make sure that the people watching the proceedings, who lost their loved ones, feel that something has been done, and done in good time? This is by no means the first public inquiry that has taken too long. The right hon. Gentleman is in the great position of not being responsible for setting up the inquiry. Will he set out what he thinks we should learn from failed and lengthy inquiries to make sure we do these urgent lessons-learned exercises much more quickly? The next emergency could strike tomorrow. We do not have time to hang around and have these long, blame-fest inquiries with criminal lawyers asking "gotcha" questions to get headlines.

Pat McFadden: The shadow Minister, in his response, also asked about the general question of inquiries. I believe there is a legitimate question to be asked about whether there can be a quicker way for the state to admit when it is wrong and get justice for the victims. However, it is important that in the processes we set up we do not lose the valuable question of independence and the valuable capacity these inquiries have for the victims to have a voice, which has sometimes been denied in other areas. We have to have a system where the state can admit when it gets things wrong and which gets justice for those who have felt the consequences of that.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I was a cabinet member during covid, responsible for public health. As I listened to my right hon. Friend's statement, I felt so relieved that we are about to replace the chaos experienced by me and so many people across the country at that time with a forward-looking, orderly and strategic approach. Among the many things that have been mentioned, I was particularly pleased by the idea of creating a national vulnerability map. That is hugely needed. On hearing that the Department will monitor the implementation of the commitments made in response to the inquiry, will my right hon. Friend come to the House regularly to update on that implementation?

Pat McFadden: This is just module 1; there are other modules to be published, and I will update the House in some form when the Government respond to those. Of course, on top of that there are regular opportunities to question me and the Ministers in the Cabinet Office either at oral questions or in front of Select Committees.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I associate myself with the observations of the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). The fact is that we have an absolutely urgent imperative to address the dysfunctions of the British state that were exposed by the covid inquiry. I agree with everything that has been said about how bad things were in early 2020. I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman is saying about the importance of a stronger centre and a more accountable Cabinet Office—I think that is the right direction to be going in. However, does he also recognise that the parts of our society that did not fail in 2020 were the parts very far from Whitehall—local government, the private sector and our communities themselves? Does he agree that while the focus needs to be on improving Whitehall's response, we also need to think about the resilience of local communities and ensuring that they can play their part in the next crisis?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. My experience in Wolverhampton, which I represent, was that the local authority did a great job of looking out for vulnerable people. An inquiry, perhaps by definition, places the emphasis on things that went wrong, but there was a great deal of experience during the pandemic that showed the best of society, with people looking out for one another and helping those who were vulnerable. We should draw on the things that went well, as well as those that went wrong.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): In my previous role in health scrutiny in Lancashire, I got a bit fed up of hearing from Conservative politicians that no one could have seen covid coming, as if a global viral pandemic had not been top of the NHS risk register for years, and as if epidemiologists had not warned authorities that it was a matter of when, not if. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it was a disgraceful abdication of responsibility for the former Government to plead ignorance to the well-known risk of a global viral pandemic?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. There is always a risk of planning for the wrong thing, which is a risk I am very aware of as we try to do this forward-looking exercise. I was encouraged by what I saw yesterday in Liverpool at the Pandemic Institute, where the scientific expertise that we have in this country is trying to take the learning from that in the past and ensure that we do not assume that the next situation will be the same as the one we went through several years ago. It might be something similar, but it might also be something very different, which is transmitted differently and creates a whole different series of questions and requirements for the Government of the day.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I am delighted to hear that relations with the devolved Administrations are now on a collegiate basis. I have to say that my experience as a lowly special adviser with the Scotland Office at the tail end of the pandemic was nothing like that at all; it was very, very difficult. We faced constant battles with the Scottish Government, who wanted to put their oar into areas that really were nothing to do with them and constantly wanted change for the sake of change. I am therefore relieved to hear that the Cabinet Office seems to be taking a lead in this. Heaven forfend we face another situation like the covid pandemic, but we probably will. Can the right hon. Gentleman assure me that we will have a chain of command that makes it clear who is in charge, which must be this sovereign Parliament?

Pat McFadden: I said that co-operation was good on this issue. Of course, we live in a world where that might not always be the case on everything. However, I do think that, when it comes to public protection, people

[Pat McFadden]

should leave their politics at the door and ask themselves just one question: how do we protect the public and get the country through this?

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vulnerable groups to pandemics. I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today. One of the most striking conclusions of the covid inquiry was that it was the most vulnerable people in our society who were hardest hit, whether that was because they had pre-existing health conditions or because they were on some of the lowest wages in this country. Will he tell the House what steps are being taken to ensure that, in the event of another incident of this nature, support reaches the most vulnerable people in our communities much more quickly than during the covid pandemic?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right. Cracks in our society were exposed; this did not affect all parts of society equally. We have to learn from that and respond to it. The very concept of having a society should mean that in an emergency we pull together and try to overcome it together. The map we are producing will help us somewhat in identifying where those risks are. However, as I said in my statement, the most important thing is the underlying strength of the country and its institutions, and, in this context, specifically that of the national health service itself.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): In Cheltenham, in Sandford Park, we have an avenue of trees that were planted in honour of the covid heroes and the many victims that our town lost during the pandemic. Not far from there, there is a playground, and that playground was shut. There is nothing more dystopian for children than seeing the playground that they cherish shut. Children do not often have a voice in these kinds of discussions. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the next time there is a pandemic, we will take a much more reasonable approach to risk, as raised in the module, and that children will have a bigger voice, so that they will not suffer the mental health problems that we know so many have suffered as a result of the pandemic?

Pat McFadden: This is something the inquiry intends to look at in the future, but let us state the obvious: parents of young children in a flat with no outside space had a very different experience of the covid pandemic compared with someone with a nice big garden. That is true. I totally understand the public health decisions that were taken, but they did not affect everybody equally. That is something to ponder for the future.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today. To be honest, as a former public health consultant, I looked on in amazement at what happened during the pandemic. I therefore welcome the fact that the report acknowledges and recognises that Exercises Alice and Cygnus were ignored, that that contributed to our lack of preparedness, and that we had a declining national health and exacerbating health inequalities.

Another point that was raised in the report, and in the film "The Unequal Pandemic", was the fact that there was such low awareness around the functions of public health, which were being reinvented at the centre. None of the legislation and regulations on public health protection were known. I have heard that reported back from directors of public health, who went into Cobra meetings where there was a total absence of understanding of basic legislation in this regard. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me on the relationship between the centre and local public health teams, which were decimated because there was such a lack of understanding of public health as a whole, but particularly about their health protection role, and that this issue of reinventing the wheel will not happen again?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I specifically mentioned local resilience forums in my opening statement for good reason. As I said a moment ago, I think it is really important that we recognise that, in an emergency, the centre, local government and the devolved Governments have to work together in the best interests of the public. I endorse what she said, as I have said a few times today, about the importance of the underlying strength of our health system in such an emergency.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I want to begin by saying that although the loss of every single life is of course tragic—and I saw that at first hand when volunteering—it is important to note that, despite repeated political attacks at the time suggesting that we had the worst death rate in Europe, now when we look at the figures properly we see that we actually had a lower death rate than Spain and Italy, and that we were broadly in line with Europe. I caution against diminishing the results of a national effort, which was actually broadly in line with other countries, in a desire to make political attacks on the Conservative party.

As exhaustive as the inquiry's proposals for things to look at is, to my mind I see a big gap which relates to the decision making of MPs. The inquiry does not seem to cover that. Those of us on the Government Benches—equally, it could be said of those on the Opposition Benches—were often faced with very difficult votes that were expected to go down to the wire and were asked to make very difficult decisions. MPs' access to independent advice and scientific briefings was nowhere near like it should have been. If the right hon. Gentleman agrees that that is not part of the current inquiry, can he at least accept that it is a task for the Cabinet Office to think how we can better equip MPs with the information they need to make decisions on important votes of that nature?

Pat McFadden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his service to the public during the pandemic, and anybody who worked or volunteered in the NHS or in other ways for what they did. Of course, MPs and the Government must have access to the best information they can, but I remind him of something else I said in my opening statement. In the end, the accountability for policy and resource allocation decisions lies with the Government of the day. I do not say that in a partisan way. It is important to establish it as an understanding of how we deal with these things in future.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I pass the national covid memorial wall every day on my way to this place. It and the inquiry are a reminder of what

happens when Governments get things wrong. I absolutely welcome the announcement of a national pandemic response exercise later this year, but the inquiry found that a similar exercise took place in Scotland under the control of the Scottish Government before the pandemic, and that they failed to implement its conclusions. First, can the Minister reassure us that any outcomes from such an exercise will be reported to this House and that we will have oversight of the implementation of any recommendations? Secondly, I know it is outside the remit of the Minister's statement, but can he give us an update on the recovery of any money lost through dodgy contracts to the mates of the previous Government?

Pat McFadden: Let me repeat the praise I gave to the volunteers who maintain the national covid memorial wall. Hon. Members may not be aware of it when they look at the red hearts, but over time they fade—they fade to pink. The reason they are kept red is that there is a group of volunteers down there overpainting the hearts to make sure that the wall does not fade away and that the memory of the names recorded does not fade away. The conclusions of the national pandemic exercise will be reported. Predictions are a dangerous game, but let me make one: there will be things that go wrong. Shortfalls will be exposed and not everything will go right, but that is part of the purpose of doing an exercise like this. I am happy to assure him in terms of learning from it and the conclusions.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I also completely agree with him that in these matters the public do not care about party political differences. I note his commitment to an independent, whole-systems civil preparedness and resilience process going forward. I am just looking for some reassurance that the devolved Governments will be consulted and fully involved. Like the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), I want to press the Minister on recovery from some of the very wasteful PPE contracts that were awarded during the pandemic.

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member will know that we have appointed a covid fraud commissioner to try to recover as much as possible of the money that went wrong. I have sought not to be partisan today, but I do believe that the systems in place were wrong, and that there were some abuses and a significant loss of money. When we are in a situation where we want value for money for the public, we want to recover as much of that as possible. I repeat that relations with the devolved Governments on this kind of issue have been good so far. I hope it is the case that that is maintained through the national pandemic exercise that we are planning.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): We all lived through the pandemic, and we all came to see the immense value of our key workers: the bus drivers who had to continue to make essential journeys; the carers who had no choice but to continue to provide close-quarters care; and the posties, some of whom I met recently in Welwyn Garden City at their delivery depot on Bessemer Road. They told me that when they had socially distanced conversations on the doorstep with lonely residents, it was often the only human interaction they had all day. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister reaffirm how important the Government believe the role of key workers is, and that, critically, for the next pandemic we have measures in place to make sure they are protected and supported?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. Let me echo his praise for all the key workers he mentioned. When the chips were down, we found out who was keeping the country going. Let me, from this Dispatch Box, thank each and every one of them for what they did to keep the country going during those very difficult times.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The Minister, quite rightly, expresses sympathy for the victims of covid-19, which is something we all share, but he has not mentioned anything about the victims of covid-19 vaccines, of whom there are thousands. We know that those people did the right thing and took the vaccines, but they were not warned of the risks. The Minister has been talking about risk assessments. There was a lack of risk engagement, and now we find that the compensation scheme, the vaccine damage payment scheme, is in place but not operating effectively or fairly. The Health Minister keeps talking about possibly amending it, but every time he mentions that it causes immense harm to all those who are still suffering as a consequence of having done the right thing and taken the covid-19 vaccines, when many of them now wish they had not.

Pat McFadden: Let me say to the hon. Gentleman that I believe the production and distribution of the vaccines was one of the things that went well and which this country contributed to, and that the availability of vaccines helped us to overcome the pandemic. In those cases where there were adverse reactions, there is a scheme in place, as he said. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has met people affected. Of course, we want to help people affected through the kind of scheme that exists.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): First, I thank the Minister for commenting on the importance of multidisciplinary research. From my own previous research, I know that that is very important, particularly in the development of AI algorithmic risk prediction models. I also had the pleasure yesterday of speaking to Professor Tom Solomon, the director of the Liverpool Pandemic Institute, which the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee had the pleasure of visiting recently. He impressed on me the value of physician researchers in conducting groundbreaking research. Does the Minister agree that it is vital we provide the time and funds to researchers such as Professor Solomon to help build our national resilience to future pandemics?

Pat McFadden: Let me echo my hon. Friend's praise for Professor Solomon and the work that he and the Pandemic Institute are doing. He is right to underline the value of research, as is my hon. Friend. As has been pointed out throughout these exchanges, the next crisis that the country faces may be very different from the last, so it is important that we use one of this country's great assets, its tremendous research institutes and research capability, to scan the horizon as well as we can and to be as well prepared as we possibly can.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Having served on the frontline during covid, I am acutely aware of the sacrifices made by clinicians, patients and staff. However, when it comes to preparing for any future pandemics, part of the solution is ensuring that we have robust epidemiological research. Could the Minister tell us, in rather more granular detail, what assessment he has made of the current projects commissioned by the Government?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman is right about the need for robust research. I do not analyse the research projects one by one, but I thank him for his service, and underline what I have said a few times today: the best insurance that we can have in responding to another crisis like the one that we went through some years ago is the underlying strength of the country and the NHS. That is why we have made the decisions to put resources into the NHS to help to turn it around and make it stronger in the future than it is today.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I spent the pandemic as a trade unionist at the TUC, supporting Frances, now Baroness, O'Grady in her fight for the rights to safety of working people. The covid inquiry heard time and again about the impact of the pandemic on those with low wages and insecure work—people who had to go into work even when it was not safe because otherwise they could not feed their families, and who were disproportionately from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Will the Minister ensure that the new national vulnerability map treats insecure workers as vulnerable for the purpose of crisis planning and resilience, and will he ensure that the unions are key stakeholders in building that resilience in the UK?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to underline the need to thank the key workers, many of whom were low paid and many of whom did come from ethnic minority backgrounds. They kept the country going, and sometimes had to put themselves at risk to help and protect the rest of us. I thank my hon. Friend and those who represent working people for the work that they did during the pandemic.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): May I ask about the specifics of the Government's response to module 1? I was interested to hear about the national vulnerability map, which could help with a range of matters including digital exclusion as well as public health, but let me ask the Minister two questions. First, has he taken into consideration the findings of Chris Whitty's 2021 report on coastal communities and their specific vulnerabilities? Secondly, while this is obviously a hugely valuable undertaking, I do not want us to create a one-trick pony, so could the Minister try to seize the big opportunity to build a better system for storing and using citizen data that could benefit everyone and give all sorts of people the support that they need when they need it?

Pat McFadden: As I said a while ago, data has been described as the new oil, and there are good reasons for using it. The Government and the state have a duty to try to use data to secure the best outcomes for the public, and one example is using it to map our vulnerabilities. I have been praising people for what they did during the pandemic, so let me now praise Sir Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, for what he did then and what he continues to do today. The country is very lucky to have him, and I thank him for everything that he does.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): It is a source of national shame that our country was so underprepared for the covid pandemic, and the Conservatives need to take their fair share of the responsibility for that. We all worry about where the next pandemic will come from, and I am particularly concerned about the risk posed by dengue fever. For those who are not aware of it, let me explain that it is a disease spread by mosquitoes. It has been travelling closer and closer to the UK in recent years owing to rising temperatures and climate change, and has most recently been found in Paris. As one who represents a constituency on the south coast, I am especially worried about the warning that it could be within the UK within years. There is currently no cure, but there is a vaccine going through trials thanks to international collaboration, of which our country is a part. May I ask what steps the Government are taking to improve our preparedness for the next pandemic, wherever it may come from and however it may be transmitted?

Pat McFadden: One of the risks that we face is posed by mosquito-borne diseases—viruses of various kinds. The UK Health Security Agency monitors such diseases so that we have the most up-to-date information possible. This is a good example of scanning the horizon and understanding that the next crisis we face may not be the same as the last.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I agree with other Members who have said that this inquiry is taking too long, costing too much and, in many cases, not asking the right questions. The results of the previous pandemic response exercise some nine years ago, Operation Cygnus, were so shocking that they were kept from this House and the British people. Will the Minister commit that the results of the pandemic exercise later this year will be transmitted totally openly, with full transparency, to this House and the British people?

Pat McFadden: I thank the hon. Member for his two questions. I have said what I said on the speed of the state's admission when things go wrong. We do need to think about that and look at it. As for the results, the findings of the exercise will be made public, and let me repeat my prediction: they will probably show things that have gone wrong and areas where we need to improve. Anyone who carries out such an exercise and does not expect that will face a nasty surprise.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): One of the positives we saw during the covid pandemic was an outpouring of neighbourliness. Churches and faith communities played a key role in mobilising support for those most in need, delivering meals, shopping and prescription medications to those who were advised to stay at home. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to all those volunteers and assure the House that faith communities and other community organisations will be involved in the local resilience forums, so that they are integral to both the resilience planning and incident response?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: many of these efforts showed the best of us and how much people were prepared to look out for one another. I was really touched by the efforts of the Sikh gurdwaras in Wolverhampton in distributing food to people of all faiths and none, and of other faith groups and community groups who did similar things to help the most vulnerable people during the pandemic.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I want to pay my respect to all those we have lost, and I give my heart to those who have lost loved ones and have to live their lives without them. In Bassetlaw, I have met many families who have needlessly lost loved ones. My good friend Pete Armitage died on 6 April 2020 in hospital, unable to breathe, without his wife by his side, and with only six of us at his funeral.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the volunteers who stepped up and went out, without any fear for their own health or their lives, to deliver food, to stand on vaccination lines and to help at local food banks. I want to ensure that we in Parliament never forget those names. I pay tribute to them, and I ask the Minister to do the same.

Pat McFadden: In my final answer of the afternoon, let me warmly endorse what my hon. Friend said on both counts. Let us remember all those who lost their lives and give thanks to the many relatives and friends who are keeping those names alive and trying to make sure that we learn the lessons from what happened in the past. Let us praise all the volunteers who helped people in any way. It was a very tough time in this country and others, but those efforts—that reaching out—showed the best of us, and we should not forget it.

Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I remind Members to take care to avoid saying anything that could prejudice any cases relating to vulnerable children that are currently before the courts or might come before the courts at a later date.

2.58 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Last Monday, I set out the actions this Government are taking to tackle the terrible crimes of child sexual exploitation and abuse, including mandatory reporting, a new victims and survivors panel, an overhaul of data and police performance requirements, tougher sentences for perpetrators, and support for local inquiries, including in Oldham.

The Safeguarding Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), met this morning with survivors from Oldham. Earlier this week, she and I met Professor Alexis Jay, who chaired both the seven-year national independent inquiry into child sexual abuse and the first local independent inquiry into grooming gangs in Rotherham. Professor Jay's strongest message to us was that the survivors, who bravely testified to the terrible crimes committed against them, must not be left to feel that their efforts were in vain because, despite all the inquiries, no one listened and nothing was done. Following those discussions, I want to update the House on our next steps to take forward the inquiry's recommendations, and to go further in tackling sexual exploitation and grooming on the streets and online, in order to keep children safe.

The independent national inquiry into child sexual abuse completed its final report in 2022. It took seven years, heard 7,000 personal testimonies and considered 2 million pages of evidence. There were devastating accounts of brutal rapes, sexual violence, humiliation, trauma and the betrayal of vulnerable children by those charged with protecting them, and accounts of people in positions of power who shamefully put the reputation of institutions before the protection of children. The inquiry included separate detailed reports on organised child abuse in residential homes and schools, and on abuse and cover-ups in the Catholic and Anglican Churches.

A two-year inquiry into child sexual exploitation by organised networks and grooming gangs, published in February 2022, examined over 400 recommendations made by previous inquiries and serious case reviews, as well as taking further evidence of its own. There have been further reports since then, including on Telford and on police performance. However, despite all the national inquiries, reports and hundreds of recommendations, far too little action has been taken and, shamefully, little progress has been made. That has to change.

Before Easter, the Government will lay out a clear timetable for taking forward the 20 recommendations of the final IICSA report. Four of those are specifically for the Home Office. I can confirm that we have accepted them in full, including on disclosure and barring, and work is already under way. A cross-Government ministerial group is considering and working through the remaining recommendations, and that group will be supported by our new victims and survivors panel. In addition, I can confirm today that the Government will implement all

[Yvette Cooper]

the remaining recommendations in the child abuse inquiry's separate stand-alone report on grooming gangs from February 2022, including updating key Department for Education guidance.

Let me turn to the areas where we need to go further. As I said last week, the most important task should be to increase police investigations into these horrific crimes and get abusers behind bars. We will introduce stronger sentences for child grooming by making organising abuse and exploitation an aggravating factor, and today I can announce new action to help victims get more investigations and prosecutions under way. I am extending the remit of the independent child sexual abuse review panel to cover not just historical cases before 2013 but all cases since, so that any victim of abuse will have the right to seek an independent review without having to go back to the local institutions that decided not to proceed with their case.

Today, I am writing to the National Police Chiefs' Council to ask all chief constables to look again at historical gang exploitation cases where no further action was taken, and to work with the child sexual exploitation police taskforce to pursue new lines of inquiry and reopen investigations where appropriate. These new measures will be backed by £2 million of additional funding for the taskforce and the panel, and all police forces will be expected to implement the 2023 recommendations from His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services, including producing "problem profiles" on the nature of grooming gangs in their area. I have asked the inspectorate to review progress this year.

As well as reviewing past cases, we need much stronger action to uncover the full scale and nature of these awful crimes. The child sexual exploitation police taskforce, led by the National Police Chiefs' Council, has estimated that of the 115,000 child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in 2023, around 4,000 involved more than one perpetrator. Of those, around 1,100 involved abuse within the family and over 300 involved abuse in institutions, and the taskforce identified 717 reported cases of group or gang-related child sexual exploitation. However, we know that the vast majority of abuse goes unreported, so we expect all those figures to be significant underestimates.

The taskforce reports that 127 major police investigations across 29 police forces are currently under way into child sexual exploitation and gang grooming. Many major investigations have involved Pakistani-heritage gangs. The police taskforce evidence also shows exploitation and abuse taking place across many different communities and ethnicities, but the data on the ethnicity of both perpetrators and victims is still inadequate.

As I said last week, we will overhaul the data that we expect local areas to collect as part of a new performance management framework. I have also asked the child sexual exploitation taskforce to immediately expand the ethnicity data it collects and publishes, so that data is gathered from the end of an investigation when a fuller picture is available, not just from the beginning when suspects may not yet have been identified.

To go much further, I have asked Baroness Louise Casey to oversee a rapid audit of the current scale and nature of gang-based exploitation across the country, and to make recommendations on the further work that is needed. The specific 2022 IICSA report on gang exploitation concluded:

> "An accurate picture of the prevalence of child sexual exploitation could not be gleaned"

from the data and evidence it had available. This audit will seek to fill that gap.

The audit will look at further evidence that was not previously available, including evidence collected by the police taskforce and the new problem profiles compiled by police forces. It will also include an equivalent audit of child protection referrals; it will properly examine ethnicity data and the demographics of the gangs and their victims; it will look at the cultural and societal drivers for this type of offending, including among different ethnic groups; and it will make recommendations about further analyses, investigations and actions that are needed to address current and historical failures. Baroness Louise Casey was the author of the no-holds-barred 2015 report into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, and I have therefore asked her to oversee this rapid three-month audit ahead of the launch of the independent commission into adult social care.

In many areas across the country, the focus must now be on further police investigations and implementing recommendations to improve services, but we will also provide stronger national backing for local inquiries where they are needed, to get truth and justice for victims and survivors. Last week, the Prime Minister and I met survivors from Telford, who had enormous praise for the way that local inquiry was conducted after there had been failings over many years. That inquiry led to tangible change, including piloting the introduction of CCTV in taxis and appointing child sexual exploitation experts in local secondary schools. As we have seen, effective local inquiries can delve into far more local detail and deliver more locally relevant answers and change than a lengthy nationwide inquiry can provide.

Tom Crowther KC, the chair of the Telford inquiry, has agreed to work with the Government to develop a new framework for victim-centred, locally led inquiries where they are needed. As a first step, he will work with Oldham council and up to four other pilot areas. This will include support for local authorities that want to explore other ways to support victims, including local panels or drawing on the experience of the independent inquiry's truth project. The Government are already drawing up a duty of candour as part of the long-awaited Hillsborough law.

We will also work with mayors and local councils to bolster the accountability mechanisms that can support and follow up local inquiries, to ensure that those who are complicit in cover-ups, or who try to resist scrutiny, are always robustly held to account so that truth and justice are never denied. This new package of national support for local inquiries will be backed by £5 million of additional funding to get further local work off the ground because, at every level, getting justice for victims and protecting children is a responsibility we all share.

Finally, we cannot ignore the way in which child exploitation is changing as offenders exploit new technology to target and groom children. We should all be deeply worried about the pace and growth of exploitation that begins online. We are therefore bolstering the work of

the Home Office-funded undercover online network of police officers to target online offenders, and developing cutting-edge AI tools and other new capabilities to infiltrate livestreams and chatrooms where children are being groomed. Further measures will be announced in the crime and policing Bill to tackle those organising online child sex abuse.

Nothing matters more than the safety of our children, yet for too long, this horrific abuse was allowed to continue. Victims were ignored, perpetrators were left unpunished, and too many people looked the other way. Even when these shocking crimes were brought to light and national inquiries were commissioned to get to the truth, the resulting reports were too often left on the shelf as their recommendations gathered dust. Under this Government, that has changed. We are taking action not just on those recommendations, but on the additional work that we need to do to protect victims, put perpetrators behind bars and uncover the truth wherever things have gone wrong. This is about the protection of children, the protection of young girls, and the radical and ambitious mission that we have set for this Government to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. I hope all Members will support that mission and support the measures that we have outlined today to help achieve that aim. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Home Secretary.

3.10 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Let us start by remembering the victims of this scandal. Thousands of young girls, often in their early teens, were systematically raped by gangs of men, predominantly of Pakistani heritage. Those in positions of authority—the police, local councils and the Crown Prosecution Service—ignored them and, in some cases, even covered up these horrendous crimes because of absurd concerns about so-called cultural sensitivity.

Ten days ago, the Prime Minister compounded this by saying that it was a "far-right bandwagon" to raise these issues and call for a proper inquiry. Let me say this: it is not far right to stand up for rape victims, and smearing those who raised this issue is exactly what led to the victims—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The shadow Home Secretary will be heard.

Chris Philp: Smearing those who raised this issue is exactly what led to the victims being ignored and the crimes covered up in the first place. Therefore, will the Home Secretary apologise on behalf of the Prime Minister for his language last week?

It is not true to say that the previous Government did nothing following the IICSA report. They set up the grooming gangs taskforce following the IICSA report, which led to 550 arrests of perpetrators in the first year alone, and I am glad that the new Government are continuing that work.

In April 2023, the data collection on the ethnicity of perpetrators was initiated, but the initial publication of that—I think last November—showed that the collection is incomplete. Will the Home Secretary ensure both that the police follow through on the work initiated in April 2023 and that the data is collected more comprehensively?

The mandatory reporting recommendation was introduced as an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill, which fell due to the early general election. I am glad that the Government say that they will now pick that up and take it forward.

Previous reports and reviews did not go far enough. The IICSA report itself was mainly not about these rape gangs. In fact, it barely touched on the issue and looked at only six towns. We now believe that as many as 50 towns could have been affected, so the IICSA barely scratched the surface.

The Home Secretary just announced Government support for only five local inquiries. That is wholly inadequate when we know that up to 50 towns are affected. I have some serious questions for the Home Secretary. First, how are the other 40-plus towns supposed to get answers to the questions that they have, and how will these initial five towns be chosen?

Secondly, the Home Secretary said nothing in her statement about the powers that these local inquiries will have. It seems that they will not be statutory inquiries under the Inquiries Act 2005. That means that these local inquiries will not have the power to compel witnesses to attend, to take evidence under oath or to requisition written evidence. If that is the case, how can they possibly get to the truth when faced with cover-ups? It was precisely that problem—the lack of powers—that reportedly led the chairs of the Manchester local inquiry to resign last year. They were not given the information that they needed by public authorities, and did not have the powers required to force its release, so they resigned.

Legal powers are needed, because these crimes were deliberately covered up in some cases. We heard just a week or two ago from the former Labour MP for Rochdale Simon Danczuk, who said that the then chair of the parliamentary Labour party told him not to raise these issues for fear of losing Muslim votes—truly appalling. Not a single person has been convicted for covering up or ignoring these crimes. In my view, the criminal offence of misconduct in public office might apply. Moreover, those vile perpetrators who can be deported should be deported, every single one of them—changing the law if that is needed to do it, and using visa sanctions on countries such as Pakistan to ensure that they accept eligible perpetrators.

What the Home Secretary has announced today is totally inadequate. It will cover only a fraction of the towns affected, and it appears that the inquiries will not have the legal powers they need. That is why we need a proper, full national public inquiry, covering the whole country and with the powers under the Inquiries Act 2005 that are needed to obtain the evidence required. It is not just me who thinks that; in the last week or two, the Labour Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden) have called for a full national inquiry, as has Andy Burnham, the Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester. I commend those Members and Andy Burnham for their courage in speaking out.

Recent polling shows that the vast majority of the public want a full national public inquiry, including 73% of Labour voters. Most importantly, so do victims.

[Chris Philp]

Jane was groomed and abused at the age of just 12. She was gang raped repeatedly. She told the police and she told her social worker. At one point, the police even found her being abused by an illegal immigrant, but instead of arresting him, they arrested her. Jane still does not know if any of her abusers have been jailed, or if any of the public officials who let her down so badly have been held to account. Jane now wants a proper national public inquiry—Home Secretary, why don't you?

Yvette Cooper: These are the most vile crimes, against teenagers, children and young girls. Very often they involve sadistic abuse, rape and the most appalling trauma that can last for many years. The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse ran for seven years and took evidence from 7,000 victims and survivors across the country. Too many of those voices, and the bravery that those victims showed, have just being ignored. The right hon. Gentleman says that he took action, but I am afraid the Conservative party had 10 years to introduce a duty to report child abuse, make it a responsibility of professionals to report it, and make it an offence to cover up child abuse. I was calling for that 10 years ago. The Prime Minister was calling for it 12 years ago. The right hon. Gentleman failed to do it, and we have lost a decade as a result.

The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse also ran a two-year investigation of child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs. One of the shocking things that it found was that less is now known and understood about the prevalence of this appalling crime than prior to 2015. In the period 2015 to 2022, even after we knew about what had happened in Rotherham, and Baroness Louise Casey had identified its impact and the failure to address issues of race and ethnicity, the previous Government went backwards on gathering data and information, and the need for proper evidence. That is why this Government have commissioned Baroness Louise Casey to instigate a rapid review to uncover the prevalence of this appalling crime across the country, with no holds barred, in the way that we know she will conduct this inquiry, to fill the gaps in the evidence, rather than rerun the same questions without the evidence and data that we badly need.

I also point out to the shadow Minister that his party weakened the disclosure and barring rules in 2012, again making changes that I and the Policing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), opposed at the time, and that the independent inquiry rightly recommended reversing in order to keep children safe. Again, his party failed to act.

I hope the action we have announced will be supported right across the country. It includes the duty to report child abuse; proper penalties for covering it up; stronger sentences for grooming gangs; new rights for victims to get an independent review on reopening their case; new action to reopen historical police investigations; new standards for the police to meet; a new victims and survivors panel; a new audit of the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs, led by someone who uncovered a lot of the problems in Rotherham, including the failure to confront Pakistani-heritage gangs; the gathering and publishing of new ethnicity data, which the shadow Minister failed to do; new national support for local inquiries, including the Telford model; victims panels; new work on accountability linked to the Hillsborough law to hold failures to account, because we will strengthen the law to do so; and a proper timetable for taking forward the independent inquiry, because this has to be about action and protecting children and keeping them safe.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I think I heard the Home Secretary adopting my five-point plan, so I thank her for that and thank everybody across the House who has been campaigning on the issue. If I could ask for some clarity: did the Home Secretary say she will adopt all 20 of the IICSA recommendations or just those in the grooming gang strand? Do local authorities as well as police forces have to do a review into their cases of CSE? She cites Telford, which was victim-focused—that was why it was so important, because we must have those victims' and survivors' voices—but what Telford and Greater Manchester said they lacked was the ability to compel witnesses. A big strand of what we need to do is ensure that there have been no cover-ups, and we can only do that if requirements are on a statutory footing.

With respect, Telford cost £8 million and the Home Secretary said she was providing £5 million for the whole inquiry across the country. Why do we need another inquiry in Telford when we know this is happening nationally? Can she assure us that there will be transparency of the findings of all the inquiries, reviews and audits? Is it possible that the inquiry could be UK-wide, because I do not believe this is only happening in England and Wales? It needs to be across the whole of the UK.

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for her questions. To go through them in turn, we will set out before Easter the timetable for taking forward the work around all the recommendations from the main independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. She will know that some of the recommendations raise complex issues, and considerable work will need to be done on some of them. We recognise that and have discussed that with Professor Alexis Jay. There are other recommendations we can take forward swiftly, and those covered and led by the Home Office are being taken forward swiftly. The work is already under way, including on disclosure and barring and on the duty to report, which will be included as part of the legislation.

On the local inquiries, we are not redoing the Telford inquiry. My hon. Friend is right that in Telford the extensive inquiry that was conducted involved, crucially, victims and survivors throughout. They were involved from the very beginning, designing the inquiry in the first place. The inquiry has led to substantial change, and there continues to be further follow-up work on it. That is the effective model. We need local councils, police and crime commissioners, Mayors and the Government to work together on them, so we are providing the additional £5 million. Tom Crowther will work specifically with the first five local authorities that want to do such work, drawing up an effective model that can be used in other areas.

On the ability to gather evidence and ensure that there is proper accountability, there has to be clear accountability. This process cannot be a way in which areas or institutions can avoid scrutiny. Obviously, the

work in Telford and the original work in Rotherham by Baroness Casey managed to uncover truths in different areas, but there also needs to be other new arrangements on accountability. We are working with the Cabinet Office, Mayors and councils to draw up new accountability arrangements. That will ensure either proper follow-up or, as part of those initial inquiries, that a proper accountability framework is in place. We will link that to the duty of candour part of the Hillsborough law. Unlike the previous Government, who frankly never took seriously issues of candour, responsibility and accountability in the 14 years that they were in power, and refused to bring in a Hillsborough law, we will bring in such a law because we are clear that there must be proper accountability for the failure to tackle this abuse.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Survivors are tough, as I know from my own experiences of abuse as a child, about which I have spoken in the Chamber. Survivors have been subject to intense impacts and blistering climates, but like a blade in the blacksmith's forge, each strike has strengthened many survivors' character, mettle and spirit, even though those are experiences that should never be undergone in the first place. Each shock has emboldened our resolve to be the very sword carried by Lady Justice herself, or at least to see it wielded with strength—to see action taken and justice done.

However, too many survivors' stories have been characterised by being ignored, hidden or gaslit. Recently, too many survivors' stories have been shamefully used as a political football in some corners of this House and beyond. Survivors' experiences are littered with gut-wrenching instances of power-holders missing glaring opportunities to take action against child sexual abuse and exploitation. History must stop repeating itself. We cannot afford for Professor Jay's findings, or those of the inquiries announced today, to gather dust atop power-holders' bookshelves, to get lost at the bottom of in-trays, or to be banished to the depths of filing cabinets. In line with the courage that it has taken so many survivors to speak out on this issue, we Liberal Democrats—and many others, I know—implore those in positions of power at all levels to step up, too. That means that those weaponising this issue for party political gain must stop now; it means that Professor Jay's 20 recommendations must be implemented from now; and it means that the work to get the local inquiries set up must start now.

Survivors need assurance that—beyond the areas that have been announced today—they will be able to get justice in their cases as well. Will the Home Secretary share the plan for the areas beyond those she has announced today? What legal powers will the inquiries have to ensure that they have teeth and justice can be delivered? We must all dignify survivors' experiences with action. We must honour all survivors' stories with reform. Lady Justice demands it, and so does the tempered sword that she wields.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member's points on this extremely serious issue. He is right that many victims and survivors need a proper police investigation to go after the perpetrators, prosecute and hold them to account, and get justice and put them behind bars. That will help to protect other young people as well. One of the most important changes is that we are making it easier to get investigations reopened where they have been closed down for the wrong reasons and justice still needs to be done. We will give victims a stronger right to review. They will be able to go to an independent panel with their case and have it independently reviewed so that it can be reopened. We are also asking police forces across the country to review the closed cases and pursue new lines of inquiry, with the taskforce's support to ensure that they can do so.

Tom Crowther, who did the Telford inquiry, will work with five areas on the kinds of inquiry that they may want to take forward, involving victims and survivors—it is crucial to involve victims and survivors in the design. One Telford survivor gave evidence to both the national inquiry and the local inquiry, and she found that the local inquiry was far more effective at getting changes in that area, and it was easier for her to give evidence to it. That is why we need areas to be able to learn from what Telford did effectively, but also to be backed up by a stronger arrangement for accountability—stronger mechanisms for holding local organisations to account if they are not complying. However, we also expect local organisations to comply and to be part of finding truth and justice for survivors.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the measures she has included in it, and I thank her for her promptness in doing that. I also thank her team, especially the Minister for Safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), for listening to and providing support to constituents who have gone through such horrific abuse. How will my right hon. Friend ensure not only that the individuals responsible for this awful abuse will be caught and convicted, but that those who failed to protect and support these vulnerable young people—it is not just young women who have been affected in Oldham, but also young men—will be held to account?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise those important points, and I know that she has worked on this issue for many years. One of the things we need to do is strengthen the law in this area. We need to have a much stronger legal framework to ensure that there is proper accountability; not just holding to account and properly punishing the perpetrators of appalling abuse, but holding to account institutions and individuals who fail to take the action needed to protect our children. That means the duty to report, making it an offence to cover up child abuse; a duty of candour, to comply and provide the information and transparency in these cases; and looking at the other local mechanisms that need to be in place in areas such as my hon. Friend's and across the country, enabling us to ensure that there is proper accountability when things go really badly wrong.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I welcome the statement, which my Committee will look at carefully. Professor Alexis Jay will be in front of us next Tuesday and I am sure that we will come back

[Dame Karen Bradley]

with further points, but I have two points today. The first is about the duty to report. In many cases, reports were made but the victims were simply not listened to and not believed, so what can the Home Secretary do to ensure that changes? Secondly, since I am not clear from her answers so far, will the local inquiries have statutory powers to compel witnesses—yes or no?

Yvette Cooper: On the right hon. Lady's first point, she is right that reports were often not listened to and not followed up. In some areas, what that means is that although recommendations were made, there was never any follow-up—there was never the proper implementation of standards to be able to do so. For example, in policing we have never had a proper performance management framework to ensure that standards are being met and that there is proper follow-up. We need that stronger performance management framework in place.

Those who conducted the Telford inquiry were able to make progress and get to the truth using an existing local inquiry framework. That was able to be extremely effective. In other areas, we have needed to have other action—including, for example, action by inspectorates to follow up—so there are different approaches that we can take. We believe that the current system is not strong enough; that is why we have set out work that is under way, involving the Cabinet Office and local mayors and local councils, to make sure we can strengthen the accountability arrangements to be able both to follow up and support local inquiries where they are relevant, and to use existing powers that are in place.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): As a barrister and a former Crown prosecutor for 14 years who dealt with sexual abuse and rape cases, I can tell this House that sexual abuse and assault occur throughout the United Kingdom and are not specific to any gender, race or religion—we just have to look at the Pelicot case in France. However, there is one group of victims who are often not spoken about, which is young boys and young men. The level of sexual abuse that relates to them is completely under-reported. I think it is a cultural thing: the idea that boys must man up and must not show their feelings. Can I therefore ask the Home Secretary that, when she is looking at these things, she ensures that those undertaking such inquiries look into facts about the abuse of young boys?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise this point. In fact, it was one of the issues raised as part of the independent inquiry's two-year review of child exploitation. The review identified that teenage or young boys are being exploited and that there are often patterns of that starting with online exploitation. What started as online abuse and grooming then led to contact abuse and rape, and the most appalling violations. She is right to highlight this issue, and it is extremely important that this is taken into account and is part of the way in which local councils and police forces need to respond.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The House will be well aware that I have been consistently campaigning for a rape gangs inquiry into child sexual expectation across Keighley and the wider Bradford district for far too long. So I welcome some of the points that the Home Secretary has made, particularly on the implementation of the 20 recommendations from the IICSA report. Unfortunately, I do not feel that she is going far enough, and I would like to make a few points.

In particular, I have serious concerns about the ability of inquiries at a local level to compel witnesses to give evidence and about the amount of funding that will be made available. Will the local inquiries that the Home Secretary is advocating be truly independent, not just local authorities marking their own homework, and will they lead to convictions? Local authority leaders in Bradford district have consistently refused to back my calls for a public inquiry, as has the Mayor of West Yorkshire and the deputy mayor for policing, Alison Lowe. How on earth are we meant to get across this barrier of local leaders refusing to have an inquiry on this issue without the Government stepping in and giving the statutory authority that we on this side of the House are demanding?

Yvette Cooper: It is obviously really important to ensure that there is independent scrutiny. The hon. Member will be aware that the inquiry in Rotherham led by Baroness Louise Casey used inspectorate powers, but it was clearly independent and it managed to uncover serious problems that had gone wrong in Rotherham at that time, so there are different ways of doing this. The Telford inquiry was funded locally, but it managed to involve victims and survivors, and it also managed to shape the inquiry in the way that victims and survivors wanted, which is also important. For all areas right across the country, the most important thing is still to get police investigations going after the perpetrators, getting them before the courts and getting them behind bars. Whatever else happens, getting stronger police investigations in order to pursue perpetrators must remain at the heart of what happens.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Child sexual expectation and abuse are the most sickening, appalling crimes perpetrated against some of the most vulnerable youngsters in our communities. So I strongly welcome this comprehensive new national plan of action to put victims first, and I welcome the appointment of Baroness Casey to conduct a rapid review of the scale and nature of these grooming gangs. Can I also urge a cross-party consensus on this issue, rather than the game playing and misinformation we have seen over the past week? The Home Secretary, the Safeguarding Minister and I have all been consistent in saying that we should put the victims at the heart of everything we do. My constituents in Rochdale know that this issue is too important for political point scoring, and we should put victims at the heart of everything we do. That is not just for the victims of the past, but for the victims of the present.

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I know this is an area on which he does a lot of work. He is right that the purpose of a national audit by Baroness Casey is to identify the scale and look properly at the characteristics of these appalling crimes right across the country, and then to make further recommendations about further work and further investigations that may be needed. Anyone who has worked with Baroness Casey will know how independent and determined she will always be. My hon. Friend is also right that this must

still be about victims and survivors and, crucially, protecting them for the future, because we still do not have strong enough standards and strong enough protection in place. Unless those changes are made, we will continue to let children and young people down.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for the steps the Government are taking to address this serious issue. I appreciate that the timetable for the implementation of the IICSA recommendations cannot be immediately shared, but waiting until Easter means there is a big period when we need to take some action. Will she explain what immediate steps the Government are taking to ensure that all alleged victims who come forward are treated, taken seriously and listened to, and that immediate action is taken to address their allegations, so as to serve justice and protect these children?

Yvette Cooper: I can assure the hon. Member that we are already taking forward some of the recommendations. Some will be in legislation and will take time to pass through Parliament, because legislation also needs to change. We are also taking immediate action to change the victims' right to review so that if victims have been to the police or to a local authority—this includes parents who have been worried about their children—and they feel that nothing is being done, they will have a right to review. That will be an independent right to review—not just to go back to the same police force or the same Crown Prosecution Service, but to go to an independent panel on child sexual abuse to get that independent look, so that we can get more cases reopened and get urgent action taken, which is what we need to keep children safe.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): I welcome this action from a Government who see violence against women and girls as the national emergency that it is, with a Prime Minister, Home Secretary and a Safeguarding Minister with records of taking action to deliver for victims like me and many in my constituency. Giving birth as a result of grooming is a story that far too many of us share. There are so many reasons why children and the women that they grow into do not speak out. I want to share one particular story today. It is about the victim who told me that the perpetrator has threatened that if she speaks out, he will have access to her child, which is something he has not done so far. That means she has to work so hard to hide his crime in order to protect herself and her baby. Will the Home Secretary meet me and other victims to discuss changing the law in order to protect children born of rape?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for that incredibly important point, and also for the shocking and disturbing story she has told of victims continuing to be silenced, having already been through the most traumatic experiences. They are then continuing to be silenced to protect the children, even though what actually needs to happen is for perpetrators to be held to account and to face the full force of the law. She is right that we need to ensure that family courts cannot be used by abusers and rapists to persecute victims. I will happily meet my hon. Friend, and I know that the Safeguarding Minister will too. This issue is also being taken forward by the Ministry of Justice.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The House should be generous towards the Home Secretary, as she has travelled a long way since last week by recognising that there is a requirement for far more inquiries into the towns affected, and we should thank her for that. However, one crucial thing still lacking from her statement today is whether these new inquiries will have the power to summon witnesses and require the production of papers.

Only the Home Secretary—or a Secretary of State or Minister—can set up a statutory inquiry. In fact, the Minister specifying an inquiry could set the terms of reference, decide whether it should concentrate on certain towns, set the timeframe and set the budget. She could appoint as many people as she wants to the panel so that different parts of the inquiry could run in different parts of the country concurrently. Is she really ruling out that any of these inquiries should be statutory inquiries? Victims have the real freedom to speak out only in this Parliament, as we have just movingly heard, or in a statutory inquiry, where they are legally immune from consequences for anything they say. Why cannot she provide the victims with those protections?

Yvette Cooper: The strongest protection for victims continues to be through police investigations, and of course the police have full powers to pursue investigations wheresoever they may be found. A series of local inquiries have been held in different ways. The inspector investigation into Rotherham, where Baroness Casey was the lead inspector, did have powers to get to the truth, whereas the Telford inquiry did not have those powers but still managed to uncover serious problems and make serious recommendations.

There are different ways in which to do this. We have made it clear that we want to strengthen accountability powers and the ability to ensure that answers are given to local areas, and that is alongside the work we already have under way as part of the Hillsborough law on the duty of candour that we need to implement across the board.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the really important steps that she has announced today. Nothing must come in the way of victims getting justice or being listened to, or of us learning all that we can about how we protect future victims. If lessons come out of the individual local inquiries repeated across the country that would enable us to better protect victims in the future, how will we co-ordinate that? Turning to the previous question, will she explain why she believes that the statutory footing is not the right way to go and that the localised way will ensure that we get to the truth?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure proper follow-up where there are recommendations. There have been over 500 different recommendations, predominantly around child sexual exploitation, with many more around child sexual abuse much more widely. There is currently not a proper process to be able to follow them up. That is one of the reasons why the independent inquiry talked about strengthening child protection arrangements through, for example, a child protection authority and having stronger arrangements in that way. It is also one of

[Yvette Cooper]

the reasons why we have said that we need a new performance framework for policing to be able to have proper follow-up.

Obviously, we have already had a statutory seven-year inquiry into child sexual abuse and a statutory two-year investigation into child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs. Those reports came out with really important recommendations, but one of the things that they identified was that there simply was not enough evidence or data on the gangs in particular to be able to do further work and further investigations. That is why the next step must be to have the rapid national audit that we have asked Baroness Casey to undertake to get a much more extensive assessment of the prevalence and nature of child sexual exploitation across the country.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The right hon. Lady will know that I would not for one moment question her integrity, and certainly not her intent. However, I am perplexed by the methodology. Baroness Casey has one or two other things on her plate at the moment, but if she is able to deliver this audit in three months, that can only be a good thing. In her statement, she said that Tom Crowther has agreed to work with the Government to develop a new framework for victim-centred locally led inquiries where they are needed—five pilot schemes. That in itself will take time, and it is kicking the can down the road.

We all know that the Select Committees of this House can take evidence, generate a report and publish it in short order. It does not have to take seven years—it can take less than seven months. Having heard everything that the right hon. Lady has said, I cannot for the life of me understand why she is so resistant, first, to a broad-based national inquiry rather than a narrow five-town inquiry and, secondly, to statutory measures that will allow that inquiry to compel witnesses and evidence.

Yvette Cooper: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the importance of any independent inquiry is the independence of the decisions made by the chair about how it should be pursued. The inquiry led by Baroness Jay into child sexual abuse took seven years—that was a decision made independently by Baroness Jay and the panel. They took evidence from 7,000 victims right across the country. They pursued detailed investigations in different areas, including into churches, religious organisations, residential homes and schools. The inquiry into child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs on our streets took two years.

First, we want a rapid audit that fills the gaps that were left by the independent inquiry, such as on the scale and characteristics of child sexual exploitation across the country. That work will rightly be done by Baroness Casey. Secondly, we want more police investigations under way, including the victims' right to review. Thirdly, we want Tom Crowther to be able to work with other areas where there are local failings and problems, to pursue successful local inquiries such as Telford, to get to the heart of local failures and make sure that there is accountability.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I remain shocked that only two MPs stepped up and attended and participated in the Alexis Jay five-year inquiry into child sex abuse—my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and Lord Mann, when he was the Bassetlaw MP. As its new MP, it is my duty and responsibility to carry on that fight for justice.

Where grooming gangs have been operating, whether they are white, Pakistani-origin or church gangs, or taking place behind the closed doors of private homes, the bright light of an inquiry will expose who they are, where the cover-ups are and who is responsible. Every single perpetrator should be hunted down and jailed. I have no time for the grandstanders or the people who turn a blind eye. This is the biggest challenge of our Parliament. I find it stunning that the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), is not in his place for this critical statement.

Inquiries in areas where the gangs operate will give sick and evil perpetrators no place to hide. National oversight for Government is essential, ensuring swift legal action and the mapping of gangs, their links and their co-ordination—when and where they are ferrying girls across county lines. Does the Home Secretary agree that we need to end this tyranny of child abuse and put words into action?

Yvette Cooper: I agree. These terrible crimes have been ignored for too long. There are currently 127 major police operations under way on child sexual exploitation and gang grooming, across 29 different police forces. The independent inquiry identified that child sexual exploitation happens across all police force areas and all communities. All areas should ensure that they have the proper systems in place to follow up on what is happening to missing children, such as the vulnerable kids who stay out overnight, or those who go missing from residential care homes. Too often, that is still not happening and too often, we still get reports, even though those are basic things that all police forces and local authorities should be doing.

That is why we have strengthened the powers for victims to get a review, and that is why we are requiring police forces to look back at historical cases, because we know that cases are not being reported and not being investigated. That is where the fastest action needs to be, to go after the perpetrators who are still on our streets and still getting away with it. They will continue to do so unless police forces and local councils work together to put perpetrators behind bars.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I refer the House to the Register of Members' Financial Interests and particularly to the fact that I am a director of WhistleblowersUK, a not-for-profit organisation. I am the last remaining MP of the seven Members of the House of Commons who originally called on Theresa May to hold an independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. My experiences are also on the record. I therefore particularly welcome the acceptance of Professor Alexis Jay's recommendations and Baroness Louise Casey's rapid review into child sexual exploitation.

May I, however, draw the Home Secretary's attention to my concern about police investigations? She has referred to the matter of the National Police Chiefs' Council and to reopening cases, but I am concerned about people marking their own homework and we know that there is an institutional resistance to being found lacking and to deep scrutiny.

One of the primary whistleblowers with whom I was involved has waited years for the truth to out, and senior police officers have threatened to sue her. It would appear that complaints can only be made about junior officers who are called and investigated, and that there is no ability to complain about senior officers. I ask the Home Secretary to look at the Independent Police Complaints Commission and the Independent Office for Police Conduct reports, whether they have been published or not—particularly where they have not been published—and where there have been threats, as I understand it, from the police to sue members of those organisations about their findings. It is incredibly serious that we have organisations such as the IPCC and the IOPC—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call the Home Secretary.

Yvette Cooper: I am happy to follow up with the hon. Lady about the very serious issues she raised. She is right that this cannot be about institutions just marking their own homework. That is one of the reasons why we have made the right to review an independent one. For child sexual abuse cases, where victims feel that they have been let down by a police force or the Crown Prosecution Service, they should be able to take that right to review not back to the same police force, but to an independent child sexual abuse panel to get a right to review in order to see whether they can get their cases reopened and properly investigated and see perpetrators pursued.

The hon. Lady will also know that there are other routes to hold police forces to account, including the police inspectorate. Although it can currently make recommendations—for example, it has just found serious failings in Cleveland police's response to child sexual exploitation—too often, those recommendations are not followed up because there are no powers to do so. That is why we will also be changing the police performance management framework to strengthen the ability of the inspectorate and the Home Office to ensure that action is taken to improve performance and implement recommendations for improvement where serious problems are found. I am happy to talk to the hon. Lady about the wider policing reform needed to make sure there is accountability.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet), who is not in her place, for sharing her story—I know it is very difficult to do—and for her continued work to support victims. It is really important that we finally act for victims and survivors, and I welcome that the Home Secretary will be acting on the inquiry's recommendations. I urge her to make public the monitoring of the progress of those actions and to return to the House to provide regular updates on those actions.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We will need a process to keep the House up to date on the next steps and actions that are taken forward. We will do that through the victims and survivors panel that will be established by the Safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), and through regular updates on the work of the cross-departmental group of Ministers to pursue and take forward the recommendations.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I welcome today's announcement; it is great to see some progress. I will not cover what has been said about the legal powers, but I am interested in the funding. When I led a commission in Plymouth, the money to pay for it came from the local authority's in-year budget. I appreciate the £7 million in total that has been announced. However, the Home Secretary has talked a lot about the police. What additional funding will they receive to do this work on a local level? What additional funding will there be for the practicalities of holding these inquiries, outside the five initial local authorities? What funding will come forward for the interventions that might be recommended following the inquiries? We know that local authorities are incredibly cash-strapped, and this could potentially disincentivise them to follow through on these local inquiries. Finally, is that £7 million new money going into the violence against women and girls budget, or is it money that would have been spent elsewhere?

Yvette Cooper: On the funding to support the various measures we are taking forward, we have identified up to £10 million for additional investment to support further action. However, I cannot stress enough that this has to be part of the mainstream work that agencies, police forces and local councils do, because tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot just be an add-on. It cannot be something that is done only if there is a particular announcement from the Government—it has to be done as part of the core responsibilities of police forces and local councils and included in their funding. That is why we want our mission to halve violence against women and girls to be the central mission right across agencies and right across the Government, as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I appreciate that this is a very sensitive subject, but if the questions are long and the answers are just as long, we will get very few people in. Chris Murray, show us how it is done.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In her report, Alexis Jay notes that one in 20 boys and one in six girls in the United Kingdom is estimated to be a victim of sexual abuse. We have had scandal after scandal of grooming in care homes, councils, schools and churches for decades. I welcome the appointment of Baroness Casey on the rapid review into grooming, and welcome that it will be rapid, because these victims deserve justice.

It is unbelievable to my mind that grooming is not an aggravating factor in the sentencing of child sexual offenders. Will the Home Secretary restate her commitment to making it an aggravating factor, and commit to that being done quickly and by force, so that child sexual offenders are properly punished by the law?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. The inquiry identified that half a million children are victims of sexual abuse every year. The majority of cases are, sadly, within the family—a betrayal by those from whom

[Yvette Cooper]

children should be able to expect protection. However, as he said, there have also been huge betrayals in residential homes and other institutions, including faith institutions—the Church of England and the Catholic Church—as well as wider grooming online and on the streets as part of these terrible crimes. So yes, we will change the law, strengthen sentencing and make grooming an aggravating factor, because the punishment should fit this terrible crime.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): There is much to welcome in the Home Secretary's statement, but she has resisted six invitations from hon. Members to confirm that the Government-supported local inquiries will have statutory powers. Instead, she is relying on the duty of candour, responsibility and accountability, so let me try it a different way. Is the Home Secretary 100% certain that the duty of candour, responsibility and accountability is equivalent to statutory powers?

Yvette Cooper: What we need to do is to ensure that the crimes are investigated and that there is proper follow-up in those areas where things have gone badly wrong—and we know that there are some areas where things have gone badly wrong. The first stage has to be for the police to have full powers to pursue these crimes and to follow wherever the evidence takes them in order to put perpetrators behind bars. Frankly, that is where they should be to protect children and keep them safe.

We also need to ensure that where things have gone wrong, there are sufficient powers to be able to get to the truth and sufficient ability for local organisations to do that, so that no one can hide from accountability, run away or obfuscate, or use bureaucracy to get away with providing the answers, the justice and the accountability that victims need. That is why we have set up a new programme of work to look at how we can strengthen the powers available and the accountability available. Part of that has to be the duty of candour. It also has to include the duty to report, because there have to be stronger responsibilities on people to report child abuse in the first place and we have to make it a criminal offence to cover it up. If the law is not strong enough, we will not get the accountability or the action.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I encourage Opposition Members to heed the appeal from the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) to stop scoring party political points on such an important and sensitive subject. I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement, in particular the Government's commitment to take action to protect victims and secure justice by accelerating investigations and prosecutions. Can the Home Secretary confirm that the support is there so that police forces such as West Yorkshire have the resources they need to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of these horrible crimes?

Yvette Cooper: We have increased the resources for police forces across the country by up to £1 billion next year. It is really important that all police forces see these kinds of crimes, against some of the most vulnerable people in society, as part of the core work that they must do on public protection and keeping people safe.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his persistent campaign to get an inquiry into Keighley and Bradford.

Scotland is not immune from grooming gangs. Indeed, a survivor expert fears that grooming gangs are operating in every town and city in Scotland. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with the Scottish Government to ensure there is a unified and co-ordinated approach across the United Kingdom? Lastly, just to add my voice to those of others in the Chamber, why on earth can the inquiry not be backed by statute? The Inquiries Act 2005 gives all the accountability and assurances that victims and communities need to ensure process is followed properly.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the child sexual exploitation and abuse that takes place in every corner of the United Kingdom. Obviously, on the issues that involve police forces, the Home Office has responsibility for the police forces in England and Wales. Therefore, some of the changes we are making around the review panel, and around performance management and proper data in these areas, will apply to England and Wales police forces. However, we are also working with the National Police Chiefs' Council, which as he will know works very closely with Police Scotland to ensure there is a national approach. I would also say that we had the nationwide inquiry into both child sexual abuse more widely and child sexual exploitation. It is really important that we fill the gaps in the evidence and that we take forward those recommendations, alongside supporting those areas where there have been particular problems to get to the truth.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I welcome today's news that Baroness Casey will conduct a rapid review of the scale and nature of grooming gang offences. Having served as deputy police and crime commissioner on the frontline in Lancashire, I know that much exploitation and abuse goes unreported and unidentified in towns such as Blackpool, and that the figures are a significant underestimate. What will the Government do to ensure that systems are in place that enable these crimes to be reported and command the confidence of victims and survivors?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to say that it should be easier to report crimes, but I also think there should be a proactive duty on police forces, local authorities and child protection authorities to pursue the evidence of where these crimes are taking place even when they are not being reported. If kids are going missing from home, and particularly from residential care homes, they may not be reporting crimes partly because they are being groomed and exploited. As well as making it easier for victims to come forward and disclose the terrible things that have happened to them, we should ensure that those authorities have a responsibility to pursue crimes wherever they are found.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I am usually measured when I come here, but it worries me that the Labour Government seem to be playing us for fools today. The Home Secretary has picked five out of 50 towns and provided no statutory powers. She has

announced a review by the incredibly able Baroness Casey, but Baroness Casey is already conducting a review of social care, and this review is not a review; it is an audit. Is not the truth that the good Members on the other side of the House went back to their constituencies—and there are many across the country—and recognised the strength of feeling among the public about the need for a national inquiry? Members on this side of the Chamber get it, and most of the Back Benchers on the Home Secretary's side get it. Why does she not swallow her pride and launch a national inquiry?

Yvette Cooper: Let me just say that I was one of those who called for the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse very many years ago, and that I also supported the two-year investigation by that independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation, as well as some of its other investigations. However, we also have a responsibility to act. When more than 500 recommendations from inquiries are just sitting there with dust gathering on them, we have to ensure that we get action, including the audit that we need from Baroness Casey, who will be proceeding with that for three months before the commission on social care gets going. It is also important for us to have stronger police investigations—because if the police investigations do not happen, no one will get the protection they need—and for Tom Crowther to work with the first local areas that want to take forward local inquiries in order to develop a model and a programme that can be used in other areas, wherever it is needed.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Child sexual exploitation is without a shadow of a doubt the most disgusting, degrading crime imaginable, and we must at all times have the victims at the forefront of our minds. When Conservative Members table amendments to important legislation that they know will not result in an inquiry but will block child protection measures, and then spend the subsequent days spreading misinformation, they are letting victims down.

I welcome the national audit of grooming gangs, and I welcome the reopening of the police investigations to ensure that criminals are brought to justice, but may I check one point with the Home Secretary? She said a number of times that the five local areas she had identified were initial, pilot areas. Is it the ambition that wherever these crimes are taking place, local inquiries can take place?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Wherever there are serious problems or failings and it is believed that local inquiries are needed, we want those areas to be able to conduct the kind of effective local inquiry that Telford was able to conduct, rather than having to start from scratch. Tom Crowther will work with five areas so that he can draw up conclusions about how we can most effectively learn the lessons of what happened in Telford, where victims and survivors felt supported and also felt that they delivered change—that things had actually happened as a result—rather than having inquiries whose recommendations just sit on a shelf, letting everyone down.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): As well as withheld court transcripts, I have been pushing the Ministry of Justice for data on the following: how many Pakistani or other foreign rapists have been deported, are still in prison, did not serve a custodial sentence, are back in the same community as their victims, had previous convictions or have reoffended, with a full nationality breakdown of those involved in the gangs. The response was that the requested information

"is not centrally identified in the data systems relevant to these questions."

If this were a state inquiry into the private sector, it would be accused of negligence. My view is that we need a full national inquiry. This is a rotting stain on our country, and it needs to be exorcised in full. It cannot continue to be kicked into the long grass. The British public want transparency, and they want to know why this has taken so long to be dealt with.

Yvette Cooper: We do believe that better, more comprehensive data needs to be collected. That is why I have said that the overall data on child sexual abuse needs to be overhauled, with immediate changes to the gathering of data on ethnicity of both perpetrators and victims, because the system we inherited from the previous Government simply is not strong enough. We will need further changes as well.

On the issue of foreign national offenders, where foreign citizens have committed sexual offences in this country, they have no right to stay in this country, and we have to increase returns. That is why, rightly, this Government have increased returns of foreign national offenders by over 20% since the election.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I welcome the announcements the Home Secretary has made today. Disclosing abuse is a very difficult thing to do. Many victims speak out, but too often their words are not heard, they are not taken seriously or they fall between multiple agencies. Will the Secretary of State investigate how we can assist victims to disclose in the first place and ensure that agencies act on those disclosures?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to make that important point. By establishing a victims and survivors panel to work with the safeguarding Minister and other Ministers on taking forward recommendations around sexual abuse, we want to make sure we are recognising those experiences and exactly how difficult it can be to come forward. People need to have the confidence that if they do come forward to do something incredibly difficult, they will be listened to, they will be taken seriously and investigations will follow.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for her in-depth explanation of what the Government are and will be doing to ensure the safety of our children in the face of the most heinous crimes. Since the vote on the amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill last week and the subsequent attention that it attracted in the media, many of my constituents have written to me upset, angry and in fear over the grooming scandal. All the correspondence I have received demands a public inquiry into this scandal, to determine the failures—both historical and present—of the institutions involved that allowed these heinous crimes against vulnerable children to go on for so long and so widely, without being stopped and without the victims being safeguarded and protected sufficiently.

[Mr Adnan Hussain]

I finish by asking the Home Secretary to confirm whether, in northern towns like my Blackburn constituency, crimes of this specific nature and grooming gangs continue to haunt our streets and vulnerable children. Can she confirm that further public inquiries and reports are needed to find out why this has gone on for such a long time? We need to provide my constituents and everybody across the country with solace.

Yvette Cooper: The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse and the two-year inquiry into child sexual exploitation concluded that child sexual exploitation is happening right across the country and that action is needed across the country. The taskforce reports that there are currently 127 major police operations under way on child sexual exploitation and gang grooming across 29 police forces. That is why it is so important that recommendations from those inquiries are implemented and that we get action to protect children and young people who too often are let down when inquiry recommendations are ignored.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I need Members to work with me so that we can get in the final 10 questions; otherwise, there will be a lot of disappointment. If Members have not been here and bobbing throughout, there is no point in them trying to catch my eye now.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement, which was full of action. I am pleased that last week I supported the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill so that we can start implementing much-needed safeguarding measures—unlike some Conservative Members, who attempted to wreck the Bill and spread misinformation, which led to online abuse towards many Members. Does the Home Secretary share my concern about the most rapidly evolving forms of child sexual abuse taking place online, including through artificial intelligence-facilitated child sexual abuse material? Can she outline what plans the Government have to strengthen the law in this area?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. In addition to the measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, including on the proper identification of children to strengthen child protection, which is crucial, we need much stronger measures to tackle online abuse and exploitation. I am really worried about the pace at which this problem is escalating, about the fact that it involves online grooming, abuse and indecent images, and about the impact of drawing young people into contact abuse. We will bring forward new laws in this area.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the new victims and survivors panel will have representation from regions across the country to ensure that victims' voices are heard loud and clear? Does she agree that we need to dial down the political opportunism that we have sadly seen from some Members on the Opposition Benches?

Yvette Cooper: Yes, the victims and survivors panel will include people from right across the country. The inquiry into child sexual abuse had cross-party support, and I really hope that there will be cross-party support for implementing the action that we need, which I have set out today.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) pointed out, the victims and survivors panel really needs countrywide representation. Given that I am a Welsh MP, can the Secretary of State confirm that Welsh voices will be heard loud and clear?

Yvette Cooper: We will ensure that Welsh voices are heard loud and clear.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Many of my constituents have contacted me to share their concerns about child abuse and child exploitation. They will be relieved that, unlike the previous Government, this Government are no longer allowing this matter to be kicked into the long grass and are taking action, not least through Baroness Casey's rapid review. I think my constituents will be concerned that the official figures woefully underestimate the scale and nature of grooming activities. How can the Home Secretary reassure the House, me and my constituents that in future the reporting systems will be such that they can guarantee the confidence of victims and survivors?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. Some of this is about giving victims and survivors the confidence to come forward and report abuse, some of it is about getting agencies and organisations to take seriously the risk factors so that they identify potential crimes and pursue them, and some of it is about making sure that we have much stronger data requirements on police forces and local authorities so that we collect information and data. That was the first recommendation of the independent inquiry, and we are taking it forward. It has not been taken forward for far too long.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her statement. There are victims and survivors in many communities, including in my constituency, and I welcome the steps that she has announced. I commend the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet) and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde).

Does the Home Secretary agree that the voices that matter when we discuss how we tackle these issues are not those of billionaires, politicians or talk show hosts seeking to weaponise the pain and suffering of victims and survivors? Above all, we should be listening to victims and survivors themselves.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We need to make sure that victims and survivors are at the heart of this issue. Seven thousand victims and survivors gave evidence to the independent inquiry, which is a really hard thing to do. We owe it to them to make sure there is action as a result of their testimony, rather than just leaving the inquiry to sit on a shelf.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): A number of constituents have contacted me on this serious issue, and I have made it clear that I would welcome any further inquiry that is able to command the support of experts and victims and to build on the recommendations

of the Jay report, rather than choosing to ignore them or delay action. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that is exactly what she set before the House this afternoon? Does she believe, as I do, that on this basis these measures should command support from across the House?

Yvette Cooper: I hope these measures command cross-party support because, ultimately, we need stronger action from the police and local authorities, from across Government and from across communities to do the things that, for more than 10 years, we have been told need to change, and yet for too long simply have not changed. That is why we urgently need this action to keep children safe.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement on the action she will take to implement Professor Alexis Jay's recommendations. Professor Jay made another set of recommendations on which my constituent has been campaigning—those on safeguarding in the Church of England. Professor Jay called for an independent process for the oversight and operation of safeguarding in the Church. The Synod is discussing this next month, but does the Home Secretary agree that measures must be brought forward to be approved by the House without delay?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to point out that there were many further inquiries as part of the overarching national inquiry into child abuse, including on Church and faith organisations. Some of the recommendations were for those organisations to take forward. They need to ensure that they do, that they are responding and that they have strong enough child protection arrangements in place. We will be monitoring and looking at the recommendations of all those reports.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her answers, which have clarified a number of the questions I would have wanted to raise with her. I am also grateful for her victim-centred approach. One of the challenges is that, when a child is being groomed for sexual exploitation, they do not always know that they are a victim until they are an adult, living haunted by the past. What more can be done to help children recognise what is happening in their lives?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's important point. Part of our wider work on tackling violence against women and girls is to ensure that children and young people have the confidence to be able to recognise abuse and exploitation. I know the Education Secretary takes this immensely seriously and is looking at how to take it forward.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Child sexual exploitation is a vile crime that violates the trust, safety and dignity of children. Perpetrators of such despicable crimes—individuals or groups, no matter their race, religion or creed—must face the full force of the law. I commend the Home Secretary for her statement and the steps it sets out, especially on victims' right to review. So many victims feel that the authorities have neglected their position. Can the Home Secretary please give a timetable, even an estimate, for the duty of candour? I am sure she knows that justice delayed is justice denied.

Yvette Cooper: Work is under way on drawing up the Hillsborough law, which was part of the King's Speech to be taken forward as a priority in this Session. That work is being done across the Cabinet Office, with Ministry of Justice support, and it is part of the wider work on making sure there can be proper accountability where things fail and where people are let down, alongside both the duty of candour and the duty to report.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Well done to everyone who kept their question short. We got everybody in. I thank the Home Secretary.

Backbench Business

Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency

4.30 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) continues to need substantial reform, as recognised by the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review (IMMDS), with patient safety concerns persisting and exacerbating since the review's publication in 2020; believes that the MHRA's 2017 expert working group report on Primodos was deeply flawed, with IMMDS later concluding the drug had caused avoidable harm; further notes that the yellow card system for reporting suspected adverse drug reactions is failing, with no process for following up on serious or fatal reactions and conflicts of interest, with 75% of the MHRA's funding being derived from industry fees, a concern raised in the Fourth Report of Session 2004-05 of the Health Committee, The Influence of the Pharmaceutical Industry, HC 42-I, published on 5 April 2005; also notes the MHRA's delayed response to reports of myocarditis, pericarditis and vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopaenia following covid-19 vaccination, despite action from regulators in other countries; and calls on the Government to fully implement the recommendations in the IMMDS review and to acknowledge the harm done to patients and the financial burden on the healthcare system as a result of the MHRA's widespread regulatory failures.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and the many colleagues from across the House who supported my application for it, especially the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer), and also the hon. Members for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe).

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is the body responsible for ensuring the safety and efficacy of medicines used in the UK. Its job is to oversee medical products, medicines, medical devices and blood components for transfusion. The responsibility it has is extremely important, as it comes with the potential not only to change people's lives for the better, but to cause serious harm—even death—if poor decisions are made or safety signals are missed.

The MHRA is required to scrutinise applications from the pharmaceutical companies for new products and devices and to remain ever vigilant over existing drugs should safety problems arise post-authorisation. It has to weigh up the arguments for and against these products and devices. After all, the companies trying to get these products on to the market—and to keep them there—are driven, as all industries are, by commercial success. It is up to the MHRA to balance that with the health and safety of the UK and the public.

Alarm bells rang for many of us when, in March 2022, Dame June Raine, the chief executive of the MHRA, boasted of the agency's transition from watchdog to enabler. Twenty years ago, the Health Committee report, "The Influence of the Pharmaceutical Industry", found that the MHRA was unusual in being one of the few European agencies

"funded entirely by fees derived from services to industry".

Not much has changed since, with the MHRA continuing to get 75% of its funding from the pharmaceutical industry. In this context, the agency's transition from watchdog to enabler does little to quell suspicions of conflicts and the implications that has for patient safety.

One of the most worrying issues is the MHRA's mismanagement of the yellow card system. Established in 1964, the system is a way for patients, relatives and healthcare professionals to report suspected adverse reactions to drugs or medical devices. The reporting scheme should be a valuable source of information about possible harms, and act as an early warning system, but there is gross under-reporting to it. As the IMMDS's 2020 review put it, the system is

"too complex and too diffuse to allow early signal detection."

Under-reporting is a big problem because it makes it difficult to spot safety signals and assign causation. That then translates into unnecessary harm or death, with devastating side effects from treatment going unnoticed for years, months or even decades. That was recognised by the IMMDS review led by Baroness Cumberlege in the case of Primodos, sodium valproate and surgical mess—I meant to say mesh, though perhaps the word should have been "mess."

According to research from Bangor University in 2019, potentially avoidable adverse drug reactions cost the NHS £2.2 billion a year in hospital admissions. In 2018, the MHRA estimated that only 10% of serious reactions and between 2% and 4% of non-serious reactions are reported. More recently, it has claimed that reporting rates for covid vaccines are better due to higher public awareness, but it has not been able to point to published evidence to back up that claim. The yellow card is currently a voluntary scheme that doctors and members of the public can report to, but I echo calls from the Sling the Mesh campaign and others for the UK to follow the example of Denmark and Sweden by making it mandatory for all healthcare professionals to report suspected adverse reactions.

Let me turn to the MHRA's failure to act promptly on evidence of adverse reactions. We have seen that historically. For example, sodium valproate was known to cause harm to unborn babies in the 1980s, yet the MHRA did not establish a valproate pregnancy prevention plan until 2018. The known harms to unborn babies were allowed to persist for over 30 years. More recently, in 2021, the MHRA reacted slowly to strong signals that there was a serious problem with the AstraZeneca vaccine causing an autoimmune condition called vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia. Denmark and other European countries suspended the vaccine for all age groups on 11 March 2021. The MHRA, by contrast, only started to restrict the vaccine in some age groups nearly two months later, on 7 May—yet there was a signal in the yellow card reports as early as 8 February. How many people were needlessly exposed to a risk?

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My right hon. Friend hits on an important point. What action did the MHRA take to apologise for or explain its failure to give adequate and timely warnings to potential patients?

Esther McVey: I do not believe that the MHRA has taken such action. We are probably still waiting for it. Hopefully, that will come out. People are also either not getting compensation quickly enough or not receiving compensation that is commensurate with the illness and damage caused to them.

It is worth noting what happened when *The Daily Telegraph* reported on the potential causal link between the AstraZeneca vaccine and blood clots in March 2021. The journalist who wrote the story received a threatening call from the MHRA warning that *The Telegraph* would be banned from future briefings and press notices if it did not soften the news—an extremely defensive approach for an agency whose No. 1 strategic objective is to maintain public trust through transparency and proactive communication. Does that sound like an agency that is doing its best to maintain public trust, let alone patient safety?

It is clear that the system does not work. We have good evidence that suspected adverse reactions are under-reported, but what about the ones that are reported? We know from freedom of information requests that the MHRA does not have a process for investigating and following up individual yellow card reports. We know that the retrieval of follow-up information from the yellow card database still requires manual extraction and that only 54% of deaths reported as possibly linked to exposure to one of the covid-19 vaccines were followed up by the MHRA. That is extremely worrying or, as Matt Hancock infamously described it in a 2021 WhatsApp message, "shonky". The chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, replied to that message by saying that the system "needs to get better".

Another long-standing problem with the MHRA is its lack of transparency. Take FOIs to the agency as an example. Between 2008 and 2017, only 41% of requests were successful. In 2021, 76% were answered outside the 20-working-day statutory response time. A culture of delay and secrecy has emerged, and MHRA's behaviour around the Commission on Human Medicines meetings for the covid-19 vaccine benefit risk expert working group show that beyond any doubt. Minutes of the meetings were published just last month, four years after they took place—why the delay? They are stuffed full of redactions that leave us with many more questions than answers, particularly as to why the new vaccines were continually described as safe and effective.

In the meeting on 18 November 2020, the expert working group asks if Pfizer was "required to respond to the 36 questions asked by MHRA". In response, the MHRA confirmed that "there is no formal obligation to reply". Why is there no formal obligation to reply? Surely it is essential, when making such an important decision as to whether to allow a new vaccine to be rolled out to the nation, to have those replies. The minutes do not specify the 36 questions. Indeed, they do not appear to have been mentioned again.

I asked a written question last week to see whether, in the spirit of openness and transparency, the MHRA would publish those questions and any answers received from Pfizer. The response was that the MHRA does not intend to publish those questions or any subsequent responses. Why not? Is this not a matter of public interest? Those issues were not resolved before the MHRA gave the green light to start the vaccination of the nation.

Particularly worrying is the issue of lymphopenia, where blood does not have enough white blood cells, which was reported in phase 1 of the trials and then went away—not because they fixed the problem, but because testing for the condition was not conducted in phases 2 or 3.

In summary, the failure to act on the weaknesses of the MHRA will lead only to more harm and further damage to the public's trust in the pharmaceuticals agency and those tasked with regulating it. My hope is that the debate will help bring those wide-ranging issues further to light and focus the Minister's mind on finding solutions. I will end on the words of Dr Tom Jefferson of the University of Oxford:

> "You cannot support both secrecy and vaccination. Requesting data is not a sign of being against drugs or vaccines; it shows that you favour transparency. Those who try to keep data confidential and criticise those who ask for evidence are anti an evidence-based approach. How can you have informed consent if you do not know precisely what is happening?"

Sir Christopher Chope: On that point, does my right hon. Friend accept that one of the consequences of the lack of transparency has been a public distrust of vaccines, which is spreading rapidly? As a consequence, for example, there is less take-up of MMR vaccines than there should be and used to be, and that is because of a lack of trust in the system.

Esther McVey: My hon. Friend makes a good point. If people lose trust in vaccines, the pharmaceutical industry and the regulatory agency, that is precisely what happens. We know that these vaccines are essential to many people, so we do not want that happen. We want to ensure that new vaccines and medicines coming into use are thoroughly tested and that, along the way, we keep an overall watch on whether they are working correctly.

4.44 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). I agree with every word she said. It is late in the day for a Thursday, so I will try not to repeat many of the pieces of evidence and arguments that she proposed, but they are all valuable contributions to this debate.

I will start by talking about the attitude of Members of Parliament and politicians to regulation in general. A long time ago, I had responsibility in the Cabinet Office for dealing with better regulations. I travelled around the country to look at businesses that complained about regulations and see how those regulations could be made better—that was 18 months of my life that I will never get back. I came to a number of conclusions after that. Politicians have a knee-jerk reaction when it comes to regulation. If a child dies, if there is a fire, or if there is another disaster of some sort, there is a cry from both sides of the House for more regulation—not necessarily better regulation and enforcement, but more regulation—when, in many cases, regulations are already there but inspections and enforcement have not taken place.

The other knee-jerk response, which my Government are giving at the moment, is to say, "Regulations are burdensome so we will try to get rid of some of them." I do not think that either of those responses deals with the issue. We set up regulators—this afternoon we are talking about the MHRA—but, by and large, once they are set up, MPs and Ministers abdicate responsibility and do not consider them until there is a crisis.

When I had that responsibility, I went to see the European Medicines Agency—this was some time before we left the EU. One of the surprising things I found—or

[Graham Stringer]

maybe it was not so surprising—was that I was the only Minister who had been anywhere near the place. It was the major European agency that this country got after the Maastricht treaty. It had wide-ranging and important powers, to deal both with the market and with regulation, but nobody bothered with it. If there had been a crisis, however, Ministers and shadow Ministers would have been queuing up to go there.

If there is a lesson, particularly in relation to the MHRA, it is that we should look at regulators—be they water, medicine or other regulators—all the time. We cannot as a Government and MPs abdicate our responsibility, because we then come to a crisis, and the electorate say, "Well, what are you doing?" and the answer is, "Not a lot; we have passed that on." Those water regulators or medical regulators might be, as the right hon. Lady showed, pretty useless. We should be looking at them all the time.

I was a member of the Science and Technology Committee in 2012. Partly because of that experience, and partly because there was a lot of press discussion and debate about metal hips that were squeaking and not working very well when they had been implanted and about breast implants that were falling apart, potentially damaging and poisoning the recipients, we had an inquiry that reported in October of that year. I will read out some of the comments from the witnesses we heard from about the MHRA, because they are being repeated now. They are very similar to what the right hon. Member for Tatton said about the MHRA's responses—secretive and slow. For instance, there was evidence that there were problems with metal hips for four years before the MHRA took any action whatsoever. Nearly 14 years later, it still has the same problems.

I asked Dr Heneghan from the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine at the University of Oxford who had authorised those metal hips. His answer was extraordinary: "Nobody knows. I don't know—nobody knows." It was a different regulatory regime then, because we were part of the European Union. Anybody who had the competence—or at least the authority—in any country in the EU could give authorisation, but nobody knew which body had done it, and whether that body was composed of competent people and what evidence they had used to do so.

However, when the MHRA found out, it did nothing for four years. That is disgraceful, and there were all sorts of comments that I can give the House. One was from Dr Stephen O'Connor at the Institute of Physics and Engineering, who said that the MHRA was overly bureaucratic relative to other competent bodies, inefficient, and difficult to deal with. As the right hon. Member for Tatton showed, the MHRA does not answer FOI requests, and it does not tell us what is going on.

The Lancet said about the breast implants, which I will talk about next, that the MHRA was in paralysis and in need of reform. Again, that was a long time ago. It was a different issue with the breast implants, because the MHRA was dealing with a fraudulent product—the products that had been authorised were not the products that were being sold to surgeons to be implanted in women. However, the Committee asked for there to be random and regular testing of the bodies that were responsible for manufacturing those implants. I do not expect the Minister to know at this time, but will she check whether the authorities have done any of those randomised tests on those bodies?

That is the history. The right hon. Member for Tatton has basically analysed what is going on now, but I will just talk about what we learned during the covid period. We learned that many of the NHS's constituent parts—although not the clinicians—were secretive. Earlier today in the Chamber, we talked about the Government's response to the first part of the covid inquiry. At the present time, that inquiry is not getting to part of what went wrong during covid, which was the fact that the NHS did not tell us what was going on, and there was also a restriction on political debate. If we are to get the best policies in any crisis, and in the regular turn of events outside crises, we need transparency so that we know how things can be improved and what we can criticise.

The right hon. Lady made the excellent point that keeping things secret encourages people who do not trust vaccines and have odd theories about how societies is controlled not to take the protection from vaccines. We know that no medicine is 100% safe, and there is no point in pretending they are safe, but vaccines have saved many lives over decades—more than decades; over a century—and it is good for society and for individuals that people understand that, and they will be less trusting if we do not tell them what is going on.

As recently as a few minutes ago, I got an email telling me that the UK Health Security Agency is still refusing to release the cost of the bird flu vaccines it has purchased. What possible reason can there be for not saying how much public money has been spent on a good cause? Having vaccines ready for any flu epidemic is a good thing because it saves people's lives, as we have been discussing. Why should it be kept secret? Could the Minister to respond to that?

Is there any Member in the House who thinks that turning the MHRA, in the right hon. Lady's phrase, from a watchdog to an enabler is a good idea, or even knows what it means and what is being enabled? I certainly do not know what is being enabled, but one of the things we should remember is that the MHRA and the whole of the health industry are swimming in a sea of pharmaceutical sharks. Pharmaceutical companies produce some extraordinarily wonderful products that keep us safe, but they also produce huge profits, and sometimes they get their products on to the markets by telling lies, or certainly by sins of omission. Everybody knows about the thalidomide case, and how long it took to prove it and to get compensation for the victims.

Almost at random, I have picked two other cases. With Paroxetine—I think that is how to pronounce it—GSK held back information because it did not release the tests that did not show a positive benefit. It also kept back tests that showed that Paroxetine increased the chances of children committing suicide, and it took a lot of investigation to get that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Stringer, I assume you are coming to a conclusion soon.

Graham Stringer: I am. I have one sentence. I am sorry; I did not realise I had speaking for so long.

Lastly, Reboxetine is another example of where the information given out to doctors was inadequate because it did not show the negative tests. I use those two examples basically to show that the MHRA should not be enabling these things. It should be much more vigilant, and it should be asking for powers to demand the right to know all the information that drugs companies have before it says those drugs are as safe as they can be.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. To enable us to get everyone in, I hope all Members will be mindful of those who are to speak after them.

4.59 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I shall try to be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I follow the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) by referring to a quote from Hayek's book, "The Road to Serfdom". I do not claim credit for identifying it myself; it was quoted in the other place by Lord Hannan of Kingsclere on 15 January in the context of the Football Governance Bill. He was talking about the growth of the administrative state, about which the hon. Gentleman was speaking at the beginning of his speech. Hayek said:

"The delegation of particular tasks to separate bodies, while a regular feature, is yet only the first step in the process by which a democracy…relinquishes its powers".

That is in chapter 5 of "The Road to Serfdom" from 1944, so not much has changed. The MHRA is an example of what happens if we in this House transfer responsibility to unelected and unaccountable organisations.

It so happens that on the Order Paper for tomorrow is my Covid-19 Vaccine Damage Bill, which is sponsored by a former Attorney General. That Bill calls for an independent review of covid-19 vaccine damage. It calls on the Secretary of State to

"appoint a current or former High Court judge to lead an independent review of disablement caused by Covid-19 vaccinations administered in the United Kingdom and the adequacy of the compensation offered to persons so disabled."

We know that more than 600 people have already been told by the agency responsible at the Department of Health and Social Care that they have suffered disabilities as a result of covid-19 vaccines. A large number of them, where the disability is in excess of 60%, have been awarded wholly derisory payments of £120,000 each.

My Bill goes on:

"The review must consider…the rates and extent of disablement caused by each type of Covid-19 vaccination offered in the United Kingdom".

Relevant to this debate, the review must also consider

"the effectiveness of Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency monitoring of such side effects, and National Health Service and Government responses to such monitoring",

as well as

"the adequacy of compensation offered to persons so disabled".

There has always been an agreement, basically, that if something goes wrong for people who undertake vaccination voluntarily or are in receipt of other medical products—if they are doing the right thing by the country at large—and they have an adverse reaction, they will be able to look to the Government or the taxpayer to pay them some recompense under the scheme to which I have referred, if causation is established. The trust built by that scheme has been undermined by the long denial of the previous Government—and, to an extent, the current one—that any adverse reactions had been caused by the covid-19 vaccines, other than the most minor disablement. It has also been undermined by the fact that so many people have applied for a review of their cases. Some people—I think more than a thousand—have been waiting more than 18 months for a decision. That shows that this is a low priority for the Government.

I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate, she will be able to explain why the Government will block my Bill again tomorrow. If they were taking this issue seriously, as they should be, they would be open to and supportive of the establishment of an independent review of disablement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I am setting a five-minute time limit.

5.5 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing a debate on what is an incredibly important campaign in support of the reforms to the MHRA. I would like to make clear my interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on Primodos.

I will focus on the human case for reform. I would like to share part of a speech delivered at a recent APPG meeting by Jason Farrell, a journalist who has been instrumental in communicating the campaign for some time and who powerfully put into words the experience of Marie Lyon and other victims. He said:

"In October 1970, in Billinge maternity ward in Wigan, a woman gives birth to a girl. The baby is quickly rushed out of sight and later brought back swaddled. When Marie Lyon unwraps her daughter, she discovers half her baby's arm is missing.

Meanwhile, in Portsmouth, Shirley Gubbins gives birth. Her daughter is so damaged, medics put her in a cupboard, assuming she will be dead within minutes. Shirley's husband demands to see his child and discovers the baby's back is twisted, her face disfigured, and one eye is missing. When she's eventually allowed to see her baby, Shirley reacts in exactly the same way as Marie does: 'She's beautiful. She's mine.'"

As a relatively new MP, I first met Marie Lyon, campaigner-in-chief and chairwoman of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, just a few months ago at the request of a constituent. Marie has met many MPs in her years campaigning for recognition and justice for mothers and children affected by hormone pregnancy tests. I had not met many campaigners like her before, and I had certainly never met a leader with such reserves of stamina and such a profound sense of injustice.

I speak here on the shoulders of victims, families, activists, MPs, scientists and academics who have called for substantial reform of the MHRA and for the Government to acknowledge the harm done to patients and to implement the recommendations of the IMMDS. The harrowing stories of victims of this scandal after decades of fudges, obfuscation and inaction that have hindered their pursuit of justice must be heard again and again in the Chamber. The evidence is clear. The time for talk has long passed. It is time for us now to act.

5.7 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I will be as quick as I can be, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to talk about over-prescription and the vaccines. I acknowledge my role as the co-chair and past chair of the beyond pills all-party parliamentary group, which the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) chairs in this Parliament. I thank the secretariat for the great work it does to support the group.

We have a crisis of over-prescription in our country, with the rates of prescription drugs being given to people going up vertiginously. Prescriptions have doubled over the last 12 years. Nearly 9 million people—one in five adults—are on antidepressants, which is way too high a figure. Many people should never have been put on these drugs—they should have been offered non-chemical alternatives—and they should be supported to withdraw. I very much hope that the MHRA and the Government more widely will heed the calls we are making on the APPG for better training of GPs, better labelling of these drugs and withdrawal services for people who want to come off them.

In addition to social prescribing, which I am sure the hon. Member for Stroud will talk about from his experience, I want to mention the important potential role of digital therapeutics, which are not properly commissioned by the NHS but could be a big part of the answer.

I want to talk briefly about the role of the MHRA in over-prescription, particularly with respect to antidepressants. We know from evidence, from anecdote and from coroners' reports that SSRIs—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—can cause people to take their own lives. There are dozens of documented cases. The most prominent of those recently has been the tragic case of Thomas Kingston, whom I knew and whose family I have been speaking to since his death. Tom shot himself last February after being put on SSRIs. In fact, he was put on that SSRI after another SSRI caused him to feel absolutely awful, so he was put on two in very quick succession.

The coroner for Gloucestershire, who conducted the inquest, recommended much clearer communication of the risks of these pills, and she is not the first coroner to make that recommendation. I pay tribute to *The Times* for its campaigning to highlight the fact that so many coroners' reports have not been heeded by the authorities. I wish they had been, as it might well have saved many lives.

Esther McVey: The number of people who have taken their lives after coming off SSRIs shows that it is not a one-off or rare. There are many people, including one of my constituents, aged only 25, who took her life. I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this issue. What more can we do to raise awareness of the effects of withdrawal from these antidepressants?

Danny Kruger: The tragedies that we read and hear about are bringing to light the chronic problem of over-prescription in our society. I am afraid that the MHRA is to blame. A review is under way, but it does not sufficiently recognise the direct harms that these pills can induce in people. I hope that through better labelling and regulation, and a better culture of alternative prescriptions, we can reduce the tragedies that we are so familiar with.

Let me quickly comment, following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), on the experience of the MHRA during the covid epidemic. The vaccines were developed at a frantic rate. We can be very impressed by the speed of the taskforce and pay tribute to the work of the private sector, particularly our world-leading research base. The Government managed to act at great speed, largely because they bypassed Whitehall. But significant questions remain, which my hon. Friend raised, about whether the vaccines are genuinely safe and effective.

It is right that people ask questions about the data on excess deaths and wonder if there is a connection with the vaccine—that is not inappropriate. Ultimately, there is only one way to answer that question: to have the data. However, we do not have access to that data. The Government hold it and, extraordinarily, they have made it available to the pharmaceutical companies that produce the vaccines, but not to researchers—individual-level death data that shows who was dosed with what vaccines and which of them died.

In a debate in the House last April, and previously in correspondence with Ministers, I clearly and simply asked for that data to be made available to researchers, anonymised as appropriate. The UK Health Security Agency has admitted that the data exists, but has refused to release it, almost unbelievably, because of the risk to the mental health of the relatives of the dead. That begs the question, does the data show a link between the vaccines and those deaths? The information tribunal is due to rule on that matter shortly, and I fervently hope that common sense will prevail and the data can be made available to disprove the link, so that our minds and those of our constituents can be put at rest. There is also a case with the information tribunal about the data held by the MHRA on the vaccines' safety for pregnant women. Again, the agency has been withholding that data for two years.

Let me finish by observing, in the light of the comments made by hon. Members across the House, that we have a genuine problem with the regulation of the medical industry and of medical products. I very much welcome the appointment of R. F. Kennedy to the role of Health Secretary in the United States. He will shake things up over there. Perhaps the Minister can be our own RFK over here, and bring some genuine transparency to the health system.

5.13 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing this important debate, and I am very happy to be called to speak on such an important issue.

As chair of the First Do No Harm all-party parliamentary group, I am very interested in the need for MHRA reform in the context of the mesh, Primodos and valproate scandals. However, for time's sake, I will focus my remarks on MHRA reform and the mesh scandal in particular, not least because the right hon. Lady opened the debate so well, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) will speak about the Primodos scandal and I do not want to steal any of her thunder.

I want to start by paying tribute to all the campaigners we have worked with over so many years on the "First Do No Harm" report scandal, especially Kath Sanson from Sling the Mesh, Marie Lyon, who has been mentioned, from the Primodos campaign, and Janet Williams and Emma Murphy from the valproate campaign. I also must pay tribute to Baroness Cumberlege, who recently retired from the other place, who was the author of the independent medicines and medical devices safety review and the former co-chair of the First Do No Harm all-party parliamentary group. She has been a great support to me over the years. Thanks to her invaluable hard work highlighting key recommendations to prevent future health scandals, including vital MHRA reform, we know what we need to do. Now we must get on with the job.

As we have heard, colleagues here today are in agreement that the MHRA is in need of urgent and substantial reform. One area in particular is the need for mandatory reporting of adverse events to the yellow card by healthcare professionals. Contrary to responses I received when I asked questions on the topic in the House, which argue that the current system works, it does not. It is broken. Let me be clear: the current voluntary system, which doctors enjoy, enabling them to choose whether to log side effects and complications to the MHRA yellow card, is simply unacceptable. This voluntary system has led to many adverse events going unreported. The system must be made mandatory, but that fix alone will not work if the data is there but is not used. The information must be tracked and assessed in real time by the MHRA, to spot trends of harm so that treatments can be stopped immediately if needed, to prevent the repetition of mistakes and, in turn, to prevent their escalation into further health scandals, as we have seen with mesh, valproate and Primodos.

Comparison of datasets conducted by Sling the Mesh found that a whopping two thirds of mesh complications —some as serious as slicing into bladders, bowels or through vaginal walls—were not logged by healthcare professionals to the MHRA yellow card. If these excruciating examples are not interpreted by healthcare professionals as worthy of reporting, what reason do we have to trust that healthcare treatments are safe? We need to see the MHRA at the heart of patient safety, properly and efficiently regulating and recording and not just nodding treatments through like a tick-box exercise.

Mesh, for example, was allowed from the 1990s onwards on the basis that it was equivalent to hernia mesh. Without any post-market surveillance by the MHRA, it was allowed to be aggressively sold, free rein, in the UK. This ultimately led to thousands of women, including my very own mam, being irreversibly harmed. Had reporting been mandatory, the sheer scale of women impacted could have at least been reduced through spotting a clear pattern of harm and putting a stop to it. It is clear that we need to change the current system, and fast.

Most of the scandals we are talking about today affect women, so women's voices must be taken seriously. We should not have to wait until media coverage publicly shames health scandals or documentaries force accountability and answers upon us. The MHRA needs to be functioning and not just responding to treatments causing harm, but regulating and preventing them in the first place. Surely this is the absolute least we should expect from a regulation agency that is supposed to ensure the safety and effectiveness of patients and the medicines and medical devices that they receive—hence: first do no harm.

5.18 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): I should start by alerting people to my declared interests relating to the pharmaceutical industry.

All of us familiar with the growth of the quango will be aware of how these unelected, unaccountable organisations have come to control and dominate British public life—not us, the democratically elected Members, but the quangos. Failure is rewarded and never punished. No organisation encapsulates that point as comprehensively as the MHRA. Its role is essentially to ensure that medicines and medical devices are safe and effective—where have we heard those words before? How can it possibly be trusted to regulate properly when it is funded largely by the companies it is tasked with regulating? It is simply human nature for a conflict like this to impact on the decision-making process.

The biggest challenge in the MHRA's history was the covid response, and it failed. It enabled the biggest assault on civil liberties and economic prosperity in my lifetime, which was lockdown—the greatest scandal of them all. It was, quite simply, the most disgraceful period of recent history. The MHRA's insistence on vaccines for all enabled lockdown restrictions to continue for as long as they did. It must take part responsibility for the consequences: vast NHS backlogs, mental health issues rife, soaring alcohol-related deaths, obesity booming, children's development wrecked, long-term illnesses mounting, increased substance abuse, domestic violence on the rise, unnoticed child neglect, fathers missing the birth of their children and elderly loved ones left to rot and die alone. We were not even allowed to mourn the dead properly. The wicked list is endless.

None of it was based on any science, and certainly not the vaccination of almost the entire population—including, disgracefully, young children. This was a hideous dereliction of duty by the MHRA. It was not just children it forced the covid vaccination on, but tens of millions of people who had absolutely no need for it whatsoever. There was clear risk from taking the vaccine—not just the initial two doses, but the booster following them. The evidence for the vaccine was simply not there, particularly considering that by that stage, almost the entire population had actually caught the virus, which gave far more effective natural protection than any man-made intervention. The MHRA knew that, but it failed to act. Why? Was it under political pressure not to undermine the wretched covid response? Had it been honest about the real need—or lack thereof—for population-wide vaccinations, the whole case for lockdown would have collapsed.

As of 4 November, there had been 489,991 adverse reaction reports from covid-19 vaccines in the UK. Those are just the reported issues. What is the true number? When individual after individual reports feeling far worse after taking the vaccine than they ever did after the virus, should we not question whether that vaccination was necessary? The MHRA failed. This was simply not a vaccine that was needed by the entire population.

[Rupert Lowe]

We were fed the lie that taking the jab would protect vulnerable loved ones, which was disgraceful dishonesty. The vaccine did not prevent transmission—we know that now, and we knew that then. It should always have been a fully free and informed choice. If an elderly man in his 90s believes that the virus poses more of a threat than the vaccine, then let him take it. For almost everyone under 70, that is a risk analysis that falls firmly in the camp of not having the vaccine. Don't even get me started on the abhorrent vaccine passport policy—one of the most evil policies devised by Government in living memory.

The MHRA should have provided full and transparent data so that educated adults could make their own decisions for themselves and for their families. It must act as an independent barrier against both political expedience and corporate profit, protecting public health above all else.

The question is: who regulates the regulator? Who protects against regulatory capture? How did the MHRA allow politicians, celebrities and even its own agency to describe these vaccines as safe and effective, when yellow card data clearly showed it is not universally safe and certainly not universally effective? How could MHRA CEO June Raine say she had transformed the MHRA from a watchdog to an "enabler" of the pharmaceutical industry—an oxymoron for a watchdog that is meant to safeguard public health? It is Parliament's duty now to exercise its sovereign power to ensure that we learn from the myriad of mistakes.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We are going to have to drop the time limit to four minutes. I call Dr Simon Opher.

5.23 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have quite a lot to say here, but I shall squeeze it into four minutes.

First of all, having a regulator funded by a drug company is genuinely a case of marking one's own homework, and we need to change that straightaway. I think we need a reform there.

From clinical experience, I would also say that the yellow card system does work, but that we never get any feedback from it. That is one of the problems. The other problem is that clinically one is often not sure whether or not something is an adverse effect. We need a very easy system that can just be fired off. The right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) mentioned low white blood cells, for example, and whether that was a reaction. Then, when a number of different doctors get it, we can accumulate that information.

If I may, I want to say a few things about vaccinations. Vaccinations save far, far more lives than they cause damage. Every medicine that has ever been invented has side effects and I do not deny vaccine side effects. However, the vaccine saved hundreds of thousands of lives. I ran the covid vaccination service in our area in Dursley. At the height of the pandemic, if we injected 180 people over 80, we saved a life—that is incredible. Compared to that, the side effect rate was incredibly small. It does exist and we need to look at it, but let us not get on the backs of vaccines. Vaccines have saved more lives than anything else.

I really want to talk about antidepressants, on which the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) has already said a few words. We have a problem with over-prescribing in this country. Some 8.7 million people are on antidepressants. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) spoke about Paroxetine causing increased risks of suicide. We need to wean ourselves off medications. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines say that for mild to moderate depression we should not start tablets, yet they are started. That is because people have become a bit over-medicalised, we have 10-minute appointments and no psychological therapies. We must also make use of social prescriptions, available to the NHS, where we can prescribe to patients something that is not medical. We need to de-medicalise what is going on. That can include lots of different things, such as exercise and being very creative. In fact, yesterday I went with the Lord Mayor of Westminster and Lu Jackson to St John's Wood library for a Comedy-on-Prescription event. Making people laugh can avoid the need for medication. We need to look at those things much more seriously and get people off tablets.

The right hon. Member for Tatton said that one of her constituents took their own life when they were trying to get off antidepressant medication. The MHRA needs to put warnings on the packet, but it has failed to do so. We also need a support mechanism for people coming off tablets. Of the 8 million people on antidepressants, about 2 million are trying to get off them, so it is a major problem. GPs, actually, are not that well informed about this. There are some very strong Maudsley guidelines based around micro-tapering, so that people can come off slowly and safely. Some kind of support service might have helped her constituent and stopped them taking their own life.

In conclusion, we have a pandemic of over-prescription and we need to start looking at that. As chair of the beyond pills all-party parliamentary group, with the hon. Member for East Wiltshire we are trying to reduce prescriptions and make it safe for people to come off antidepressants.

5.27 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Before being elected to this House I worked for nearly 20 years in the pharmaceutical regulation and compliance industry. I know from first-hand experience the critical role that the MHRA must play in protecting the public and its indispensable role in ensuring public trust in the medical sector. My comments, therefore, come from a place of wanting to ensure that that trust, so painstakingly built up, continues to be strengthened.

A recent survey by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry found that 80% of respondents felt the MHRA's lack of capacity was undermining industry trust and deterring domestic investment—problems compounded by Brexit, which has created obstacles to co-operation in the European Union. Faced with a large backlog of clinical trial applications, one would imagine the obvious solution is to make more resources

available to recruit and train new staff, and to rebuild relationships with our European partners. However, the Prime Minister seems more determined to demonstrate his commitment to slashing red tape and the need to, as he says, "regulate smartly and regulate creatively". I must admit I get very nervous when I hear that kind of language used in relation to the pharmaceutical industry, because it is normally code for measures that threaten safety standards even further.

The need for openness, transparency and regulation is probably greater than ever before. Recently, I have had constituents raise with me why the animal feed additive Bovaer, which is given to cows to reduce methane, is not tested or approved to MHRA pharmaceutical standards and why it is not even listed on milk cartons. Constituents have raised concerns with me about the use of carcinogenic chemicals in our food. We know that a host of chemicals that are banned from being used in food in the European Union are permitted in the United States. It is perfectly understandable for people to fear that, amid the bonfire of red tape that the Government are planning to set alight, some things that better protect us might go up in smoke.

Constituents have also raised questions with me about the latest impact of the covid-19 vaccines. Before anyone starts accusing me of being an anti-vaxxer, I took both covid vaccines and agree that they saved many lives, but it is also the case that legitimate concerns have been voiced about long-term side effects. We now know that in the largest vaccine study to date, two very rare side effects—a neurological disorder and inflammation of the spinal cord—have been detected. Other studies have confirmed side effects including inflammation of the heart muscle and the lining around the heart, particularly in young males, as well as blood clots in the brain's venous sinuses.

Today we stand united in our commitment to safeguarding the health and wellbeing of our citizens. The motion highlights critical issues within the MHRA that demand our immediate attention and action. The Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review has shed light on persistent and exacerbated patient safety concerns since its publication in 2020, and it is our duty to ensure that the MHRA undergoes substantial revision to address those issues. The safety of our citizens must be paramount, and we cannot afford to overlook the shortcomings that have been identified.

In conclusion, let us not forget that our primary responsibility is to the people we serve. We must act with urgency and determination to rectify those issues with the MHRA. By implementing these recommendations, we can work towards a safer, more responsive healthcare system that prioritises patient safety and trust above corporate profits and interests

5.31 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing this important debate. My interest in the issue stems from the fact that one of my constituents, Barbara Manning, was affected by Primodos, and, along with the tireless campaigner Marie Lyon—who has already been mentioned today—has been seeking justice ever since.

For the benefit of Members who do not know this, let me explain that between 1958 and 1978, Primodos was a hormone pregnancy test that was given to about 1.5 million women in the form of pills. It was taken off the market in 1978 amid concerns about the effect on the unborn children of those who were pregnant, but the link has never been formally recognised by regulators or the manufacturer. Some research at the time suggested that there might be an association between the drug and miscarriages, and babies born with shortened limbs, abnormalities in their internal organs, brain damage and heart defects. Many of those children died before reaching adulthood, and of those still alive, some are blind, deaf and brain-damaged.

In 2017, a report from an expert working group of the Commission on Human Medicines concluded that there was no causal association between Primodos and severe disabilities in babies, but there are real concerns about the conflict of interests involving some of those on the expert working group and their connections to the big pharmaceutical companies involved in the scandal.

On 8 July 2020, Baroness Cumberlege published her in-depth findings on how the health system responds to reports from patients about harmful side effects from medicines and medical devices. On the MHRA, she said:

> "A regulator must work both for patients and with them. This hasn't been the case in the past. We are recommending that the regulator of medicines and medical devices… is overhauled. It needs to change and radically improve the way that concerns about medicines and devices are detected and acted upon. The regulation of devices in particular needs urgent change. The MHRA needs to engage more with patients and track how medicines and devices improve—or fail to improve—patients' health and quality of life. It needs to raise public awareness of its role and it needs to ensure that patients have a core role in its work."

The review also concluded that the state and manufacturers have a moral responsibility to provide ex gratia payments to those families who have experienced avoidable harm due to their failure to remove Primodos from the market.

The duty of the regulator was to protect women. It chose to protect the manufacturer instead. Thousands of women and unborn children were exposed to a risk that was widely acknowledged at the time. That should not have happened. It now falls to us to put right that injustice, to persuade the manufacturer to pay compensation to those affected families and to reform the regulatory system, so that it protects patients in the future.

5.35 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): My interest in this matter arises as I chair the APPG on Primodos, and it is a campaign that I and many other MPs have been working on for the past 12 years. On one occasion, after a big debate, the Minister ordered an expert working group to be set up. The MHRA was supposed to examine the evidence. We the campaigners and Members of Parliament thought that all the documents we had would be looked at by the MHRA, but clearly it did not look at them. The MHRA was supposed to engage with the victims and their families, but they were not spoken to or dealt with properly, and there was no thorough examination.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

In fact, some of the members of the expert working group, which was set up by the Commission on Human Medicines, had connections with pharmaceutical companies. We wanted the MHRA to look at the documents, which showed very clearly that in the 1970s it was accepted by the then Committee on Safety of Medicines that this drug was causing deformities. However, the chief medical officer at the time colluded with the manufacturer, destroyed the evidence and refused to help.

We have documents that show that the manufacturer knew there was a cover-up, and yet the MHRA refused to look at them. Subsequently, Professor Carl Heneghan from Oxford University looked at the same material the EWG had looked at and came to a completely different conclusion: he said the evidence showed that there was a connection. The EWG was asked to look at whether there was a causal connection, and it changed its recommendation again. The former Prime Minister, Mrs May, was also not convinced by the expert working group. We persuaded her to set up a review chaired by Baroness Cumberlege, who said there was avoidable harm and that the victims should be compensated.

Throughout all those years, the Government of the day did not want to communicate with us, and they have not been dealing with this issue properly. They have always relied on the expert working group's report, which has held the victims back and held us back from pursuing a possible legal claim. We say to the Government now that the EWG report needs to be relooked at, and Professor Carl Heneghan's study of it should also be looked at. Scientific evidence has been produced using an experiment on zebrafish which shows that there is a link with this drug, and we have sent this to the Commission on Human Medicines for the Department to look at.

We must remember that this drug is 40 times the strength of the morning after pill. Women were given this pill and told it had no effect other than to see whether they were pregnant, and it then caused this damage. I ask the Minister today, with the new Government now in place, to please relook at this; the report by the EWG, which was set up by the MHRA, has been discredited, so please stop listening to it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

5.39 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for bringing forward this really important debate and for her excellent opening speech, which was very informative. In the interests of time, I will keep my remarks brief.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is tasked with vital work, and we all agree that it is there to protect and promote public health. As a number of Members have set out, it is concerning that despite the MHRA's obvious importance, it clearly faces a number of challenges that need to be addressed. The Cumberlege review highlighted a conflict of interests, because the MHRA relies on fee income from pharmaceutical companies; as the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) said, this is a case of the agency marking its own homework. It is not a great way to set up its funding.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) made a really important point about Brexit, which is the elephant in the room. As with so many parts of our economy, Brexit caused major disruption to the pharmaceutical industry. Among other things, the loss of the prestigious European Medicines Agency from London to Amsterdam damaged trust in the UK's pharmaceutical investment space.

Danny Kruger: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison Bennett: In the interests of time, I will not.

Brexit caused significant confusion for companies looking to sell products from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. It has also slowed down the time in which novel medicines and treatments can be approved for use, as pharmaceutical companies have understandably prioritised obtaining a single approval, allowing access to 27 markets via the EMA.

Meanwhile, strict affordability models imposed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence mean that companies face a further hurdle before their products can reach patients. Again, that diminishes the attractiveness of the UK market post Brexit. To help address this issue, the MHRA introduced the international recognition procedure a year ago to streamline the authorisation process by incorporating assessments from trusted regulatory partners worldwide, including the EMA. However, that relies on those partners having already approved the products, so UK patients will inevitably still have access to medicines later than people in other countries, including EU member states. When I met representatives of Roche Diagnostics, based in Burgess Hill in my constituency, they told me about the industry's serious concerns that the additional GB-specific conformity checks required could be prohibitively expensive and lead to significant delays.

As things stand, the forecast is looking gloomy. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are committed to addressing these issues head-on, and to helping the MHRA become world leading. First, we are pushing to expand the MHRA's capacity by halving the time for treatments to reach patients suffering from illnesses such as cancer. Secondly, we encourage the Government to fully implement the recommendations of the Cumberlege review, including on compensation, corrective surgery and psychological support for those who were failed and who suffered from faulty devices and drugs. Thirdly—this is vital—the Government should actively seek a comprehensive mutual recognition agreement with the EMA to promote faster access to new and novel medicines and medical devices. That would reduce red tape, cost and friction, providing hope for those who need access to these lifesaving and life-enhancing medicines and devices.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

5.43 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on securing this debate, and on

giving Members from across the House the opportunity to raise issues such as Primodos, breast implants, mesh, SSRIs, vaccines and MMR. As a clinician, I have seen patients who have been affected by all these issues, and I know the heartfelt difficulties that they have faced—not only in what has happened to them, but in trying to resolve the problems. It is a testament to her that she has given the House the chance to debate these issues, and I am not sure that the public have ever paid so much attention to a regulator, even in the financial crisis. The MHRA has suddenly become something that people know.

I often used to explain to patients that a regulator should be like a good referee: we should not see them, but they should be there to hold people to account and know the rules. However, modern refereeing is about more than that. A referee has already met the players beforehand, and speaks to the public about how things work. They help to shape the way in which the rules should be interpreted, allowing us to improve the game.

The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) asked who regulates the regulators, and the answer is that this House is accountable. That accountability is key.

What are the functions of the MHRA? They are: to ensure that medicines, medical devices and blood components for transfusion meet applicable standards of safety, quality and efficacy; to secure safe supply chains for medicines, medical devices and blood components; to promote international standardisation and harmonisation to ensure the effectiveness and safety of biological medicines; to educate the public and healthcare professionals about the risks and benefits of medicines, medical devices and blood components, leading to safer and more effective use; and to enable the development of innovation and research that benefit public health.

I welcome the MHRA's new chair, Professor Anthony Harnden, who was appointed at the start of the year. I hope he is listening to this debate, as it will be important for him in setting his priorities. I pay tribute again to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton because, whether or not the MHRA knew this debate was happening, I noticed during my research that all the guidance was updated on the MHRA's website only yesterday. That is testament to the power of this place, even if inadvertently.

The last Government did a lot in this space, particularly focusing on patient safety and access. They introduced new regulations on medical devices, with the classic example being diabetes monitoring, but they also set out to attract innovation. Their reforms have helped to make the UK an attractive market for medical technologies. I am pleased that both sides of the House agree that this is a great place for the UK to find growth.

These developments were based on a consultation-led approach, following the changes we have had since 2021, when there was a consultation on the future regulation of medical devices. This led to a proportionate and phased approach that minimises supply disruptions and supports system readiness.

Under the last Government, a road map for implementation was set out on 9 January 2024. Again, I am pleased to see that the current Government updated the road map in December. This has the regulatory aims of adapting new technologies, strengthening patient safety and providing clarity for manufacturers that are trying to bring products to market.

All these significant changes try to balance medical technology advances, market capture, patient access, affordability and clinical outcomes. However, as we have heard in this debate, this is all well and good, but "perception versus reality" comes to mind. We arguably have one of the best regulatory regimes in the world and, post Brexit, there is a real opportunity to lead the way. Counter to what the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), said, it is because of Brexit that we were able to regulate around our vaccines.

As has been said today, there are still serious concerns about the system, surveillance and resources, given the medical tech boom. This is a wide debate, so I will focus my remarks on three areas: the current medical market, the emerging medical market, and communications with the public, perceptions and beliefs.

When it comes to the system for current medications, we need only consider what we heard earlier about SSRIs, and particularly their impact on sexual dysfunction —I happen to have that casework on my desk at the moment. Do the Government believe that the yellow card system works, or will they consider a review?

When it comes to emerging markets, we have to remember that the MHRA has a statutory role not only in regulating but in the advertising and promotion of medicines in the UK. We have seen thousands of online adverts for weight-loss injections, such as Ozempic. *The Times* found approximately 6,500 adverts that mention GLP-1 on Meta's ad library between January 2022 and the end of June 2024. And Sky has reported that, according to Simple Online Pharmacy, which has access to wholesale figures, 500,000 people in the UK are currently using things like Wegovy.

I would be grateful if the Government could set out what support they are offering the MHRA to ensure that it can fulfil its roles and functions properly, given that it has to manage promotion, safety and supply in all these areas. Are there any plans to review whether the MHRA is able to meet these conditions in a changing medical world?

Finally, and most importantly, if I were to be critical of the MHRA, I would say that the key thing missing on the list of objectives, as set out by the new chair, is communication. Let me finish where I started: a regulator has never been more in the public eye. As a clinician, I know how difficult it is to wade through complex medical data that is both conflicting and opaque. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton pointed out, freedom of information requests and transparency are key to our understanding of this area. Will the Government look to review how the MHRA interacts with the public, how it communicates with grassroots professionals, and what it can do to explain the hugely important work that it does?

To conclude, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) pointed out, this is all about trust. I think it was Reagan who said, "Trust, but verify". That seems particularly apt for this debate—for that is the role of a regulator, but it is also the role of the Government and the public. We must build a regulatory system that all can trust, and do so inherently, but that is also easily verifiable at any point. If we can achieve that, we can build a trusted ecosystem that is good for innovation, good for the economy, and, most importantly, good for the people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Minister.

5.50 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on securing this debate and thank her and all those who have spoken for their contributions. We have heard some powerful stories of failure as well as some useful experiences. I have to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher), the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) and the shadow Minister for sharing their expertise. I have heard many of these stories before in my 10 years in this place. Sadly, I have also had a constituent who shared her experiences with me, for which I am grateful. Frankly, those experiences shocked me and my staff.

I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan), for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) and many others who have brought their experiences to this place, shining a light on the issues. It is right for us to debate this matter. Six months into the job and I am still learning, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I am grateful for being able to take part in this debate.

I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) that I cannot answer everything, and I am glad that he recognised that. The right hon. Member for Tatton has focused my mind, for which I am very grateful. If I do not do justice to the points that have been raised, I will write to Members about specific things. I am meeting representatives from the MHRA and will be very clear about our expectations. It is absolutely the role of Parliament to be the ultimate monitor of its work.

The MHRA plays a vital role in fulfilling the Government's health mission: balancing its responsibilities to maintain product safety and championing innovation. I will, if I may, be clear about the role of an enabler. It is about enabling innovative products to reach patients without compromising patient safety and without unnecessary delay.

It is thanks to vaccines and medicines such as antibiotics and modern surgical procedures that we are living longer, healthier, and more active lives. No medical product is completely free of risk; the main objective of the safety monitoring process is to identify any new risks that may emerge. When that happens, the MHRA must take its responsibility seriously, rigorously and transparently when balancing population risks and benefits of each medical product, taking prompt and decisive action whenever that is needed.

On supporting safety, the MHRA recognises the need constantly to seek to improve its safety monitoring systems to deliver better results for people. Recent improvements include implementing the new Safety Connect IT system, following recommendations from the Cumberlege Review. This IT system will improve the efficiency of reporting and processing of yellow card reports, much of which we have heard about today, supporting the prompt identification and assessment of new safety concerns.

In addition, the MHRA makes use of real-world data via the clinical practice research datalink, which collects anonymised patient data from a network of GP practices, across the UK, encompassing data from 60 million patients, including 18 million currently registered patients.

The MHRA has recently launched a pilot, in partnership with Genomics England, to create a rich source of genetic information to investigate the role of genetic pre-disposition in the development of serious adverse drug reactions. The aim is to establish a yellow card biobank to reduce the number of harmful side effects caused by medicines—a step towards personalised prescribing.

The Cumberlege review also highlighted the need to improve the regulation of implantable medical devices. In November last year, the Government introduced new regulations to strengthen the requirements for manufacturers to proactively monitor and report on medical devices once they are on the market, which was noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South.

We plan to lay further reforms before Parliament this year, including unique device identifiers and implant cards to improve the traceability of implanted devices, as well as increasing the classification of devices to ensure that they receive the highest scrutiny throughout their lifetime. Finally, the MHRA has made some progress in response to the wider set of recommendations set out in Baroness Cumberlege's report. It listened carefully to the people who gave evidence and to the review's findings, and is committed to bring about those changes. It is our job to ensure that that happens.

The yellow card scheme provides the backbone of our safety monitoring system. The scheme relies on voluntarily reporting from patients, parents, caregivers and healthcare professionals. The MHRA also collects reports of suspected safety concerns involving defective, falsified or fake healthcare products. Last year, it assessed more than 118,000 reports, and identified 134 safety signals, but I take onboard the comments made today. When safety signals lead to confirmed risks, the MHRA can introduce specific risk minimisation measures, such as introducing particular warnings about the risk of side effects in the product information, restricting the use of the medicine or medical device, or suspending or removing the medicine or device from the market. The MHRA will continue to proactively encourage the reporting of adverse effects through improvements such as those within the new Safety Connect system, and will ensure that there are better connections between clinical systems, working with the wider healthcare system.

The MHRA recognises that there have been delays in some of the regulatory services that it provides, including licence applications for innovative and generic medicines, variations to licences, and inspections of manufacturing and laboratory premises. Since September 2024, all new applications for marketing authorisations of established medicines are being assessed within expected timescales. That element is therefore improving, but we will keep a close eye on it.

I reiterate my thanks to the right hon. Member for Tatton. This has been an informative and, bizarrely, a wide-ranging but focused debate. Trust is really important. Patients have to be at the heart of our work, and that of the MHRA. Patient safety is the foremost priority. The MHRA is continuing to work on improving engagement and involving patients in decision making throughout the life cycle of the products that it regulates. It will continue to work to facilitate patient access to new medicines and medical devices, in collaboration with health system partners across the UK. The regulator

maintains its focus on continuous improvement, and has implemented new ways of working to maximise productivity in ways that put patients and public health outcomes first. I take the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), that communication around that is key.

The MHRA has turned around performance on clinical trials and is on track to deliver all regulatory services within statutory timelines by the end of March 2025. Later this year, as part of its programme of reform, we will introduce new point of care manufacturing legislation that will make the MHRA the first regulator in the world to introduce a tailored framework for innovative manufacturing methods, taking the manufacture and supply of medicines to patients. It is truly an exciting development, and I pay tribute to those involved.

The process for recruiting the new chief executive is well under way. We welcome Professor Anthony Harnden. His strategic focus is on helping the organisation to protect patient safety through robust surveillance systems, embracing risk-proportionate regulation and fostering an inclusive workplace where people flourish. Without putting him on the spot, we should think about organising a parliamentary event of some sort to bring people together to discuss matters with the MHRA and build that trust. I am pleased to support its work. It is internationally recognised as a regulator. We want to do better. The Government will ensure that the MHRA is better.

5.58 pm

Esther McVey: I thank all Members who have stayed late to speak today, many of them recounting the deeply moving and harrowing experiences of their constituents. All contributions reinforced the failings of the MHRA. In fact, listening to Members, the verdict on the MHRA is guilty as charged, confirming that it is in need of substantial reform. I feel sure that the Minister will ensure that that reform starts here and now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) continues to need substantial reform, as recognised by the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review (IMMDS), with patient safety concerns persisting and exacerbating since the review's publication in 2020; believes that the MHRA's 2017 expert working group report on Primodos was deeply flawed, with IMMDS later concluding the drug had caused avoidable harm; further notes that the yellow card system for reporting suspected adverse drug reactions is failing, with no process for following up on serious or fatal reactions and conflicts of interest, with 75% of the MHRA's funding being derived from industry fees, a concern raised in the Fourth Report of Session 2004-05 of the Health Committee, The Influence of the Pharmaceutical Industry, HC 42-I, published on 5 April 2005; also notes the MHRA's delayed response to reports of myocarditis, pericarditis and vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopaenia following covid-19 vaccination, despite action from regulators in other countries; and calls on the Government to fully implement the recommendations in the IMMDS review and to acknowledge the harm done to patients and the financial burden on the healthcare system as a result of the MHRA's widespread regulatory failures.

UK Air Defence

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mark Tami.)*

5.59 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [R]: I am grateful for this opportunity and declare my interests as a reservist, the father of two servicewomen and the brother of a serving admiral.

Among the many issues that should be keeping Ministers awake at night are two tech-based conundrums that particularly worry me. One is future access to critical minerals and their products, which I have spoken about in the past. The other related issue is the patchy nature of the protection of these islands against missiles and drones. That is what I want to raise this evening.

Everything costs, and it is easy when one is not in government to wish the ends without the means. At the moment, defence is spread too thinly and what I am suggesting would spread it even more thinly. Whether the UK should be globally deployable or focus on the defence of the homeland and its Euro-Atlantic neighbourhood is moot. The likelihood is that we will soldier on, make do and mend—we always have. But the scene is set for the biggest retrenchment since Suez. I wish it were otherwise, but it falls to this Government to make the call. Their attempted unforced surrender of the Chagos islands is perhaps an indication of where their thinking lies.

In 1963, the 35th US President told his National Security Council that European NATO members were not paying their fair share. John F. Kennedy said,

> "We have been very generous to Europe and it is now time for us to look out for ourselves".

On Monday, the 45th and 47th President will likely be saying the same thing. Clearly, American frustration with Europe enjoying the insurance policy without paying the premium is nothing new. What is new is the American willingness to strong-arm Europe into changing its ways. Forget 2% or 2.5%—Trump says he wants 5% of GDP spent on defence by all NATO members, and here is the kicker: he wants a 20% tariff on all goods imported to the US. Combine the two and it is not a stretch to imagine him slapping tariffs on European goods unless Europeans step up to the plate.

Ultimately, the single most important reason Trump can do what we fear he is about to do is that America is no longer principally competing with Europe's proximate threat—Russia. A vast but thinly populated nation of 144 million, a busted economy and a military whose weaknesses have been generously displayed for all to see since February 2022 is not perceived by Washington as a main threat. An America emerging from the 9/11 Bush counter-terrorism era is back to facing off with great powers once again, but the great power is not Russia; it is China.

As the US pivots, European states of all sizes must step up to defend their homeland and safeguard the north Atlantic. There are no free passes. Israel is a small state, but its military capabilities are unmatched in the middle east. Its layered missile defence systems—the famous Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow—and its formidable fleet of aircraft demonstrate how small states, with a little help from their friends, can punch way

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

above their weight. Several of those small states will provide the first line of defence against Putin's Russia. The bulk of the cruise, ballistic and hypersonic missiles that Putin would fire at Britain as a proxy for the US will be intercepted by existing defence systems and fighter aircraft stationed in the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Poland.

While our geography, as so often in our history, gives strategic depth and protection from long-range attack, we can have less confidence in dealing with proximate threats from sea and subsea platforms and with threats to deployed and overseas assets, such as Cyprus, that fall well within the scope of short-range missiles and drones from Russia, Iran and their proxies. In any event, some missiles directed at the homeland would get through in the event of a full-on attack right now by the Russian Federation. That has been our blind spot.

The public would expect that missiles evading the first line of integrated missile defence would be destroyed closer to their target. The Type 45-mounted Sea Viper and the ground-based Sky Sabre are exquisite examples of air and missile defence systems, but there are simply not enough of them—not enough missiles ready to go and not enough industrial capacity to enable resilience in anything more than the very short term. Russia's war on Ukraine has helpfully made us alive to our vulnerability. Russia, as we have seen in Ukraine and throughout its history, is capable of taking long-term pain in a way that it seems unlikely we would. As things stand, the capital is particularly vulnerable to Russian missile attack, unless we park all our Type 45s—those that are operational—on the Thames.

Happily, unlike Israel and Ukraine, we are surrounded by friends. It makes sense to be a full part of, and a contributor to, NATO integrated air and missile defence, but European IAMD, and its suppression and destruction of enemy air defence systems, are currently completely reliant on the US. In any event, the suspicion is that a full-on attack by Russia right now would find too many holes in the patchy architecture that has evolved to protect against missiles.

Germany has recognised that threat; it has owned the consequences of doing nothing. It has established the European Sky Shield initiative, and has begun procuring trusted systems such as Patriot and Arrow 3. The UK has been considering joining ESSI. Where are we with that? What about off-the-shelf systems such as Arrow 3?

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for that point. It is interesting that the Arrow 3 project he mentions is a joint project between Boeing in America and the Israeli defence machinery. Is there something in the innovation offered by Patria, a Finnish company, which is offering to help us build armoured vehicles here in Britain but based on its design? Do we need less of a reliance on domestic systems and to consider, as he says, off-the-shelf systems from elsewhere?

Dr Murrison: There is a great deal in what my hon. Friend says. Historically, buying off the shelf has proved to be somewhat more cost-effective than designing exquisite systems of our own. I hope very much that, as we go further into this process, we can partner with others to ensure that what we buy is both integrated and cost-effective. I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on ESSI.

Ukraine has shown the limitations of the "just in time, not just in case" policy that has driven our failure to stockpile the materiel of war in recent decades. In the 1930s, the shadow factories initiative fitted commercial premises that typically produced cars for reconfiguration as armament factories, in case the need should arise, which it did. Car workers would switch to become the basis of the skilled workforce necessary to create materiel for prosecuting the war effort. That then happened, to the point that in 1940, this country was outstripping Germany in the production of fighter aircraft. With every respect due to the Few, the Battle of Britain was won in Britain's factories and on its production lines as much as in the skies. Victory hinges just as much on logistics now, except the timelines are far shorter. The defence ecosystem in the US 2022 national defence strategy had more than a whiff of the 1930s in advancing an intertwined commercial-military co-operative.

In a good light, we can see shadow factories in the thematic approach to missile defence taken by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory missile defence centre. Crucially, it is industry partner-based, with a heavy focus on growing suitably qualified and experienced people, of whom we are desperately short. The MDC is now 20 years old. What assessment has the Minister made of it, and what changes does he propose to its structure and remit to help plug holes in our missile defence architecture? In the light of prevailing circumstances, will he consider upgrading the MDC so that it has the salience and clout approaching that of the pre-war directorate of aeronautical production? Then, it was Spitfires and Hurricanes; today it is missile defence, SDEAD—suppression and destruction of enemy air defences—and drones. Then, it was preparation for the total war to come; now—God willing—it is deterrence.

There are those who say that the solution to our vulnerability to missile attack from the east is simple: it is Israel's Iron Dome—the close-in element of the layered missile defence system used successfully to thwart Iran in April. However, Israel is a small country with a small population concentrated in a small number of cities with limited critical national infrastructure. It is surrounded by hostiles. Happily, none of that applies here.

Our missile defence must be fully integrated with NATO partners. NATO needs European leadership as the US pivots, and we must not encourage those whose primary interest in defence lies in extending the remit of the institutions of the European Union, rather than the defence and security of Europeans. We do not need the distraction of a separate, competing EU defence architecture; NATO is our strength and our stay, and we must use our status as the continent's leading military power to ensure it remains so. In particular, we must articulate clearly the case for layered missile defence and SDEAD within a NATO construct, as the US pivots towards the Indo-Pacific. The UK and Europe need NATO integrated air and missile defence that incorporates close-in systems to guarantee major centres of population, defence assets and critical national infrastructure. Crucially, member states must not give an aggressor capable of waging an attritional war grounds for believing that the west will exhaust its ordnance in the first few hours or days.

Where are we with the versatile and scalable very short to medium-range modular ground-based air defence system envisaged by NATO Defence Ministers at their meeting in October 2020? What application might that system have to provide the last arrow in our quiver—one that will destroy missiles that have evaded intermediate layers and are about to land on critical sites in the UK? For a country with no money, directed energy weapons offer a potential solution for dealing with drones and missiles, albeit in line of sight and in good weather. Is DSTL's DragonFire weapon still on course for service with the Royal Navy in 2027, and what export opportunities are Ministers exploring? Do they expect that Type 26s, Type 31s, and any Type 32s will carry DragonFire or successor directed energy weapons? Will they be fitted as standard, or as expensive retrofits?

Do we really need a sixth-generation manned—or even hybrid—fast jet to replace Typhoon? Would it not be better to rely on the F-35 airframe with mid-life upgrades in a future that is surely progressively unmanned? The lineal, if less romantic, descendants of the Few will be tech geeks, gamers, coders and those who provide a human interface with artificial intelligence. What are we doing to grow them, and will the Minister visit the #TechTrowbridge initiative that I started in Wiltshire's county town, which was once a centre for Spitfire manufacture? He would be warmly welcomed on his way to his constituency.

The reason that a grisly artillery war has played out in Ukraine is because nobody has been able to command the airspace. Happily and to our surprise, Russia has been unable to suppress or destroy Ukraine's air defences. In the future, unmanned combat aerial vehicles configured to shoot the archer, not the arrow, will do that. I would be very surprised if Lord Robertson were not casting a critical eye over the global combat air programme, and comparing and contrasting its cost and effectiveness with those of unmanned combat aerial vehicles.

I appreciate the deep cultural difficulty of envisaging an unmanned future battlespace. It is deeply unsettling for those of us steeped in the traditions of the armed forces, but while there will always be a need for sufficient booted and spurred combat troops ready to close with and kill the enemy and hold the ground—as the Member of Parliament for a garrison town, I am not for one moment suggesting a further reduction in headcount—this country will never again be able to expose itself to attritional warfare of the sort we are seeing being played out in Ukraine. Politically and societally, that would be impossible and unconscionable. That means integrated missile defence, SDEAD, drones, and command of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Once again at a dreadnought crossroads, Britain must configure the forces at its disposal for the long term in all domains and take a lead as what is still the principal military power in its Euro-Atlantic voisinage. Early pointers suggesting that this Government are taking the right fork in the road would include difficult and unpopular decisions such as standing firm on the deep space advanced radar capability envisaged for Cawdor barracks on the St David's peninsula, which was bottled by previous Governments. As we chop to an unmanned future, those pointers would—for example, and very painfully—include consignment of the RAF Red Arrows aero-acrobatics team to the historic flight.

This Government have four years left to run—the time the directorate of aeronautical production had to fit out this country with what it needed to prevail. Recent events have revealed the fundamental truth that we are vulnerable now, as we were then, and the shifting geopolitical plates will likely make us more so. The public will never forgive an Administration of whatever colour who muddle through, leaving them open to the predations of Putin's advancing missile programme.

6.15 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I thank the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for calling this debate and for the seriousness with which he has approached it. I share his general analysis of the context that we live in more difficult, unsettled and challenging times. That is the reason why, on coming into office, the Prime Minister commissioned Lord Robertson to begin the strategic defence review to look at our capabilities and to set those against the threats we are facing as a country. I will return to some of those areas, and indeed to the questions the right hon. Gentleman asked.

There is a real challenge when it comes to integrated air missile defence, the threats from drones and the threats from one-way effectors and long-range strike, as we have seen every single day in Ukraine, with its brave people being on the receiving end of onslaughts from Putin's illegal invasion. Those are the lessons we are seeking to learn in the strategic defence review to make sure not only that we can support our friends in Ukraine with the equipment they need, but that we can adapt our own ways of war fighting and defending to deter aggression if at all possible, and to defeat it if necessary.

The right hon. Gentleman has raised a number of issues, and I will come on to those in my remarks if I can, but I am sure he will keep me honest if I have missed any by the time I reach the end of my response to him. His analysis of the context of the political challenges in this debate is certainly true. When he was a Defence Minister and I was on the Opposition Benches, the current Defence Secretary and I made that argument. Having heard from the Government Dispatch Box that defence had been hollowed out and underfunded, we argued that we needed a different approach.

I do not like the approach the right hon. Gentleman mentioned of having to "make do and mend—we always have". I recognise it, but I do not think we should accept it, especially in more difficult times. Precisely because of that, the SDR needs to be bold, and that is in effect the remit given to Lord Robertson, Fiona Hill and Richard Barrons by the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that it falls to this Government to make those decisions, and we have already made a number of decisions about retiring old platforms. That is sometimes difficult, and he raises the interesting challenge of how we renew technologies without offending or upsetting the established norms. As an example, Watchkeeper, a 14-year-old drone system used by the British Army, has been retired because it cannot keep pace with the modern challenges of electronic warfare jamming and other things we would be asking it to do if it were to be deployed on a frontline. That is certainly something we feel incredibly strongly about.

[Luke Pollard]

I have just returned from the E5 Defence Ministers meeting in Warsaw in Poland, and it is clear to me that our NATO allies are all taking integrated air and missile defence seriously. If we look at the experiences of the nations on NATO's eastern flank—particularly Poland and the Baltic states, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned—we are seeing very real concern about protection of their airspace. Protection is being built up through what they are seeking to procure and the support they are asking for from allies in providing a protective bubble over their countries. Britain's island geography may have deterred aggressors throughout much of our history, but it is no shield against sophisticated weapons and modern air warfare, and for that reason the SDR has been commissioned.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. From the discussions the Minister had at the E5 conference, does he think our allies are confident that we are playing our part in air defence?

Luke Pollard: I thank my fellow Devon MP for that question. He will be able to read the joint statement by the UK, Italy, France, Germany and Poland when it is published on the Ministry of Defence website on the conference's conclusion. I made the point clearly in the press conference afterwards that the UK is calling on all NATO partners to increase their defence spending. We have a plan to increase our defence spending from 2.3% to 2.5%. Where any increased defence spending goes matters, because it needs not only to deter aggression, but to defeat it and—perhaps most importantly and relevant to this debate—to be interoperable with our allies. We need to ensure that any investment in defence has an increase in our deployability and our lethality as we fight together. It is the assumption of this Government, with a declared NATO-first policy, that we will be supporting our NATO allies in any defensive measures. That is the reason we have the British Army in Estonia with Operation Cabrit. It is the reason we have NATO air policing in a variety of states along NATO's eastern flank.

Integrated air and missile defence is an area that all NATO members need to develop. There is not one answer that everyone has reached for yet. It is a difficult, wicked problem that requires investment and a change in strategy. That is part of the reason why that is being addressed by the SDR. That is a long answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, but I hope it provides him with the clarity he needs.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): The Minister represents a city and a football club that are close to my heart. I also thank the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for bringing forward this important debate. I am heartened to hear that the Minister views the interoperability of our workforce and our assets alongside our NATO allies. Do the Government view the defence of UK airspace not singularly but, as I do, as the western front of European air defence?

Luke Pollard: I would certainly be happy afterwards to take up any discussion about Plymouth Argyle and a post Wayne Rooney world.

It is certainly true that the United Kingdom's commitment to NATO is not just in securing a northern and western flank and dealing with the north Atlantic and the high north; we also have responsibilities to our NATO allies on the eastern and southern flanks. Part of the challenge we have with integrated air and missile defence and the threats that the UK and our allies face is that the definitions of what are the close and the deep have fundamentally changed, because of the experience of the Ukraine war. I recognise that there are Members in this House and this debate who served in our armed forces, and they will be familiar with the broad definitions of close and deep.

It is certainly true that what we previously regarded as close and deep have fundamentally changed. The distances have increased enormously. We are seeing that in Ukraine, and that means we have to re-imagine and re-define the strategies and capabilities we need to be able to operate in those environments. Having the ability to project power and fire at distance is one reason that we have supported Ukraine with so many weapons systems. It is also the reason why the SDR is looking in particular at this area and how any forces and capabilities can meet the threat we are facing. In that respect, I hope that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) understands that the SDR will address many of the answers to his broad question. Our responsibilities are more than just securing the UK homeland; they are about supporting our allies, and indeed it is our allies' role to support not only their own country, but their NATO partners, including the UK.

The threats posed to our security continue to proliferate and converge. With technologies rapidly developing, protecting Britain and our allies from attacks becomes ever more complex and challenging. Let me be absolutely clear: adversaries must be in no doubt that the UK possesses formidable capabilities contributing to our integrated air and missile defence, along with the will and the intent to protect the UK and our allies. We have Typhoon aircraft on alert 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. I am sure that the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire has seen the quick reaction aircraft, as I have, operating out of RAF Lossiemouth and seen the incredible speed, dedication and professionalism of our teams there responding to threats approaching the United Kingdom. Our radar at Fylingdales provides continuous early warning against ballistic missiles, and the Royal Navy proved the effectiveness of the Type 45 destroyer against different air threats in the recent operations in the Red sea in particular. That included shooting down drones similar to those used by Russia against Ukraine.

In relation to the specifics of our capabilities, I have had the privilege of visiting UK forces stationed forward in Poland using the Sky Sabre system, supporting the NATO logistics hub that supports so much of what we provide to Ukraine. Operation Stifftail has now concluded, and that mission has been a success. I thank all those members of the Royal Artillery in particular who supported that mission.

The Sky Sabre system that was in Poland has been returned to the UK and is being reconstituted. The Sky Sabre system that we have in the Falklands provides continuous air defence to the islands, protecting the sovereignty of the Falkland islands. Having seen that system up close and personal on my recent visit to the Falklands, I thank those members of our armed forces

protecting the skies above the Falklands. We will need to ensure that integrated air missile defence is more than just a bubble over Poland and protection of the Falklands.

I think that is at the heart of what the right hon. Gentleman is seeking to raise in the debate. It is also one of the challenges that the strategic defence review seeks to answer. I will not steal Lord Robertson's sandwiches in terms of what I expect to see in the strategic defence review, but certainly enhancing our capabilities to meet threats is one of the core challenges of the SDR, and I would expect him and his review team to be making recommendations about how that should be done in the SDR when it is published in the spring. The right hon. Gentleman will also know that the time on the path to get to 2.5% of GDP being spent on defence will also be published in the spring. Hopefully, that will enable us to look at those two parts together to ensure that we are, in his words, meeting the challenge of stepping up. I agree that there are no free passes, and as a nation we have relied on our strategic depth for a great many years, but we cannot rely on that alone today. That is why our capabilities need to match that challenge.

Our NATO-first approach means ensuring that we deliver not only on the article 3 responsibilities in the NATO treaty to protect our own homeland, but on article 5 and be able to support our NATO allies. That is why we will continue to support our deployments around the NATO area of operations.

As a country, we are leading the way with initiatives such as DIAMOND—delivering integrated air and missile operational networked defences—which will improve air defence integration across Europe and strengthen NATO's air and missile protection. The UK has also launched the NATO multinational procurement initiative on missile capabilities, which is a catalyst to mobilise the Euro-Atlantic defence industry in support of Ukraine and address the burgeoning security threat to NATO members as well.

We are also forging deeper relations with individual European partners. Hon. Members may have seen the landmark Trinity House agreement signed between the United Kingdom and Germany, which will see us turbocharge a series of major projects across air, land and sea, working in partnership to strengthen air defences and better protect European airspace. We are also working more closely with France, with our most recently signing a letter of intent for the European long-range strike approach—the ELSA initiative—at France's request. Such initiatives demonstrate our determination to support Ukraine, counter the threat posed by Putin and reconnect Britain internationally.

I realise that I have not got to every one of the right hon. Gentleman's points, but if he will forgive me, I will write to him and place a letter in the House so that all Members can be certain of these matters. Let me be absolutely clear that I look forward to seeing the strategic defence review published and having it as not only Labour's defence policy, but supported on a cross-party basis as Britain's defence policy, to secure our nation, our values and our allies in more uncertain times.

Question put and agreed to.

6.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 January 2025

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Marine Renewables Industry

1.30 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the marine renewables industry.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the allocation of time for this important and, as we head towards allocation round 7, timely debate. I hope that we will be able to influence some of the Minister's thinking. It is good to welcome him to his place in the Chamber.

It is also good to welcome you to the Chair for the first time, Ms Jardine. You and I have known each other for many years, and I anticipate—I might yet be shown to be horribly wrong about this—that the next few hours may witness the longest I have ever been able to speak in your presence without interruption. *[Laughter.]* I should also place on the record that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) is celebrating a significant birthday today. What better way to celebrate the acquisition of a bus pass than an afternoon spent in Westminster Hall?

This debate is particularly timely. As well as coming in the run-up to AR7, we anticipate in the next few weeks the publication of a fairly comprehensive piece of work by one of Scotland's finest universities, the University of Edinburgh. Its school of engineering is about to publish a report on the future economic potential of tidal stream and wave energy in Scotland. I will not spike the release of the report, but it is an enormously significant piece of work, which will significantly progress the debate as we head towards AR7.

Among the headlines from that report may be an indication of the potential of tidal stream and wave energy in Scotland and across the whole United Kingdom. Marine energy could contribute £37 billion gross value added to Scotland's economy by 2050, and £28 billion of that, most significantly, is from exports. When the Minister speaks to colleagues in Government about the opportunities to grow our manufacturing base, contribute to the economic growth to which we are all committed and, as a consequence, improve export performance, this is the direction in which he might want to point them. Marine energy has the potential to create 62,400 jobs—to put that in context, the wind industry currently supports in the region of 20,000 jobs—and we have the potential in Scottish waters alone to deploy 9 GW of tidal stream and wave energy by 2050.

The opportunities for tidal stream generation come from the fact that as a brand-new industry—how often do we get to say that?—we can shape the supply chain and then export the expertise and products from that supply chain around the world. Tidal stream is not unique to Scotland or the United Kingdom; when we show that it can be done here, others will want to do it in other parts of the world. Devices that are currently in the water have produced a UK supply chain input in the region of 80%. Not many technologies are in a position to make that boast.

The vibe in the industry, if I can put it like that, is fairly positive and upbeat: there are opportunities coming down the road. However, this "overnight success" has been at least 20 years in the making. It has been a long march, and progress is never linear. We have had false dawns and disappointments, but in the last few years it has been demonstrated beyond any measure of doubt that obvious and visible demonstrations of Government support make a real difference in getting this industry towards the point of commercialisation and the opportunities that that will bring.

At the time of the fourth allocation round, the then Government committed to the first ringfenced pot for tidal stream generation. That had a massive impact, not just as a consequence of the opportunity that it provided, but as a signal that the technology was taken seriously by Government and was being given opportunity and support from Government. It is to that series of signals that we now need to look, because although we have made significant progress, we are not yet at the point of commercialisation. We do need to do a little bit more in order to get there happily.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need to give leadership and clarity to the tidal sector, including by explaining whether the criteria for well-developed tidal range proposals published by the last Government are being taken forward by the current Government, so that projects like the Wyre tidal barrage in my constituency will be better informed when going forward with their proposals?

Mr Carmichael: I do agree. I suspect that I do not have as much expertise as the hon. Lady in tidal barrage—or whatever we are calling it these days. Most of the interest I have developed over the years is in tidal stream, but there is never going to be a single technology or a single silver bullet here; there has to be an opportunity for all the different technologies to contribute. The USP of tidal energy, however we capture it, is of course its predictability, so it can contribute to baseload. I will discuss later how the industry is able to engage with Government, because there are parallels to be drawn with what has been done in the past for the oil and gas industry, which might now be done for renewables, particularly marine renewables.

I shall first dwell briefly on the progress we have made thus far. Orbital Marine Power, for example, now deploys the world's most powerful tidal turbine—in Orkney, obviously. It is estimated that that device, manufactured in Dundee, has on its own created something in the region of 80 full-time equivalent jobs across the United Kingdom. Since its incorporation, Orbital has raised and deployed £84 million of capital. It won two contracts for difference in round 5, totalling £7.2 million, on top of the £7.4 million that it had been awarded in AR4. It is expected that the first power from these contracts will be collected in 2026. These are serious companies doing serious business. This is no longer a sort of aspirational, slightly hippy niche subject; these are serious businesses that require serious attention from Government and regulators.

[Mr Carmichael]

Nova Innovation, which operates in Shetland, as it happens—I am told other island groups are available—installed the world's first offshore tidal array in Bluemull sound between Yell and Unst in Shetland. It has six two-bladed horizontal axis tidal stream turbines and is the largest array yet deployed. In AR6, Nova secured three 15-year contracts totalling 6 MW of tidal energy capacity. As a consequence of the last allocation round, the UK is on track to have in excess of 130 MW deployed by 2029. Nova is also involved in floating solar developments, and it is estimated that floating solar has the potential to produce 9.343 TWh in the future. That is the scale of the opportunity that presents itself.

The real catalyst of this serious and determined progress was the setting up in 2003 of the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney, a body that had its roots in a report of the Science and Technology Committee of this House, which was taken up and driven by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and then the Scottish Executive. I pay tribute to my predecessor in this House, Lord Wallace of Tankerness, who as Deputy First Minister of Scotland saw the opportunity, got the resource and the political drive behind it, and set up EMEC, which is the facility for demonstrating and testing wave and tidal devices.

EMEC's operations since 2003 have contributed £370 million GVA to the UK economy. EMEC's success is due in no small measure to Neil Kermode, its director since 2005. I am not going to turn around because he is in the Gallery and I know that he will be staring daggers at me for singling him out, but Neil's contribution to the success of that institution must not be underestimated, as it shows the difference that one person in the right place at the right time can make.

Another significant driver of progress in Orkney is Heriot-Watt University's campus there, the International Centre for Island Technology. In recent years, its postgraduate taught courses in renewables have grown a skills base at postgraduate level which has been an important part of driving the progress we have seen. We cannot make progress without skilled people; we can get in all the investment we like, but it will only take us so far if we do not have people who are capable of using and developing it. Despite that, in 2019, the Scottish Funding Council grant scheme that had supported the tuition for these postgraduate taught courses ended. That has precipitated a fall in student numbers.

Although this issue is principally within the Scottish Government's remit, I want to put it on the Minister's radar, because if achieving development and deployment goals is part of UK Government policy, there must be a means of finding UK Government money for these courses. Whether it is done by sponsorship of places or some other means, the cost of 20 students a year at £9,200 each would be £920,000 over a five-year period. Think about that in the context of the numbers that I have spoken about—the potential that the sector adds to the UK economy. If we do not make this investment now, we will be penny wise but pound foolish.

I have some key asks of the Government as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on marine energy, in consultation with the Marine Energy Council, Scottish Renewables and RenewableUK. The most important thing, as we head towards allocation round 7, is an increase in the ringfenced budget for marine energy. The last three consecutive ringfences for tidal stream through contracts for difference have delivered an unprecedented deployment pipeline, but the last round saw a fall in the contracted amount at a point where we really needed to build momentum for the sector. I am told by those in the industry that there is sufficient eligible capacity to ensure that there would be competition for a ringfence set at that level. Scottish Renewables and the Marine Energy Council believe that the UK Government should set a £30 million ringfence for tidal and a £5 million ringfence for wave energy in this year's round—a round, incidentally, that they described to me as "crucial".

We also look to the Government to enable support for marine energy through GB Energy and the national wealth fund. High capital costs and unconventional risk profiles are hindering some of the progress in securing adequate finance for a move towards large-scale commercial construction. GB Energy and the national wealth fund could accelerate deployment of, and embed UK content in, marine energy projects. They could provide finance under commercial terms for viable projects that have secured a CfD. That is not asking them to make a particularly risky investment, but it would allow them to bring to final investment decision, and thus construction, some of those projects in this parliamentary term.

The third ask is to provide a voice for marine energy with a marine energy taskforce, which brings me back to my answer to the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers). In addition to supporting investment, both the Scottish and UK Governments have an important role to play in bringing key stakeholders together. Again, it is about sending signals. Scottish Renewables and the Marine Energy Council believe that the UK Government should establish that energy taskforce to develop a strategic road map, to tackle barriers to deployment, to secure investment, to increase innovation funding and to deliver value for money.

When I was in government, we set up a body for the oil and gas industry called PILOT. It was essentially the forum in which all the various majors, and those with any production interests in the UK continental shelf, could sit down and inform Government on the progress of their industry, and on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. That was a formal body, so that there was a degree of transparency associated with it. If PILOT could be set up for the oil and gas industry in the past, a similar body for marine renewables would be a particularly positive development. Again, it is about sending signals to the markets to give them the confidence to make the necessary investment.

We are looking for the Scottish Government—this is obviously not a point for the Minister—to prioritise marine energy in their energy strategy; for the Minister to speak to his colleagues in other Departments as we get the industrial strategy; and for both Governments to set bolder targets, which we believe would boost investor confidence. These asks do not come with particularly large price tags attached. The CfD levels would of course be a significant increase, but that is money that is already there and accounted for. Everything else is essentially about sending signals. We saw at the time of the creation of the first ringfence, at AR4, that sending these signals can be an enormously significant catalyst for investment.

There are a couple of issues that I want to put on the Minister's radar. They do not necessarily fall under his portfolio, but I know that Ministers talk to each other. First, as the deployment of marine renewables and offshore wind continues to develop apace, there has to be some mechanism for holding the ring between renewables and other users of the sea and the seabed. The Minister knows that I have big concerns about the role that has been given to the Crown Estate Commission as owners of the seabed. I would like to think that the commission would be a body that could hold the ring, as it owns and licenses the use of the seabed, but experience tells me that it does not always work out like that. If we give the powers to the Crown Estate Commission that are anticipated in the Crown Estate Bill, which is going through the House, while retaining the obligation on it as a primary duty to maximise return to the estate, then there could be an issue. To be successful, we have to be able to bring island and coastal communities along with us, otherwise this becomes another thing that is done to those communities, rather than something in which they feel they have a role.

Finally, if we are going to deploy more resource at sea—and obviously, I think we should—we have to take the question of cable security seriously. We have to look at what happened just before Christmas, when the Russian so-called ghost fleet cut the cable going into the south of Finland. We know that Russia has had some activity, which we believe to be malign, in the UK continental shelf, so let us get ahead of the game and take that seriously.

The placing of cables on the seabed will only become more significant. I recently met Xlinks, which is bringing a significant amount of solar energy from Morocco to the United Kingdom via a subsea cable, which it is burying as it goes. It is at these points that we realise that with every opportunity there is a threat, and we must take the threats seriously. That is not within the Minister's purview, but at the end of the day it has to be part of the way that we approach the outcomes.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring these concerns to the House, Ms Jardine. I am thankful that a good number of colleagues have stayed here on a Thursday afternoon. I appreciate their commitment, and I hope it will bear fruit.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

1.51 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate.

I want to begin by talking about the exciting link between the Edinburgh North and Leith constituency, and Orkney and Shetland. Nova Innovation, based in Leith, has a very simple mission: to be a global leader in marine energy, delivering clean, predictable energy across the world. In 2016, it installed the world's first offshore tidal array in Bluemull sound, in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, and ever since then the array has went from strength to strength. Three turbines were installed in 2016, a fourth in 2020, and a fifth and sixth two years ago. That installation is not just the world's first offshore tidal array; it now has the largest number of tidal turbines anywhere in the world. In last year's contracts for difference allocation round, Nova secured contracts to deliver 6 MW of tidal energy at the Fall of Warness site in Orkney. It is innovating at pace and is demonstrating the potential for tidal and new marine renewables to deliver energy security, and to help with the sprint to clean power.

It is essential that the Government support and guide marine renewables—first, by setting a 1 GW tidal stream target by 2035, which would send a signal to industry about their support and ambition. I am keen to hear from the Minister what consideration the Government have given to putting in place such a target.

Secondly, GB Energy could help to harness the potential for tidal power here and across the globe. Nova in my constituency has demonstrated that the technology can work, and our tides and sea mean that we have 11 GW potential domestically. If GB Energy took equity stakes in tidal stream projects, those projects could be scaled up not only to benefit from that 11 GW earlier, but to build up domestic manufacturing, and domestic supply chains and to deliver jobs. I appreciate that there is smaller demand for tidal overall than for other renewable sources, but at present 8% of the tidal supply chain is in the UK.

Thirdly, we need to speed up the consent process, and I welcome the decisions taken by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in that regard. Stakeholders have expressed their dismay to me that, although Canada can secure consent and start construction within two years and France can do similar within three, the process can take up to a decade in the UK. I am concerned that if the timescales cannot improve, we will fritter away our competitive advantage not just with marine renewables but across a large number of established and innovative technologies. I appreciate that consenting is devolved to Scotland; the Minister knows that I have raised the unacceptably long process for consent decisions with the Energy Consents Unit and Marine Scotland, and I would welcome an update on the recent discussions he has had with Scottish Ministers on consenting.

I hope that the Government will listen to today's debate and fully back marine renewables, and that in the future there will be a stronger link between Edinburgh North and Leith, and Orkney and Shetland, with more tidal energy generated.

1.54 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this debate.

As the Member for South Devon, I am proud to represent a constituency with a long and rich history of maritime activity. From the bustling port of Brixham to the naval port of Dartmouth, the sea is very much part of our identity. It is for that reason that I am here today in firm support of the development of marine renewable energy. However, progress must be pursued in a way that respects and supports our fishing industry, ensuring that these two vital sectors can thrive side by side.

The UK is a global leader in renewable energy, and marine renewables present a unique opportunity to further that leadership. The waters surrounding our

[Caroline Voaden]

islands hold enormous potential. Living on wet, windy islands, would it not be great if we could put some of that weather to good use?

According to the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult, tidal stream energy could provide up to 11.5 GW of capacity —following what my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland said, I think that figure is probably more now—which is equivalent to approximately 15% or more of the UK's current electricity demand. Wave energy, though less mature technologically, offers additional capacity for long-term energy generation. These technologies, which include tidal stream turbines and oscillating wave surge converters, are capable of harnessing predictable and consistent energy, which is a crucial advantage over more intermittent renewable sources, like solar and wind.

Investing in marine renewables is not just an environmental imperative. It is a huge economic opportunity for the UK. The sector, as we have heard, could create tens of thousands of jobs and attract billions in private investment. Projects such as those we have heard about in Orkney and Shetland demonstrate the potential for large-scale deployment, with capacity to generate a substantial element of our electricity once fully operational.

The integration of marine renewables into our energy mix will not only diversify supply, but enhance our grid stability through predictable energy output. The economic benefits extend way beyond energy production. The sector could contribute billions to the UK economy annually, with supply chain opportunities for our coastal communities and the manufacturing sector alike.

As we pursue this promising future, we must not lose sight of the vital role that our fishing industry plays. Brixham, one of the UK's most productive fishing ports, landed a record-breaking £43.6 million-worth of seafood last year. That is not just an economic statistic—it represents the hard work of the fishing community and their contribution to our food security. As we navigate the transition to renewable energy, it is essential that the voices of our fishermen are heard and their expertise is valued.

Marine renewable energy projects must be carefully planned to avoid disrupting fishing grounds and marine ecosystems. That requires advanced spatial planning tools, such as geographic information systems, to identify suitable sites for development that minimise conflict with established fishing zones and sensitive habitats. Consultation with the fishing community must be a fundamental part of the development process, not an afterthought. Fishermen know the waters better than anyone and can provide invaluable insights into where installations can co-exist happily with fishing activities. With good collaboration, we can ensure that marine renewables are located in areas that minimise conflict and maximise benefit.

This approach is not just a matter of fairness. It is also a matter of practicality. Energy security and food security are two sides of the same coin. As we strive to achieve net zero and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, we must also ensure that we are protecting our ability to feed the nation. The sea can provide both energy and food, but only if we manage it wisely and sustainably. It is worth noting that the development of marine renewables can also enhance marine biodiversity if designed thoughtfully, creating artificial reefs and habitats that benefit marine life.

I must, though, express some concern about the lack of clear Governmental targets for marine renewables. Neither the previous Government nor the current Government have set—yet—any specific targets for the installation of wave or tidal energy. Although the Government have committed to achieving at least 95% low carbon generation by 2030, the December 2024 clean power action plan fails to set explicit goals for marine renewables. Instead, it relegates them to a potential long-term role in decarbonisation objectives.

I believe that lack of ambition is a missed opportunity to capitalise on the UK's vast marine resources and risks leaving us behind in the global race for renewable energy innovation. As an island nation, where the one thing we can rely on is the tide coming in and going out day after day, we should be doing more to capitalise on it. That seems more logical than shipping in solar energy from Morocco—although if we could ship in sunshine from Morocco, I would be up for that. I urge the Government to rectify the oversight by setting binding targets for the deployment of wave and tidal energy. Doing so would provide clarity and confidence for investors and developers, fostering rapid growth in this critical sector. Moreover, it would align marine renewables with the broader decarbonisation agenda, ensuring that they contribute meaningfully to our energy transition.

I also call on the Government to provide long-term funding for research and development, such as the UK's £20 million ringfenced budget for tidal stream innovation, and streamline the regulatory process to accelerate deployment. The Government must create a supportive framework for private investment, through mechanisms such as contracts for difference, to ensure market confidence, with a ringfenced budget for tidal and wave. The Government must also commit to robust engagement with the fishing industry to ensure that livelihoods are not sacrificed in the name of progress. There is room for everyone in this endeavour, but only if we take the time to plan and act responsibly.

Marine renewable energy offers a bright and sustainable future for our coastal communities and the nation as a whole, so let us seize this brilliant opportunity but do so with care, collaboration and respect for all those who depend on the sea.

2.1 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this important debate, which is of great interest to me as an MP from Cornwall and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea. I will probably replicate some points that have been made but it is telling that we are all calling for similar things, so I will say a little more about some of the industry's asks.

Cornwall is ideally placed to play a leading role in the development of the marine renewables industries. We have 400 miles of coast, strong tides, south-westerly winds and proximity to the Celtic sea. We are in a prime location for offshore wind and tidal stream energy. The port of Falmouth in my constituency could service floating offshore wind turbines, and Truro and Falmouth

is home to world-leading businesses such as Inyanga and Tugdock, which are at the forefront of marine renewables innovation.

However, the tidal and wave industries, like floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, need support from the Government and particularly ringfencing for AR7, to which I will return. As hon. Members have noted, tidal stream is a highly reliable method of energy generation because it is unaffected by weather, offers a stable energy supply and complements other more intermittent renewable sources, such as wind and solar. It also presents a number of benefits to UK jobs, supply chains and energy security. Tidal stream projects are being deployed with over 80% UK supply chain content, which is a much higher percentage than for some other renewable technologies. However, tidal and wave are smaller, less-developed industries than solar or fixed offshore wind. Tidal energy currently forms less than 0.01% of the UK's electricity generation, but the UK Marine Energy Council says that it has the potential to meet over 10% of demand.

I welcome the Government's recent clean power action plan, which recognised the potential for tidal stream and floating offshore wind to be important components of long-term decarbonisation in the UK. However, for that to happen—and if marine renewables are to follow a similar cost-reduction pathway to solar and fixed offshore wind—the marine renewables industry does need Government support.

From AR4 onwards, tidal energy has benefited from ringfencing, which led to Inyanga, based in my constituency, being awarded CfDs in AR5 and AR6 for their HydroWing technology, which will be deployed in Morlais, Wales. Previous allocation rounds show that the sector can respond successfully to a ringfence. Inyanga had the only successful pot 2 offshore project to win a CfD in AR6.

The ask of Great British Energy is to commit, say, 3% of its budget to investing in marine energy because tidal stream projects are being deployed with over 80% UK supply chain content spend, which is significantly higher than for other renewable technologies. GB Energy should seek to embed and accelerate deployment of that UK content in projects installed here and around the world. It could take equity stakes, under commercial terms, in projects that have secured a CfD.

Other hon. Members have asked about a Government-industry marine energy taskforce. The purpose of that taskforce would be to bring together key players from Government, industry, regulatory and other relevant organisations to enable marine energy development—the embedding of that UK content in projects deployed here and around the world—to support the Government's ambition to make the UK a clean energy superpower. I have also been pushing for that kind of masterplan and leadership for floating offshore wind. Others have asked about the 2035 targets, including a 1 GW tidal stream and 300 Mw of wave energy deployment. Setting those targets will boost investor confidence and support investment in coastal communities and beyond.

The UK could also introduce innovation funding, particularly for marine energy. Between 2017 and 2022, such projects received only £17 million in innovation funding. Wave energy projects received £57 million of funding, £39 million of which came from the Scottish Government. That targeted innovation funding has been proven to reduce the overall cost associated with commercialising these emerging renewable technologies. Two tidal scheme projects in Scotland were successful in the last Horizon Europe call, which demonstrates both the importance of a close UK-EU relationship on marine energy and the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for that innovation funding.

I cannot stand here and talk about renewable energy in the sea without mentioning floating offshore wind, so I will reiterate some of the asks that that industry would have as well to kick-start floating offshore wind, particularly in the Celtic sea. Like tidal and wave energy, floating offshore wind needs a ringfenced element in the AR6. The one-size-fits-all route is disadvantaging the Celtic sea due to the comparative lack of port infrastructure, skills and wider supply chain support. We are a virgin area; unlike Scotland, we have not had oil and gas before, so we are starting from scratch.

We need technological and geographical ringfencing, CfDs for the test and demo sites in the Celtic sea, and support for stepping-stone projects such as TwinHub, which has a CfD but is facing the challenges of developing that supply chain and the now out-of-date cost of the CfD. The £1.8 billion ports fund can now be distributed quickly in a multi-port strategy that was developed, allowing ports across the region, such as Falmouth in my constituency, to work together to prepare for and benefit from the opportunities that floating offshore wind presents.

The Crown Estate Bill passed through the House recently. Those option fees could, for example, be diverted to local supply chain building. Additionally, outside of the industry, other hon. Members have mentioned that we need that strategy for the ocean as a whole. It is crucial that we have a long-term marine spatial strategy, so that everything in the ocean has its place and we balance energy generation with important industries such as fishing, and with protecting the natural environment.

Creating clear frameworks for each sector would give certainty to developers, which would help speed up the deployment of these renewables projects. Co-ordination would involve linking existing plans, such as the Crown Estate's whole of seabed programme, the strategic spatial energy plan and DEFRA's marine spatial prioritisation programme, ensuring that the UK harnesses the benefits of marine renewables while supporting fishing and safeguarding marine habitats.

2.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have quickly written this speech while others were speaking, so if it is a bit general, it will be because of haste. I have just read it twice and—thank the Lord—I should be able to decipher my writing.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I have said it before, but I really do mean it: he brings many issues to Westminster Hall and the Chamber, and always with calmness, which is quite a talent. He also makes sure they are subject matters that all of us from the Gaelic nations—Northern Ireland, in my case—are right away interested in.

I have a big interest in this subject. Since I became an MP, way back in 2010, I have always been aware that Strangford lough, which is in the constituency I represent, has the potential for tidal green energy provision. There was a pilot scheme so many years ago. That was probably

[Jim Shannon]

the wrong time, simply because the energy generated was too expensive. Things have moved on, and what was not possible way back then is possible now. That is why I wanted to speak on this issue.

The hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) mentioned fishing, and I also want to reflect on that. I am a great believer that, when we move forward, as much as possible we have to bring everybody with us, although that is not always possible in this world.

I want to mention a Queen's University Belfast marine development scheme in Portaferry. Exciting stuff is happening there, and it reinforces the ideas advanced by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. Strangford is being used as a test site for a groundbreaking marine energy project. That is something that I hoped to bring forward many years ago—for the record, I have not brought it forward, but I have supported bringing it forward. It has been great to see it, and to tell people about it.

Ocean Renewable Power Company Ireland and Queen's University have announced the successful deployment and commencement of the testing of a new generation of marine hydrokinetic turbines on the Strangford lough tidal test site. This is groundbreaking and visionary, and I am particularly pleased to see it. It is a significant milestone for ORPC, because it is the first time that the company has generated electricity from one of its turbines outside of North America—that is where the innovation and excitement comes from—after 17 previous deployments in America and the USA. We are on the frontline.

The deployment in Strangford lough is the company's first in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is part of the deployment of the X-flow project, which is led by Queen's University. The project includes Applied Renewables Research and the Shell Technology marine renewable programme as industry partners, and is supported by the green innovation challenge fund. That fund is led by the Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy, and is delivered in partnership—again, partnership is how it all works—with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment at the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is another initiative that I pushed in my time as an Assembly Member, but more so as an MP here, working in conjunction with the Assembly back home.

The purpose of the deployment in Strangford lough is to collect data on turbine performance in a real tidal environment, building on laboratory testing undertaken earlier this year in another project—it never sounds great when I speak Italian, so I will not try to pronounce this; an Ulster Scot speaking Italian is a real challenge. [Hon. Members: "Go on!"] No, I am definitely not doing it; it would be embarrassing. Suffice it to say that the company comes from Rome, in Italy—I will leave it at that. The European Commission funded the project, which is called CRIMSON—commercialisation of a recyclable and innovative manufacturing solution for an optimised novel marine turbine project. It is no secret that I am a Brexiteer, but Europe does some good things, and we have to acknowledge that this is one of them.

Carwyn Frost, who is senior lecturer at Queen's University Belfast, says that the marine laboratory tidal test site at Strangford lough

> "is a unique facility providing developers the opportunity to deploy and monitor their technology in real tidal flows."

I have had the opportunity to experience that a few times as an MP, as well as when I was at the Assembly. At one time, people swam across Strangford lough for charity; I always wondered how anybody could swim across Strangford lough, because the tidal flows are so extreme that swimmers can start in Portaferry and end up well round the tip of the peninsula. Mr Frost went on:

> "The X-Flow project will provide unique insight on the impact of turbulent flow conditions on the control of the crossflow turbine and its blade loading. The fully instrumented turbine by ORPC will provide vital data for assessing the impact of turbulent flow conditions on performance, blade loading and control."

I want to put that on the record because I believe that the project, which is happening right on my doorstep, is incredibly exciting. I have lived in the Ards peninsula for all but four years of my life, so I feel great pride about this.

The work will facilitate condition monitoring by the Queen's University marine team, which is committed to working in collaboration with partners. That is how it works: big business along with universities and local government. It is great to see Queen's University leading the way, and I look forward to the conclusion of some of that research. The way forward is to energise the tidal flows at Strangford lough so that we can all gain—homes and businesses across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who are crying out for it.

I am conscious that others want to speak. I should have said, Ms Jardine, that I welcome you to the Chair. I apologise; I should have done that right away. It is lovely to see you in your place, and it is well deserved.

As an island nation with a rich history of maritime culture, we must recognise the incredible wealth of life beneath the waves and the imperative to protect it. The hon. Member for South Devon referred to fishing; I want to say a quick word about how important fishing is for my constituency of Strangford. Ours is an inland shore fleet, by and large, based in Portavogie in my constituency and further down in Ardglass and Kilkeel. Marine ecosystems, essential for not only biodiversity but the economy, are facing mounting pressures that demand urgent action. Fishermen depend on the sea for their livelihoods, and I want to support those who fish in Strangford lough and out on the Irish sea.

Northern Ireland has a close connection with the sea. We have 650 km of coastline. The sea is home to an amazing variety of marine life, some of which is found nowhere else in the world. Isn't that great to say? It cannot be found anywhere else but Strangford lough. That reiterates what I have always said: Strangford lough is unique. Strangford is unique, and I am pleased and privileged to be the MP for the area.

Mr Carmichael: And they're fortunate to have you!

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman is very kind.

Strangford is at the junction between significant bodies of water, and it contains a thriving commercial fishing community, primarily based on the inshore fishery. A significant number of fishermen fish out of the local fleet and there is also an important processing plant sector, tied to the inshore fishery, that produces mussels, cockles, whelks and shrimps. The fishery is one of the

most important in the country and local people feel passionately about it. They and their families have been fishing these waters for generations and their views are deeply rooted in tradition.

The hon. Member for South Devon put forward a case: to move forward with all our great technology and establish all the green marine energy that we can. I support that. Some people in Northern Ireland may not share my opinion, but I think it important for us to move forward. However, we also need to protect our fishing sector, and I make a special request on its behalf. What is required is a regulatory framework that is flexible, adaptable and responsive to changing conditions at sea. Unlike land-based conservation, whose ecosystems are more static, marine ecosystems are dynamic and can change year by year. We must be able to adapt our policies to the changes, ensuring that our approach to marine energy also supports our fishing sector and those who—let us be honest—vote for me. Let us make sure that we deliver for them as well.

2.19 pm

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Ms Jardine. It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, and I welcome you to your place. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. Given the importance of the debate, it is again disappointing to see that so few Members from His Majesty's official Opposition are here to contribute. But I am encouraged that so many Members from the Celtic nations of the United Kingdom are represented today.

Support for the marine renewables industry demonstrates not just awareness of our developing energy system up to 2030, but foresight into how we achieve energy security in the long term. Julian Leslie, the chief engineer at the National Energy System Operator—the body responsible for advising the Government on their clean power strategy—has described the 2030 clean power target as reaching the base camp of Mount Everest. He describes the next stage, decarbonising heat and wider industry on the way to 2050, as climbing to the mountain's peak. What that means is that the next generation of technologies, such as tidal stream and wave energy, will need to develop and proliferate deployment at scale as our economy becomes increasingly reliant on electricity.

According to the Government's "Clean Power 2030" plan, marine renewables—tidal stream, in particular—will be an incredibly useful source of energy that, as has been mentioned, can be deployed without correlation to other energy sources, therefore acting as a predictable component of our clean energy infrastructure.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) refers to rolling the technologies out at scale. The only eligible English project that has the marine lease, environmental licence and network connection offer is in my constituency, on the Isle of Wight. Does he agree that local communities must benefit directly from projects in their areas—through direct jobs, obviously, but also through other indirect benefits?

Perran Moon: Yes, I entirely agree. Social value is an absolutely core element of a lot of these renewable opportunities; I am thinking not only of value going back into the community—including community ownership, potentially—but of the creation of good quality, highly skilled local jobs.

I echo the words of my colleague and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), in championing Inyanga Marine Energy Group, which is based in Penryn. It is developing the exact cutting-edge technologies that we will require in the form of its HydroWing structure, which produces exceptionally high and reliable yields.

I also highlight the work of Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult's marine energy team, which focuses on tidal stream and is, I am proud to say, based in my constituency of Camborne and Redruth, and in Hayle. As has been mentioned, according to the Marine Energy Council tidal stream technology can meet over 10% of UK electricity demand, with the UK leading in the planned installation of over 130 MW in its seas by 2029. We must show support for the commercial development of such marine renewable projects through greater funding from Great British Energy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) mentioned, and by ringfencing contracts for difference funding in AR7 later this year.

In the 20th century, the UK's power system was dominated by coal; in the 1990s, that system evolved into the "dash for gas". We are now pivoting towards the use of offshore and onshore wind, partnered with flexible and low-carbon dispatchable power. Generations before us in the last century would scarcely have been able to imagine what our energy system looks like now. However, I believe marine renewables represent immense potential, which we must support today to achieve the net zero goal of tomorrow.

2.23 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine, and to welcome you to your place. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing what we all surely agree is a really important debate.

Many people do not support renewables. I guess they are not here today but we occasionally hear them in the Chamber, saying things like, "What are you going to do when the wind doesn't blow and the sun doesn't shine?" We see the answer when we look out to the sea: the tide rises and falls twice a day, every day, 365 days a year, so we can build a future on renewable energy. We must do that if we are to achieve net zero and protect our planet.

The Celtic sea has massive opportunities. I am going to discuss something that Members may not have expected: the maritime importance of Taunton, which is in the middle of Somerset. Taunton is the headquarters of the UK Hydrographic Office, which produces the Admiralty charts—famed throughout the world for being the biggest mapping system of the ocean floor around the world. It is the world leader and its charts are used by navies and merchant navies around the world. No one is quite sure why the office came to Taunton in Somerset, although it may be because it is not that near the coast; one story is that enemy bombers would therefore find it harder to

[Gideon Amos]

find. We are very proud of that link, and of course we are only a few miles from the coasts to the north and to the south.

As the county town of Somerset, we are an important regional centre. Under the previous Labour Government, we hosted the regional assembly in Taunton and the Government office for the south-west was in Taunton because we have an equidistant position in the greater south-west region. Our transport links are excellent—it takes 99 minutes to get to Paddington in the heart of London or 30 minutes in either direction to get to the heart of Bristol or of Exeter. All those reasons make it the ideal location for the south-west office of Great British Energy; I am almost certain that the Minister will announce that in his summing up. Seriously, it is an excellent location for regional centres.

Taunton would be an ideal place to host many of the headquarters of the companies involved in the offshore industry. In the Celtic sea, we have the welcome 4.5 GW of offshore wind that has been announced. Sometimes people underestimate the scale of that; I always translate it into four and a half nuclear power stations being built in the Celtic sea—hopefully it will not take the 20 or 30 years that Hinkley seems to be taking. Generating that clean energy is vital.

As well as offshore wind, I want to put in a word for tidal stream, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland and the hon. Members for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) and for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) have talked about eloquently. Tidal stream is vital—we need energy from all these sources—but tidal range is as well: it generates, project for project, hundreds of times more electricity, as shown in northern France with La Rance in Saint-Malo. That was built by de Gaulle and is still generating around 60 MW of energy.

When I was working for the Government inspectorate, I was privileged to be the lead inspector on the Swansea tidal lagoon, which got its consent. In my view, it was a massive mistake of the previous Conservative Government not to fund that project; we could have had a new generation of tidal energy from this country. We have the second highest tidal range in the world—up and down by 9 metres at the maximum, which is second only to western Canada, where there is a thriving tidal range energy industry. We should be building on that for the future.

Tidal range, tidal stream and offshore wind bring big opportunities to the south-west of England. Although I recognise that Members from Cornwall may be at the sharper end of the Celtic sea than us in Taunton, there are important benefits for the whole south-west in terms of upskilling, investment in skills training and the construction industry. The Great South West regional development agency has identified energy as a key driver of the south-west economy. Government support for skills, training and research projects could be absolutely crucial to the economy of the whole south-west, and particularly my part of Somerset, with University Centre Somerset and the UK Hydrographic Office working together in my constituency. There could be some really exciting projects, looking at Horizon funding as well as skills investment. I hope the Government will support those kinds of projects and applications.

As well as getting support for skills, training and research, we need to bring the community with us. That means we need to give a lot more thought and attention to the compensation and the community support from these projects. We need reliable levels of community benefit from each project. There have been some advances on that from solar projects onshore, although my constituents in Ham would like to see more community benefit for the solar farm there.

It is less developed with wind, and we need a reliable system in which communities that will be affected by offshore wind, because of the massive onshore infrastructure, know that they will benefit in some way from that project. The industry needs to be held to account so that it clearly meets established standards of community benefits. I hope that the Minister will say something about that in his summing up.

We also need more sensible approaches to mitigation for the natural environment. Surely we cannot go on any longer with a system in which every offshore wind project comes up against a debate about whether it will kill 0.5 birds or 0.9 birds in the course of 20 years, and then people design an elaborate mitigation system for that one project. We know that we will be building offshore wind projects. We need to build them. We know what the impacts will be on wild birds and other natural species. Therefore, we need to put in the compensatory measures in advance in a strategic way. I know that the Crown Estate is beginning to look at strategic compensation, but it is far too late. We need to get on with this now. We know the impacts. We know that it is one of the biggest factors slowing down our offshore wind projects. We can look at the experience in Denmark. The Danes are building islands to support their offshore wind industry before it starts, so they know the compensation will be there.

I would like to support the points that have been made on the need for a taskforce, which would certainly be important and should encompass skills, training and research in the whole offshore energy sector, and I urge the Government to recognise the regional powerhouse that the south-west can be and is in renewable energy. We have six energy NSIP DCOs—development consent orders for nationally significant infrastructure projects—across Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire, for example. It is a vital part of the UK economy, and Taunton lies right at the heart of it.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): I call Liz Saville Roberts.

2.31 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Ms Jardine. I welcome you to your first chairmanship role here. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate.

With a wind-lashed coastline stretching for a grand total of 1,680 miles, Wales has an abundance of marine energy potential. This growing sector already contributes significant sums to the Welsh economy. Last financial year, the marine renewable energy sector delivered £29.9 million to the Welsh economy, and it currently sustains 429 full-time jobs. We would like the number of jobs to be way more than that, please.

Tidal stream is the largest contributor to the sector at present, and developers are set to deliver 28 MW-worth of development by 2028. That number is expected to grow with each annual auction round. For the future, it is estimated that Wales has the potential to generate up to 6 GW-worth of wave and tidal stream energy.

I have mentioned jobs. Development and installation of 1 GW alone could support 440 full-time jobs during generation—and those in communities that currently suffer deprivation. That is a theme for many Members of Parliament from what might be called the Celtic fringe, but it really matters to us. We have such potential to generate more energy for the United Kingdom in its entirety and to generate energy security, but at the same time this can be a real levelling-up prospect for communities that have suffered in low-wage economies. Particularly in relation to Wales, I could mention Holyhead; I could mention my own community of Dwyfor Meirionnydd; and I could mention Milford Haven. We should plan ahead and look at the futures of those communities, particularly somewhere like Milford Haven, which is so dependent on fossil fuel at present.

Wales is clearly poised to play a leading role in marine renewables. However, the sector is still in the early stages of development and needs Government support so that it can truly flourish. The Welsh Government have recently announced strategic resource areas for tidal stream, and I welcome that. It is a form of marine planning to designate the future availability of these areas for potential tidal stream energy projects. Of course, in Wales, as elsewhere, it is important to work with other key users of the sea, such as fishermen. There are tourism considerations as well.

This includes, just with regard to my own constituency, the sea off the Llŷn peninsula, where Swnt Enlli—Bardsey sound—has some of the strongest tidal races in the Irish sea. Proudly, Nova Innovation had a project there, but sadly, because of the lack of grid capacity, it eventually pulled out. It is exactly these problems with grid capacity that often hinder the bringing of projects to fruition in bringing their energy onshore from the sea.

Now, of course, I turn to Ynys Môn. I am speaking in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi), who is glad to be reopening one of the berths at Holyhead. As of today, ferries are again sailing from Holyhead, which is very good news for not just Holyhead and north Wales, but the connections with Ireland. We have existing tidal stream projects there, such as the Morlais project, and we see a potential model that addresses the problem of grid connection, which might be replicated elsewhere.

Morlais came about with major investment from both the European Union and the Welsh Government, with a grid substation already developed and the environmental consents already in place—that is the important point. That provides an offering to tidal stream developers in which there is a reduced cost and risk that mean that they are sure of getting their technology into the water.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I know that the National Energy System Operator has just put forward proposals to Government on how to address the grid queue and how it should be renewed and reviewed. Does the right hon. Lady agree that we need to hear from Government as soon as possible what the reorganisation of the grid queue would mean and which projects would be prioritised?

Liz Saville Roberts: When we find ourselves discussing any large-scale energy project, we come up against some of these pragmatic, practical questions. Until we have answers to those, it is difficult for us as local MPs to do more for our constituencies than promote. I have found myself in a similar situation with Trawsfynydd and small nuclear reactors; I have been in this place talking about that for 10 years and have not got past the pragmatic first points to actually see further developments.

The UK Government could use Great British Energy to invest in and develop pre-leased and consented grid connector sites for marine energy projects in Wales and elsewhere. However, the Great British Energy Bill does not make any reference to tidal stream or to marine renewable technologies, and, sadly, the Welsh Government's announcement of tidal stream SRAs does not make any reference to GB Energy—if only those things were joined up and we had that co-working between Cardiff and London that is so vaunted. In his summing up, can the Minister set out what relationship GB Energy will have with the Welsh Government's SRAs, because at present there seems to be a lack of joined-up thinking? I also echo the sector's call for the Government to commit £250 million of Great British Energy's budget to accelerate the development of and embed UK content in tidal stream projects, and for a 1 GW target for deployment by 2035.

I turn to a particularly Welsh issue, although other hon. Members have touched on it—namely, the relationship or partnership between GB Energy and the Crown Estate, which will be crucial in the development of marine energy projects, given that it owns the sea bed to 12 nautical miles from the coast, including in Wales. It is therefore vital that Wales has full control over the Crown Estate, as is the case in Scotland, so that the people of Wales, not civil servants in Whitehall, shape the development of marine renewables to fit our nation's needs and aspirations. That comparison between Wales and Scotland will not go away, and in a moment I will show hon. Members why. We could therefore ensure real benefits to Welsh communities, including the use of local supply chains and jobs in deprived, low-wage areas that will follow on from those projects. We could shape those with Welsh needs in mind.

Jayne Kirkham: I have a question about the Crown Estate and the devolution of it. How would that work in the Celtic sea, where Cornwall would obviously benefit a great deal from some of the floating offshore wind in other installations there?

Liz Saville Roberts: Some of the politics of Cornwall already looks to Wales for guidelines; the same question arises from Scotland regarding where the border lies with England there. None the less, from Wales's point of view, we have suffered a long tradition of extractive industries, and that looks set to continue.

There is a fair argument for the devolvement of the Crown Estate in Wales. The only argument against it is that it would cause confusion in the intervening point, but any change causes confusion. Devolution of the Crown Estate, which would give Wales, rather than the Treasury, the power to manage local supply chains is a call from many politicians in Wales—including many Welsh Labour politicians—that will not go away.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

Scotland, where the Crown Estate is devolved, has successfully aligned the Crown Estate with the marine planning process and sought to make use of those local supply chains. The Scottish Government also distribute the net revenue generated by the Scottish Crown Estate marine assets to coastal local authority areas—those poor areas which we all want to seek every means we can to support. That coastal community benefit amounted to £11.1 million in 2023-24. Why are we preventing that from happening in other places? Wales should be able to do the same. The Minister will no doubt say, because this is the argument we have heard before, that devolution will fragment the market and deter investment. The success of the Scottish Crown Estate emphatically proves that not to be the case.

I want to touch on the contracts for difference auction process and EU innovation funding. To date, the marine renewables industry has been set at £20 million, £10 million and £15 million ringfenced in the last three auctions. If we want to build a renewable energy industry with high levels of UK content, the level needs to be set—as the lead Member for this debate, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, has said—at £50 million for tidal stream and £5 million for wave. I am very supportive of that for this year's renewable auction. Marine Energy Wales says that without this ringfence, Welsh tidal projects will be disadvantaged, stalling momentum and undermining the benefits already delivered by sites like Morlais.

In addition to ringfenced funding domestically, we should maximise institutional flows of funds for the sector. Leaving the European emissions trading scheme has meant that the UK no longer receives sums from the related EU innovation fund. Rejoining that scheme would help unlock further sources of funding for marine developments.

I welcome the discussion of the marine energy task force. Of course, skills are devolved to Wales. We need to make sure that the advantages work between the Welsh Government and what is being proposed here, and that there is discussion on that.

Given the weather we have today in London, we are not going to be doing much in the way of tidal stream in the Thames, but this is the sort of day in winter—grey, no wind, renewables not otherwise generating—when we should take the opportunity to bring forward further electricity supplies.

2.42 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and everyone who has spoken so far in the debate.

Back in 2009 I was involved in an as yet conceptual tidal project known as the reef. It was projected to stretch from Aberthaw in south Wales to Minehead in Somerset, a distance of some 17 km. It was designed by Rupert Armstrong Evans at the behest of the University of Southampton, which asked Mr Evans to design a scheme that would be environmentally benign and would generate significant energy for the UK.

You will no doubt be aware, Ms Jardine, that the tidal difference in the Bristol channel is the second largest in the world. The idea of a tidal barrage in the Bristol channel is not new, and the location of the reef on the Aberthaw to Minehead line was first suggested in the 1930s as being the best place to generate electricity and energy from the tides in the Bristol channel.

In 2010, when the current Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero was Secretary of State for the then Department of Energy and Climate Change, he announced funding for investigations of embryonic tidal technologies. Rolls-Royce and Atkins won the contract to do the study, and their work showed that a tidal scheme on the Aberthaw to Minehead route would generate per year 30.4 TW hours of electricity, significantly more than the Cardiff to Weston-super-Mare line, which was in the region of 20 TW hours per annum.

The Aberthaw to Minehead line has the added advantage that it has no mud—unlike Weston-super-Mare, as anyone who has visited Weston in the summer will know. Its seabed is rock all the way across and so has greater possibilities for locking tidal caissons holding large turbines to the sea floor. The design of the reef would allow for a maximum of 2 metres head on both the incoming and outgoing tides, which would mean that fish could safely swim through the large turbines without getting hurt. That is a big factor, and one reason for the rejection of previous tidal schemes in the Bristol channel.

Other factors to consider are, first, that 30.4 TWh per annum is larger than the expected annual output of Hinkley Point C, which is 30.2 TWh. Secondly, a degree of energy storage from the reef would be possible.

Gideon Amos: I thank my hon. Friend for making an excellent point about the centrality of Somerset—in particular, the Minehead route just north of Taunton—to renewable energy. Does he accept that tidal range and tidal barrages and lagoons could make a significant contribution? As he pointed out so well, Swansea lagoon would have done up to 30 TWh, but we could do that across the UK. There could be tidal lagoons in Morecambe bay and in Cumbria, where one was proposed. That would bring investment to regions across the UK and not just benefit the south-west and Somerset.

Brian Mathew: I thank my hon. Friend for his points, which of course are true. This technology could be employed right across the United Kingdom and its amazing coastline.

A third advantage would be that ships could pass up and down the Bristol channel via large floating lock gates. Fourthly, the project could be upgraded over its life so that it would effectively be time-unlimited, even with sea level rises. A fifth point, which could well be applied to renewable schemes across the UK, is that the excess energy—or the energy that the grid cannot use at any particular time—could be diverted into the manufacture of synthetic fuels. That would be one way of dealing with the problem of what to do when we generate energy and there is no call for it. In short, this project is well worth further investigation.

2.47 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate and on his efforts to keep this issue on the agenda in Parliament. I want to reinforce the point he made about the Crown Estate Commission. As Liberal

Democrats, we believe in working with communities to deliver change. The Crown Estate may own the seabed, but that does not mean the commission should be allowed to ignore the needs of others who make their living from the sea, whether through fishing, tourism or any other means. That point was picked up by a number of Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), who spoke up powerfully for the fishing industry in Brixham. The commission should also not be exempt from the duty to protect nature that other public bodies have, recognising—as we do—that the nature and climate emergencies go hand in hand.

On the wider issue, marine renewables will help us to meet our commitment to tackle the climate crisis—the single biggest challenge facing our generation.

Wera Hobhouse: My hon. Friend and I are members of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee, and yesterday we heard evidence from the Secretary of State. He said that the transition to net zero is the biggest opportunity for all of us, including those in the south-west, to create prosperity and the jobs we need for the future. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Claire Young: Absolutely—it is almost as though my hon. Friend has read the next section of my speech. I was about to say that marine renewables will also boost jobs and businesses throughout the supply chain, and will be part of the solution to the energy crisis that has hit people hard in recent years.

Sadly, we are living in the shadow of the Conservatives' failure to fully invest in renewable energy and to properly insulate our homes. The previous Conservative Government rowed back on their pledges to meet net zero and shamefully watered down policies aimed at reducing our carbon emissions. That means we need bold action now to put us back on the right course. Liberal Democrats want to see this Government step up to the plate and provide a comprehensive energy strategy designed to bring down bills, end fuel poverty, cut greenhouse gas emissions and deliver energy security.

A key part of that strategy must be marine renewable energy. I welcome the initial progress being made, with a 50% uplift in ringfenced funding support for tidal stream energy as part of the contracts for difference renewables auctions. With a significant stretch of the Severn estuary coastline in my constituency, I am keen to see the UK leading the world in tidal power. My hon. Friends the Members for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) highlighted the opportunities in the wider south-west. Given that it is his birthday, I will not argue with my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington today about his plans to make Taunton the centre of that enterprise. The 50% uplift is a good first step and shows that we are beginning to take the sector seriously.

However, there is so much more potential out there, if only the Government would reach out and grasp it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned the parallels with the gas and oil industry, and I would like to look at wind power as an example of how these things can be done. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, he made it his key priority to back renewables and managed to push through a bold climate agenda that embraced new technologies. That quadrupled the UK's level of renewable power and made us a world leader in offshore wind energy.

The Office for National Statistics has stated that employment estimates within the low-carbon and renewable energy economy are at record levels. Because of the willingness to back British renewables, the industry is now worth an estimated £69.4 billion to the UK economy and supports thousands of jobs. The economic benefits and the need to make sure they are kept in the UK have been highlighted by many Members, including the hon. Members for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) and for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon).

It is good to hear about the important partnerships with universities, including Heriot-Watt, mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland, and Queen's University Belfast, mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The Government talk a lot about their drive for economic growth, and I suggest that that goes hand in hand with investing in renewable power generation. Putting a just transition front and centre allows us to not only reskill those already working in the energy industry, but upskill people to give them new opportunities around our coast. Our coastal areas have long felt left behind and forgotten about, as I know from talking to people in places such as Severn Beach in my constituency. Those areas now have the potential to become booming hubs of activity, which is why Liberal Democrats want to see marine renewables used as part of a plan to invest in them, with a dedicated skills fund to provide green skills and jobs to communities.

I would like briefly to pick up the issue of grid connections, which I have mentioned in the House in reference to other renewables and which the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) raised today. A plan to deliver the supporting infrastructure must be part of any strategy.

Britain has long been defined by our connection with the sea that surrounds our island. We have a unique relationship with the waves, and we need to make the most of that, understanding what it looks like in the 21st century. Our marine environments are already under threat from sewage and plastic pollution. Having a dedicated marine industry strategy will allow us to carefully manage the development of our biodiverse areas out at sea. That is why we need to have new targets for marine protected areas and to mandate the Government to monitor those sites fully.

Addressing the climate crisis is about embracing opportunity and empowering communities to make the most of their surroundings. It is time that the UK stepped up as a world leader in this area, so I hope the Minister will agree to listen to our proposals, which will benefit the marine renewables sector greatly.

2.53 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Ms Jardine. Congratulations on your appointment to the Panel of Chairs, and I am sure that this is the first of many long sessions in the Chair in Westminster Hall.

Today's debate on marine renewables has been fascinating, and I congratulate the right hon. Member

[Andrew Bowie]

for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing it. Before I go any further, I will echo his comments on EMEC, the incredibly important role it has played and Neil Kermode's leadership over the past few years. It has delivered a world-leading technology and, indeed, makes for an inspirational visit, if anybody has the time or inclination to go north to the Orkney Islands.

It has, for the most part, been a thoroughly pleasant afternoon listening to an oral tour of some of our great coastal communities—and of Taunton and Melksham and Devizes. I have nothing against Taunton; it is just that it stood out for me. I have personal links with many of those communities, so it was a genuine pleasure to listen to the debate.

As so many people have said, the United Kingdom is uniquely placed in terms of marine energy. We are an island nation, and our history has been written by the seas. Given the potential of marine energy to help drive us towards our clean energy future, our future will be written by them too.

Energy from the sea is not a new concept in the United Kingdom, especially not to somebody who hails from Aberdeen. The UK continental shelf and the Norwegian continental shelf have been the lifeblood of the UK's energy industry since the 1970s. Aberdeen, in the north-east of Scotland, has been the powerhouse of the European energy sector for decades. My sincere hope is that that remains so in the decades ahead.

[Mr Clive Betts *in the Chair*]

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland has shown this afternoon, the east coast of Scotland, and particularly his constituency, is well designed for marine energy technologies, and particularly tidal. Marine energy generation in the UK covers many technologies, some of which—such as tidal and wave generation—are not yet deployed at scale and not quite at a commercial level. That also includes offshore wind, which has successfully scaled up in the United Kingdom over the past few years.

I did not want to get drawn into yet another list—I know how much the Minister enjoys my reeling off the previous Conservative Government's successes when it comes to investment in renewable technologies—but I was prompted into it by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young). I am very proud that we built the first to the fifth largest offshore wind farms in the world, which are delivering power into the United Kingdom right now, that we halved our emissions and that we were the fastest cutter of emissions of any country in the G7. We are very proud of what we did, which is supporting thousands of new jobs across the United Kingdom, particularly in the north-east of England, in communities such as Grimsby and around the Humber.

The UK's seas are home to the emerging technologies we have heard about this afternoon. Many of the technologies we will employ in the energy transition might not be fully fledged, but the previous Government were proud to announce a record £650 million of investment—for example, into the development of nuclear fusion technology, in which the UK is a world leader. We support the development of fusion and the development of technologies such as tidal, because, moving forward, we need to support all energy solutions.

As I said, the previous Government did a great deal to provide an economic framework for various technologies—especially marine energy projects—and to try to attract private sector investment through the contracts for difference scheme. In 2021, we announced that £30 million per year would be ringfenced for tidal stream projects. Allocation round 4 in 2022 made allocations to four tidal stream projects, which was a first. Allocation round 5 in 2023 is often castigated as a failed round, so obsessed are some people with wind at the expense of everything else, but it made allocations to 11 tidal projects, with capacity totalling over 50 MW. Allocation round 6, which was run under the previous Government and announced by the current Government, made allocations to six tidal stream projects, with a total capacity of 28 MW.

With the CfD mechanism, the previous Government created the conditions for new technologies such as tidal to thrive. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland set out at the beginning of the debate, the world's most powerful tidal turbine was launched off the east coast of Scotland by Orbital Marine Power, an Orkney-based company. Constructed in Dundee, the 2 MW turbine capitalises on some of the strongest currents in the world. In 2024, thanks to the dogged and determined campaigning by Neil, the right hon. Gentleman and others, the then Secretary of State for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—now the editor of *The Spectator*—and I secured £3 million of new funding for EMEC, recognising the work that it does. That was in addition to having invested over £7 million between 2016 and 2022.

The question posed by many is, why bother with marine energy when we have so many other technologies we are investing in right now? We have offshore, onshore, nuclear technologies that are coming on stream, solar power and everything else. Well, it is because we must. We need to invest in all the technologies available to us in order to drive us forward into our clean energy future, to make us more energy independent and energy secure.

Sadly, there was no mention of tidal in the "Clean Power 2030" document published by the Government. There is a perception—it might not be the reality—that tidal technology has fallen through the gap. In the rush to decarbonise the energy system, the Secretary of State seems to be putting all the eggs into two baskets. It would be good if the Minister could set out that that was not the case and that the Government were as committed to tidal and wave power as they should be. When the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine, wind and solar will not keep the lights on in the United Kingdom.

Gideon Amos: The hon. Gentleman is criticising the lack of action on tidal, so can he explain why his Government cancelled the Swansea tidal lagoon?

Andrew Bowie: The previous Government looked at the Swansea tidal lagoon in great detail and depth, but the decision was taken before my time in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero not to proceed with it. I am informed that it was due to a combination of the cost and the reluctance of those involved to make the case that the technology would be successful. However,

if it can be presented as a viable project—if the costs can be brought down and the technology can be proved to work—of course the current Government could look at it again. We should be investing in things that work and that return a benefit to the taxpayer.

Last week, the UK learned the word "Dunkelflaute"—I have probably pronounced it terribly—which expresses what happens when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine. The recent cold snap illustrated just how insecure a system reliant on intermittent renewables such as solar and wind will be, so we need to invest in new baseload generation, including gas, nuclear and tidal.

Those technologies sadly got little mention in the Secretary of State's "Clean Power 2030" action plan. There were few words about nuclear and nothing about tidal—seemingly, no plan for future generation. It is clear that a wide mix of energies will be required to ensure our energy independence and security. Offshore wind and solar are obviously essential parts of the mix, but so too will be—or at least should be—oil and gas; nuclear, large and small, with microreactors; and new and emerging technologies such as wave and tidal. The developments happening across all those technologies in this country are great.

We should support Great British and Northern Irish scientists, innovators, engineers and technicians who have the opportunity to build on the successes of the past decade, which saw Great Britain and Northern Ireland lead the world in investing in new energy generation. To echo the sentiment of other right hon. and hon. Members, we need more direction and clarity from the Government about where we are heading on this journey to more tidal and wave investment. We fully support the calls for a road map and a taskforce to drive that forward and support the industry.

I say to the Government: please do not just put all our eggs in two baskets, but invest in and support other technologies. We need all those energy sources in future. Many of the technologies will be developed and deployed around the coast, in some of the more deprived communities in this country, so the jobs and investment that they will contribute will be massively beneficial not just for our energy security but for the wider economy. If we invest now—if we spend the time and money and expend the energy—Great Britain and Northern Ireland can yet again be the beating heart of this new global industrial revolution.

3.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I am tempted to say that, although this debate has been great, it has gone on for so long that Ms Jardine has turned into Mr Betts, so I did not get the chance to congratulate her on her new job.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I ask the Minister not to comment on the benefits of that.

Michael Shanks: I won't. Hopefully, it was not the upcoming speeches from me and the shadow Minister that drove her from Chamber. In any event, it is a delight to be here.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) not just for securing this debate and the customary way that he introduced it, but for the engagement we have had since I came into this post on this issue and many others. He is a great champion not just of marine renewables, but of Orkney and Shetland. In fact, in the last debate we had in this Chamber, he declared that God came from Orkney and Shetland. I am glad that we did not get into the theological nature of the debate this afternoon.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this wide-ranging debate. I pay tribute to the various policy teams and organisations that have clearly done a very effective job of getting a consistent set of lines out to Members of Parliament; they have certainly earned their salary this week. Those are important points, and I will address each of them.

As hon. Members have said, the sector has enormous potential relating not just to energy outcomes, but to the many positive opportunities in skills, supply chains and innovation. The UK can export that innovation to the rest of the world. I will say at the very beginning that the Government are hugely supportive of marine energy, and we want to do what we can to support it.

I will start by giving some context on the Government's position. As Members will be aware—many have raised it today—we published the "Clean Power 2030" action plan just before Christmas. That was an important step in providing some considerable detail on how the Government will deliver on our mission of clean power by 2030, which is hugely ambitious but achievable. It picks up on some of the strands that Members have raised this afternoon, including how we will deliver more effective grid connections and connections reform, as well as look at the planning system and consenting. It is about all the various things that Members have raised that hold back so much of the delivery of such projects across the country.

Clean power by 2030 is not some ideological project, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), and others in the Conservative party might like to suggest. It is a critical pathway for how we deliver energy security in the long term; all our constituents have been facing a considerable cost of living crisis as a result of us not having home-grown energy security. The clean power mission is about ensuring that we not only have that energy security but tackle the climate crisis and deliver economic growth. I make no apologies for the fact that we are a Government moving at pace, because it is important that we grasp the opportunities for the implementation of both marine technologies and the many other innovative technologies that Britain can be a world leader in delivering. It is also our best opportunity to deliver cheaper energy for people across the country.

I want to pick up specifically on the point made by the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) and the shadow Minister on the clean power action plan. It is right to say that marine renewables are not in the top lines of the pathways to clean power by 2030, because we do not think that that technology is quite at the point where it will be deployed at scale to help us to achieve that mission. That does not mean that we do not hope that projects will come onstream before 2030.

[Michael Shanks]

Although we are sprinting to deliver clean power by 2030, that will not be the end of the journey. By 2050, we estimate that the electricity demand in this country will have doubled, so this journey will require us to harness all possible technologies to continue to expand our energy supply over the coming decades. That is where I think marine renewables will start to play more of an important role, as they get past the commercialisation challenges and their price comes down, and as we have some more confidence in the technology.

Liz Saville Roberts: I do not know whether the Minister will touch on the Crown Estate, so I am taking the opportunity now. On the point about electricity demand doubling, there is such potential in areas such as Wales and Cornwall, if it so wishes. The concept that the Crown Estate should be so centralised in the United Kingdom works badly in the interests of not only Wales but areas such as Cornwall. What does the Minister tell his Welsh Labour colleagues about why that issue cannot be devolved, when it would make such a difference to our local economies?

Michael Shanks: I will touch on the Crown Estate later in my speech. On that specific point, I am afraid that I fundamentally disagree with the idea that devolving the Crown Estate is the answer, and I take issue with the suggestion that the Crown Estate's considerations in Wales somehow come from Whitehall. I have met a number of representatives of the Crown Estate, and they are engaged with the Welsh Government and with communities in Wales. If we can do more on that, I am very happy to reach out to the Crown Estate, although I am not directly responsible for it and it is not accountable to me. Of course, it has published a number of strategies recently and there is more coming on the long-term vision for the Celtic sea and other parts of the Crown Estate in Wales. It is about partnership work, which includes not just bringing together the Crown Estate but how we look at the planning system and consenting, as well as the strategic spatial energy plan more broadly to plan for the long term. I will come back to some of those points later.

Although marine renewables are not at the centre of that clean power action plan to 2030, they will hugely benefit from the actions that we will deliver through it, not least on grid connections. Grid connections are all about future-proofing the grid in this country so that it can meet the demand of the future, and prioritising a grid queue that has got out of control with over 700 GW waiting to connect, which is simply not deliverable.

I would like to turn to the issue of funding, but first I wish a happy birthday to the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), who does not look a day over 21—but that is the last time I will pander to the Lib Dems. He raised a point about Great British Energy, as did a number of other hon. Members, many of whom I cannot help but notice did not vote for it, but now want it to be headquartered in their constituencies and deliver significant amounts of funding. Great British Energy will play a role in this space. It is our first publicly owned energy champion, and it will deliver and deploy clean power across the country and help with some of the innovation and development work.

Marine renewables are exactly the kind of technology that Great British Energy might invest in at an early stage and have a significant impact on, rather than technologies that are at a more confident stage. Hon. Members may not have had the opportunity to reach out to Great British Energy—the Bill is still going through the House of Lords, so it does not technically exist yet—but the start-up chair, Jürgen Maier, has had a number of meetings across the UK, has engaged on questions about a whole range of technologies and is keen to continue to do so. It will be for Great British Energy, as an independent company, to make its own investment decisions based on a whole range of factors, including the return on investment potential, but I see marine renewable technology as a potential benefit for it.

We think that tidal stream energy will play a significant role, particularly beyond 2030. As many Members raised, tidal stream will bring balancing benefits to a future electricity system that will have renewables at its heart. The balancing role that tidal can play—as a baseload, in the traditional way of thinking about the electricity system—would be important. Currently over half of the world's tidal stream deployment is situated in UK waters. However, this Government want to go further and faster, as the technology has huge potential.

Aside from having one of the world's best tidal resources, the UK also hosts world-leading marine energy hubs. Many hon. Members spoke about the EMEC. I have been pleased to speak to the EMEC over the last few months; the Minister for Climate, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), visited recently and I hope to get to Orkney to do the same at some point.

When we came into power, the Government took the contracts for difference option that had been started by the previous Government and increased the budget to try to get as many projects as we could over the line. That led to a 50% increase in the ringfence for tidal stream to £15 million in the last allocation round. That demonstrated our commitment to the technology and ensured that 28 MW of tidal stream was secured in allocation round 6, including 9 MW for projects based in Orkney.

Mr Carmichael: The creation of the ringfence in AR4 had an absolutely transformative impact, so my sense is that meeting the industry's request for a much bigger ringfence in AR7 could do similar. I am not expecting the Minister to tell us today whether that is the direction of travel that the Government are intending to take—although he is welcome to—but could he at least tell us when we might get an answer on that?

Michael Shanks: The right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. One of the things we announced before Christmas in the clean power action plan was the broad outline of where we see allocation round 7 progressing this year, alongside the clean industry bonus. We will be saying more about that in the weeks ahead when we launch the initial information on what it will look like, but I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman is not surprised that I cannot announce anything today about what ringfences might be in place.

It is a tricky balance. The aim of the CfD, and the reason that it is effective at what we want it to do, is that it has to balance the deployment targets that we want to see with the critical role of delivering value for money

for those who will end up paying for it—the consumers and all our constituents. Ringfences have an important role to play, but there is a danger that a ringfence could lead to us paying significantly more for a particular technology than we might want to.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister is being very generous. Actually, the setting of the ringfence is a process that could be significantly improved by the taskforce being set up, as that would allow the Government to understand what is going on in the industry, and improved understanding could inform decisions such as the setting of the ringfence.

Michael Shanks: The right hon. Gentleman is determined to move me more quickly through my speech; I promise that I will come on to the taskforce. He is right that the more visibility we have of projects that might bid, the more aware we can be of what the sizes of ringfences and budgets for each pot in the CfD might look like. A range of factors makes that complex, such as whether projects are at final investment decision stage, or whether planning and consent are in place to allow them to bid into the auctions. There are many factors, but the visibility point is well made. On ringfencing, I hear what hon. Members have said and what has been passed to our Department over the past few months, but we will seek to balance the needs to deliver deployment and to ensure value for money when making these decisions.

A number of hon. Members raised the issues of licensing and consenting, which are at the heart of our aims for reform of the planning system. We want to continue to have a robust planning system in which communities have a voice, but we also want to move much faster in making decisions, so that projects are not held up for years on end.

Andrew Bowie: The Minister is being very generous, and I apologise for taking his time, given that I have just spoken. He talks about reforming the planning system so that projects can be built faster. Obviously, a lot of the projects we are speaking about are in Scotland. Can he update us on discussions with the Scottish Government about reform of the planning and consenting provisions in the Electricity Act 1989, which are seen by some—not by all—as an additional burden for companies seeking to develop such projects north of the border?

Michael Shanks: I am grateful for the shadow Minister's raising that point, because that is an important piece of work that we have been moving forward. With the Scottish Government, we launched a consultation, which ran for four weeks, on how the consenting process could be reformed, so that we can change the 1989 Act in a number of key areas. I think the consultation closed a couple of weeks ago; the responses are now being analysed, and we will bring forward legislation in due course.

That is a good example of partnership working with the Scottish Government on attempts to deal with some long-running issues. Across the UK, the key point is that the aim is not somehow to reduce the burden of planning where there are still opportunities for affected communities to contribute; it is about saying that it does not serve communities, developers or the Government well when decisions are held up for years on end. That is part of how we will speed these things up.

Other hon. Members mentioned the supply chain, which is incredibly important. That is why we as a Government have said that we are not agnostic about industrial policy in this country; we want manufacturing to come to these shores. It is encouraging to see that there is already significantly more UK content in tidal stream projects than in some other technologies that we have in this country. That is a real positive. I hope that we can continue that and learn from it for offshore wind and other technologies that we want to expand.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and many others asked about setting up a taskforce. I am very open minded about that, and when I met the Marine Energy Council just before Christmas to discuss this and a number of other matters, I said that. I cannot quite remember how many taskforces I am currently chairing—we do like a taskforce, and they are important—and I am extremely grateful for the expertise of those who give up their time to come into Government, to help us to shape action plans and route maps and to understand what the challenges are. I am open to the suggestion, but if we set up something like that it must have a clear purpose, and at end of it we want a set of actions that Government and others can drive forward. That is what my officials are working on, and I am happy to speak to the right hon. Gentleman more about it.

On the technology point, the Government's position is that overall the wave energy industry is at research and design phase. That is a key step on the journey to potentially achieving commercial viability, but we do not think it is quite there yet. We are aware that it has huge potential, given the nature of this country, and significant strides are being made to take it forward. My officials are regularly in touch with those in the sector and are being kept up to date on the latest developments. We hope that all these technologies will become extremely successful and the Government are happy to do whatever we can to support that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that he had not had time to write a speech but then, as always, he made a very eloquent contribution. I think that he and the hon. Member for South Devon made the same point about partnership, which is critical to all of this. The coast around this country offers enormous potential in our energy future, in floating offshore wind, in which we are already a world leader in so many ways—I hope we will continue to be so—and marine renewables, in the economic programme that we have already, and particularly in fishing. The point was strongly made that this is not about competing priorities, although it might seem like that; it is about how we can bring industries together to ensure that they co-exist. We can get real strength from that.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply to everyone who has spoken in the debate. If he is not able to reply to this question right away, I am happy for him to come back to me in writing. I know he is keen to engage with all the regional Administrations, and I wish to make a plea for the Northern Ireland Assembly. I know it was difficult because the Assembly was not meeting, but the Assembly is back and playing the game again. Has he had the opportunity to talk to the Department for the Economy, to see how we can move forward collectively and in partnership?

Michael Shanks: That is an incredibly important point. I told the hon. Gentleman the last time we spoke on this topic that I am going to Northern Ireland soon for the next inter-ministerial working group for Energy Ministers from around the UK; I think that is in March. I hope that while I am there I have the chance to meet different organisations, because I am keen to understand how the energy system in Northern Ireland works, given the separate grid. I do not have responsibility for energy policy in Northern Ireland but I want us to work together and learn from each other.

To conclude my remarks, I am, first of all, grateful—I thought that this debate might finish at 3 o'clock and I was going to have to sum it all up in 30 seconds, but I have a little more time. I thank right hon. and hon. Members again for their contributions. I have come away from every energy policy debate in this place enthused by the real cross-party consensus on so much of this. There is much on which we do not agree, but on a lot of this we do. We need to hold on to that consensus, because achieving the future economic and energy benefits of marine renewables will require them to outlive any particular Government. That consensus has been a strength over the past few decades and I hope it can continue. I have always said that I do not have any monopoly on wisdom on these questions and I am keen to hear and learn from projects in constituencies across the country.

It is clear that there is huge excitement in the sector. I hope that we can harness that and drive forward the development of these technologies in the future, and remove the barriers there at the moment. Those barriers will be removed even if they are not specifically barriers to marine projects, although I think marine projects will be affected by many things, such as planning and grid reform, to unlock the immense potential that we have across this country. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I hope to return to his constituency soon to see many of these projects and learn more about them. Together we can drive far more marine renewables in the UK, delivering value for money for households and harnessing the abundance of clean energy in this country.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Betts. I place on record that although, since the general election, I do not work in renewables, I still own shares in a company that does.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): That is not, strictly speaking, a point of order for the Chair, but it is relevant to the debate, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising it and putting it on the record.

3.24 pm

Mr Carmichael: I thank everybody who has attended. For the benefit of the Backbench Business Committee, who may run the rule over these things, we have had no fewer than 17 Members in the Chamber in the course of this debate, covering the length and breadth of the country. The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) said there was unity in the message; it was almost as if we had been briefed in these matters. This allows me to place on record my appreciation—shared by all who are engaged in this issue, I am sure—of the work of the UK Marine Energy Council, RenewableUK, Scottish Renewables, and in particular, the companies that get the devices in the water. Their commitment and dedication to decarbonisation and the development of this most important sector is nothing short of inspirational. I extend my gratitude to them and everyone who has contributed today.

We are not using the full amount of time that we have been allocated, so I am off to sign up the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for a Duolingo course in Italian. We may benefit from that in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for the marine renewables industry.

3.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Thursday 16 January 2025

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Gas Shipper Obligation Consultation

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones): Today the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is publishing a consultation on the design of a gas shipper obligation. The Government intend for the gas shipper obligation to be the long-term funding mechanism for hydrogen production business model payments to initial hydrogen production projects and related costs. Decisions on funding for future hydrogen production business model projects will consider consumer affordability, value for money and fairness.

We are working to rapidly increase the roll-out of home-grown, clean energy. Publication of this consultation demonstrates this Government's commitment to developing a thriving and world-leading UK hydrogen sector. Low-carbon hydrogen will play an important role in supporting the delivery of our clean energy superpower and growth missions, as a key enabler of a low-carbon and renewables-based energy system. It can make our energy system more flexible, resilient, and independent, and could lead to billions of pounds of savings by 2050. The Government are committed to leaving no community behind by investing in a new era for the clean energy industry and supporting good, skilled jobs as the sector matures. Low-carbon hydrogen provides opportunities for UK companies and workers, reigniting our industrial heartlands by investing in the industries of the future.

I will deposit a copy of "Funding mechanism for the Hydrogen Production Business Model" in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS367]

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