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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**  
(HANSARD)

Thursday 17 July 2025

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 17 July 2025*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

**Mr Speaker:** Before we begin, I am sure that the House will wish to join me in sending our best wishes to Robert Gibbs, catering operations manager, who will be leaving the House of Commons service tomorrow after 25 years. Robert was instrumental in setting up the catering operation in Portcullis House when it opened more than 20 years ago, and he has since been dedicated to his role in supporting the management of catering across the estate. He recently stepped up as acting director of catering services, leading and supporting the whole team for the past two years. I take this opportunity to thank Robert, on behalf of the whole House, for his 25 years of service, and to wish him well in the future. Robert is a good man and we will miss him.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### BUSINESS AND TRADE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Support for Cycle Manufacturers

1. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps he is taking to support small and medium cycle manufacturers. [905234]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** Small and medium-sized bicycle manufacturers are important for our green growth ambitions. Through the Government's industrial and trade strategies, we are backing innovation, sustainability and skills development to help businesses, including cycle manufacturers, to scale up so that they can compete globally and continue driving forward the UK's cycling economy.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I, too, wish Robert a happy next new adventure, Mr Speaker, and I wish Her Majesty the Queen a happy birthday.

The removal of anti-dumping duties on e-bikes from China has raised serious concerns for UK cycle manufacturers, which are mainly small and medium-sized businesses. With similar duties on standard bikes and parts now under review, many UK manufacturers are worried about navigating the complex trade investigation process. Will the Minister meet industry representatives to ensure that the voices of our small and medium-sized British cycling manufacturers are heard?

**Gareth Thomas:** I associate myself with your statement, Mr Speaker, and with the comments of the hon. Lady.

I recognise that there is concern about this issue among cycle manufacturers. The hon. Lady may be aware that some anti-dumping measures have been extended until 2029, but some have been lifted as a result of the work of the Trade Remedies Authority. We are always happy to meet cycle manufacturers to discuss their concerns—whether it is with the hon. Lady or directly with industry, I am very happy to ensure that such a meeting takes place.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Minister.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is not just cycle manufacturers that are having to pedal hard to survive under this Government. With business survey after business survey stating that tax is the biggest worry for business, will the Minister take this opportunity to assure businesses that the Chancellor will not be coming back to burden them with more in her Budget this autumn?

**Gareth Thomas:** First, I commend the hon. Lady for the humour in her question. As she will recognise, this is Business and Trade Question Time, not Treasury Question Time, where tax measures are usually dealt with, but I am sure that the Treasury will note her comments. I should perhaps point her to recent surveys of business confidence: the Lloyds Bank business barometer pointed out that business confidence is at a nine-year high. I am sure she will be delighted by that news.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** Well, except for the fact that the whole House will have heard that the Government are not prepared to rule out saddling cycle manufacturers and other businesses with more taxes this autumn. Will the Minister at the very least assure the House that he and his fellow Business Ministers are making representations to the Treasury that businesses really cannot take any more tax rises?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her suspicion that I have considerable influence with the Treasury. We are always in discussions with Treasury colleagues, and indeed colleagues across Government, about what more we can do to support business. Another indicator of improving business confidence is a survey by the American Express business barometer, which pointed out that almost three quarters of small and medium-sized enterprise bosses are confident about the future—again, up from last year.

### Parental Leave

2. **Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support working families through the parental leave system. [905235]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** Through our landmark Employment Rights Bill, we are making paternity leave and unpaid parental leave day one rights. This aligns then with maternity and adoption leave. But we are going further. We have launched the parental leave review, fulfilling our manifesto commitment. The review

will explore how the system can support working families and our modern economy. It will assess the system against four key goals: supporting maternal health; boosting economic growth through increased labour market participation; enabling flexible, balanced childcare choices; and, of course, ensuring the best start in life for our children.

**Mr Rand:** Improving our paternity leave offer will be good for parents, good for children and good for our economy. I recently organised an event with Labour colleagues, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, and Dad Shift, where we heard from Tesco about the benefits that six weeks of fully paid paternity leave had brought to its business. As part of the parental leave review, which I warmly welcome, will the Minister proactively reach out to businesses, such as Tesco, that are leading the way on paternity leave?

**Justin Madders:** I thank my hon. Friend for his efforts in this area, and indeed for highlighting the excellent work that some businesses are already doing, going further than the statutory minimum. As we know, when it comes to supporting working parents, every little helps. This review will be evidence based. It will reflect and consider the views and experiences of those who engage with the parental leave and pay system. I encourage all businesses to contribute to the call for evidence, which was launched earlier this month. I can assure my hon. Friend that I plan to engage constructively with businesses, including Tesco and business representatives, throughout the period of the review.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): Hugh's law would have brought in job protection and financial support for parents of children aged between 29 days and 16 years and guaranteed parental leave while those children were receiving palliative care. The Government voted down an amendment last night to the Employment Rights Bill that would have brought that in. This campaign has been fought by Ceri and Frances Menai-Davis, and many Government Back-Bench MPs have stood side by side with them through that campaign. Why has the Minister turned his back on those parents and those children?

**Justin Madders:** We are not turning our back on parents or children. We are actually having the biggest expansion in workers' rights and family-friendly policies that we have seen in a generation. Clearly, we will not be able to satisfy every issue in this area, but that is the point of the review. We are looking at the system in the round. It needs improving and modernising and that is what we intend to do.

### Industrial Strategy: North Wales

3. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the industrial strategy on north Wales. [905237]

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds):** I am delighted by the hugely positive response that the industrial strategy has received. It is a plan to lift every part of the country, making it easier and quicker to do business and to invest. For north Wales, with its formidable prowess in advanced manufacturing,

it is a very significant set of proposals. The same is true for Wales as a whole, as I demonstrated on Monday at Port Talbot at the groundbreaking of the new electric arc furnace, which will get the enhanced supercharger discounted energy price.

**Andrew Ranger:** I totally agree with my right hon. Friend; this Government's industrial strategy backs businesses in Wales not just with words, but with action and billions of pounds of investment over the next decade. In Wrexham, we are fortunate to have fantastic businesses, such as Kellogg's and Hydro Aluminium among others, which have exciting ambitions for high-tech expansion. One barrier that needs to be overcome is sufficient power supply to the industrial and trading estates where they are based. Will the Secretary of State please update me on how the strategic sites accelerator will support them in doing so and the proposed timeline for its implementation?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I thank my hon. Friend warmly for his question. I am excited about this. The strategic sites accelerator will prepare and accelerate sites for development by using Government tools, such as land acquisition, planning certainty and infrastructure support, to overcome existing barriers to investment on sites. It is designed to create jobs, to attract investment and to support our industrial and net zero priorities. It will work alongside other initiatives such as the connections accelerator service, which will streamline grid connections for major investment projects. It is about going faster, being bigger and being more ambitious for new investments, such as those that could come to my hon. Friend's area. I can tell him that the Office for Investment is working jointly with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Ofgem to take this vital work forward. I expect capital to be deployed initially under this programme in 2026-27.

### Arms Exports: Israel

4. **Charlie Maynard** (Witney) (LD): If he will suspend the export of UK-produced F-35 components to Israel. [905238]

**The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander):** I am conscious of the hon. Member's long-standing interest in these matters. I can assure him that exports of F-35 components directly to Israel are already suspended where they are for use by Israel and not for re-export to other countries.

**Charlie Maynard:** Our strategic export licensing criteria state specifically that licences should not be granted where there is

"a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law."

Given that the courts have sent this question back to Parliament, does the Minister accept that Israel is committing breaches of international humanitarian law; does he accept that the export of F-35 components is aiding in the commission of these wrongful acts; and if he maintains that we are not in breach of our own arms export laws, will he explain on the Floor of this House the basis for how he thinks we are compliant with our own laws?

**Mr Alexander:** The F-35 programme is the largest international collaborative defence programme in the world. The hon. Gentleman refers to the recent High Court judgment, and as the High Court itself noted, the UK cannot make changes to the F-35 programme unilaterally—that requires agreement across all the partner nations and the availability of a workable programme-level change to isolate end users across thousands of different components.

### Industrial Strategy: Teesside

**5. Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the industrial strategy on Teesside. [905239]

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds):** My hon. Friend's area is one of the most exciting investment locations in the world—in clean energy opportunities, carbon capture and storage, and offshore wind, but also in creative and digital investment, chemicals production and steel. Specific interventions for the Tees Valley include recommitting £160 million for its investment zone, enhanced support for the Teesside freeport for clean energy industries, and a lot of money for transport for city regions funding. Of particular interest to businesses in his area will be the new British industrial competitiveness scheme, which will reduce electricity costs by £35 to £40 per megawatt-hour for many businesses in Teesside.

**Luke Myer:** I am pleased that the Government have been listening to us and backing Teesside businesses with serious investment—I have been pushing for investment in clean power and advanced manufacturing. Last year, the 2024 UK tech jobs report named Middlesbrough as the UK's fastest-growing tech destination. Will Ministers work with me to bring in investment in frontier technologies such as artificial intelligence to our region as well?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** My hon. Friend and his colleagues are incredible champions for bringing investment into the area, and I recognise and thank him for that support. He is right to say that some of the perhaps more traditional industries, though very exciting for the future, are not just the only story in his area. He has mentioned tech and the creative industries too, and I would say they are huge opportunities. Specifically, our investment in skills to make sure that there is a pipeline of talent in every part of the country is a formidable and significant contribution to delivering on those opportunities. I look forward to continuing to work with him on these issues.

### Post Office IT Systems: Redress for Postmasters

**6. Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What recent steps he has taken to support postmasters seeking redress for harm caused by faulty IT systems. [905240]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** By the end of last month, approximately £1.1 billion had been paid in total redress to almost 8,000 claimants. This represents a fourfold increase over the past 12 months, with more than 5,000 victims receiving compensation for the first time. We have

also committed to extending redress to family members. As the House knows, there is still much left to do, and we are considering carefully the recommendations that Sir Wyn Williams made last week in this regard.

**Emma Foody:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware of a Northumberland constituent of mine who was a victim of the faulty Horizon system, leading to her losing her job and her business and becoming a victim of abuse in her own community. Despite my assistance, my constituent remains without an outcome to her claim. Will the Minister please look into this case and ensure that her claim is progressed as quickly as possible, so that she can receive justice?

**Gareth Thomas:** My hon. Friend describes just one example of the terrible human impact that the Post Office scandal has had on many good people up and down our country who served their communities and who were treated unbelievably badly by the Post Office. I will of course look into the case that my hon. Friend has raised. We are determined to do more to help not just her constituent but all those who are still waiting for compensation.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister and the Government for all they are doing in this area. The frustration is that those who deserve compensation, having been traumatised physically, emotionally and financially, have waited many years for the redress that they should be getting. There seems to be a delay for some who should be receiving the moneys now. Indeed, they are now being told that it could be another three years before they will receive any money. I genuinely urge the Minister and Government to make sure that people get the money ASAP—in other words, let us get it done this year.

**Gareth Thomas:** I, and I suspect the whole House, share the hon. Gentleman's frustration. There were many opportunities to stop the Post Office scandal, and compensation should have been paid out to all the victims a long time ago. We have quadrupled the amount of compensation paid out in the past 12 months, and 5,000 victims who had not received compensation 12 months ago have now done so. Is that good enough? Of course not; there is a lot more to do, and the recommendations that Sir Wyn Williams made last week are helpful in that regard.

### Trade Agreements: Implementation

**7. Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on implementing recent trade agreements. [905241]

**The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander):** The UK continues to make progress across its trade agreements programme to bring prosperity to communities across the country. On 30 June, for the US, we implemented legislation creating two new quotas for imports of beef and ethanol, and the US removed tariffs on UK civilian aerospace goods and reduced tariffs on UK auto as agreed in the UK-US economic deal that we announced back in May.



**Ben Coleman:** One of the businesses that stands to benefit from the EU trade agreement is a butcher and deli in my constituency that imports a lot of its products from Spain. At the moment, its shelves are unfortunately half-empty because its small Spanish supplier—effectively a man with a van—says he simply cannot cope with all the Brexit form filling. However, he has said that he expects things to get better from later this year thanks to the Government's deal with the EU, which is great news. Will the Minister set out what steps are being taken to implement the removal of the Brexit red tape of sanitary and phytosanitary checks, including the likely timetable?

**Mr Alexander:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I express my regret that that business, like so many across the country, finds itself buried in red tape as a consequence of the implementation of Brexit by the Conservative party. There are technical aspects of our agreement with the European Union that need to be worked through, but businesses across the country, such as the butchers and deli he described, will be willing to go on in that endeavour.

**Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con):** When is a trade deal not a trade deal? It has been nine weeks since the Prime Minister announced a deal to protect steel from US tariffs, and 10 weeks since the Secretary of State said that the India deal was “signed, sealed and delivered.” Will the Secretary of State publish the details of these important deals without delay before recess, or will he apologise for misleading the House?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. We do not accuse other Members of misleading the House. A little word before that—“inadvertently”—would support that question. No doubt the hon. Member will wish to withdraw that.

**Bradley Thomas** *indicated assent.*

**Mr Alexander:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am struggling to keep up with the Conservative party's position as to whether deals have been done. As I recollect, 34,000 workers in Jaguar Land Rover know exactly the difference that a Labour Government are making, given the challenge they would have faced with more than 25% tariffs had it not been for the work of the Prime Minister and the Business Secretary. But that is only one sector of the economy. In relation to steel and aluminium, of which the hon. Member spoke, we are continuing to work with the United States to ensure that the agreement to remove 25% tariffs on UK steel and aluminium can be implemented as soon as possible, but we are unique in the level of tariffs set compared with every other country in the world.

**Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab):** May I thank the Secretary of State for meeting regularly with me and my colleagues regarding the challenges facing the ceramics industry? I look forward to continuing to work with him to seek solutions for the challenges we face. What assessment has the Department made of the potential impact of its trade strategy on British businesses, and in particular the ceramics industry?

**Mr Alexander:** I saw that the general secretary of the GMB was focused on exactly those issues in relation to the ceramics industry this week, and I applaud the

concern he has shown for a key part of many local economies across the country. I assure my hon. Friend that we have given regard to every sector of the UK economy when negotiating the three trade deals secured by the Government—with the United States, as we just discussed, as well as with the European Union and, critically, with India.

**Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP):** The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 is a restrictive piece of legislation that centralises power to the UK Government and allows them to override the Scottish Parliament. Yesterday, the Labour Government confirmed they would not repeal or amend that Tory Act. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Scotland previously said that the Act was “bad and damaging” and undermined devolution, and the Business and Trade Secretary voted against it when in opposition. Will the Business and Trade Secretary confirm whether he would vote against it again now? Does he agree with the Secretary of State for Scotland that this Tory Act is an attack on the integrity of the Scottish Parliament?

**Mr Alexander:** Well, well, well; the grievance machine is being fired up again by the Scottish National party, even at the last Business and Trade questions. The reality is that the changes made to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act are proportionate, targeted and focused critically on supporting the many Scottish businesses that contributed to the consultation. I respectfully suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he should listen to Scottish business, which disproportionately benefits from the removal of barriers and the avoidance of new barriers going up in the critical single market that is the United Kingdom.

### High Street Businesses

8. **Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps he is taking to support high street SMEs. [905242]

12. **Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [905246]

16. **Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [905250]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** To breathe life back into Britain's high streets, we are addressing antisocial behaviour and crime, rolling out banking hubs, stamping out late payments, establishing a licensing taskforce, empowering communities to fill vacant properties and reforming the business rates system. There is more to do and our forthcoming small and medium enterprise strategy will set out further steps.

**Sarah Hall:** Warrington South is home to brilliant businesses such as Gourmand!, an award-winning French café, Mamars, a wonderful artisan bakery and deli, Hideout, which serves the best piña colada in Warrington—apparently—and the soon-to-open Zak's Shack, a new parent and child-focused café in Stockton Heath. Such businesses are the beating heart of our town, built by local entrepreneurs who serve the community they

love. However, set-up costs, business rates and other barriers make it harder for them to operate. Will the Minister outline how the Department specifically supports the independent hospitality and food retail sector?

**Gareth Thomas:** My hon. Friend makes Warrington sound like a particularly attractive place for a Business Minister to visit, so if she does not mind, I will add that to the list of places that I am keen to visit. Independent businesses, as she rightly says, play an important role in supporting local growth and community cohesion. We plan to introduce permanently lower business rates for retail hospitality and leisure properties with a rateable value of under £500,000 and we have introduced a hospitality support scheme to co-fund projects that aim to help those furthest from the job market into employment and to boost productivity. I think that will help many of the businesses in her constituency.

**Liz Twist:** When I am out and about in my constituency, I am always impressed by the dedication of staff and small business owners who bring our high streets to life. Places such as Blaydon's Precinct and Consett's Middle Street are at the heart of local pride and identity, but after years of austerity and a cost of living crisis, empty shops and the loss of vital amenities such as banks have taken a toll, especially in the north-east. What are the Government doing to support local businesses and revitalise high streets such as those?

**Gareth Thomas:** Before I had heard about the attractions of Warrington, I had heard about those of Consett. I was pleased to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and meet many of the great businesses there just before Christmas.

We have introduced measures to fill empty properties, including high-street rental auction powers for councils, which can free up space for new businesses. We are also protecting vital services on the high street through the roll-out of banking hubs, with 170 opened so far. This week, we published our Green Paper on the future of the Post Office, which sets out our plans to do even more to provide banking services on high streets, which, again, I hope will help to bring more footfall on to the high street and help businesses such as the ones that she knows only too well.

**Lewis Atkinson:** In the last Budget, the Government committed to a fairer business rates system that protects the high street. Making sure online retailers pay a fair share of rates will help support businesses on the high street in Sunderland. Will the Minister update the House on the engagement and design work that his Department are carrying out so that that new fairer system can be announced in the Budget?

**Gareth Thomas:** The Chancellor announced last year that from the next financial year, 2026-27, we intend to introduce permanently lower tax rates for retail hospitality and leisure properties. A permanent tax cut will ensure that those businesses will benefit from much-needed certainty and support. Treasury colleagues have been engaging businesses on their proposals for a fairer business rates system. The Government plan to publish an interim report on their work and more detail will also be set out in the Budget in the autumn.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Small independent businesses like Kitchen Croxley in my constituency have suggested that, to counter this Government's national insurance contribution increases, they will need to serve cold coffee and replace staff with touchscreens just to afford to stay open. What will the Minister do to ensure that small businesses are encouraged to grow, rather than being punished for being entrepreneurial, so that local bakeries like Kitchen Croxley can keep serving us cake and coffee?

**Gareth Thomas:** We have taken a range of measures to support businesses such as the one the hon. Gentleman mentions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced our plans for a business growth service to make it much easier for businesses to get the advice they need on how they can start up and scale up. The Chancellor set out in the spending review a two-thirds increase in the capacity of the British Business Bank, which will make it a lot easier for businesses to access the finance they need to start up and scale up. As many hospitality businesses continue to point out the significant crime and antisocial behaviour in town centres, the extra police officers that we have recruited, and our commitment to recruit still more, will make it easier to bear down on shoplifting and other antisocial behaviour.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): Labour-led West Suffolk district council now charges cafés and restaurants £500 for pavement licences for tables and chairs in front of their premises. Their justification for the cost is that the process for granting a pavement licence is more complex than it may initially appear as it involves a number of checks with highways authorities, the police and counter-terrorism advisers. Will the Minister look at pavement licences as an example of where we can deregulate?

**Gareth Thomas:** The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about what further measures we can take to bear down on the cost of regulation for small businesses. It is one reason the Chancellor set up a licensing taskforce that has brought forward a series of recommendations and will shortly publish its conclusions, which the Government will respond to quickly. We are absolutely determined to do what we can to bear down on the cost of regulation for SMEs.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): I refer the House to my registered interest as a small business owner. Retailers in my constituency, including city centre retailers, tell me that they are on their knees, crippled by soaring costs, rising national insurance contributions, rising antisocial behaviour, expensive and poor parking, and a lack of any city centre regeneration. These long-standing independent businesses—the lifeblood of our community—are now considering closure. Has the Minister considered their clear ask, which is reducing or freezing business rates, and having affordable and accessible parking and community-focused events to revive our high streets?

**Gareth Thomas:** One measure that the hon. Gentleman referenced was business rates. As I said in answer to previous questions, we are determined to introduce permanently lower business rates for the retail sector for businesses with properties under a value of £500,000.

I hope that will make a difference to businesses not only in Leicester in his constituency, but more generally across the country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Minister.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): At the heart of every high street are wonderful hospitality SMEs—pubs, cafés, restaurants, bars and coffee shops—yet the 2024 Budget was a hammer blow to them. With £3.4 billion of extra costs, one in 10 restaurants faces closure this year. Indeed, Labour's Budget has already cost hospitality 69,000 jobs. For context, in the same period the previous year, hospitality created 18,000 new jobs. Can the Minister assure the House that businesses that are hanging on by a thread will not face a hard landing this winter?

**Gareth Thomas:** The hon. Gentleman is one of those Conservative Front Benchers who have yet to tell us, if they do not like the increase in national insurance contributions, how they would pay for the extra investment in hospitals, schools and our police force. I gently say that the difficult decisions the Chancellor of the Exchequer had to take in the Budget last year were a direct result of the £22 billion black hole left to us by the Conservatives. Our small business strategy will set out further measures that we will take to have the back of British entrepreneurs.

**Greg Smith:** That answer is simply not good enough for the 63% of employees in the hospitality sector whose jobs are on the line. Yet we now read in the press that the Government appear set on forcing restaurateurs to monitor customers' calorie consumption—another crippling blow of red tape on top of national insurance hikes, minimum wage hikes and the regulatory firestorm of the Employment Rights Bill. Jeremy Clarkson is not wrong when he says that the Chancellor is “using a machine gun on publicans.”

Can the Minister really look hospitality SMEs on our high streets and beyond in the eye and say that this is somehow good for business?

**Gareth Thomas:** One reason the hon. Gentleman's party lost the confidence of business is that it promised many, many times that it would reform business rates and never did. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has set out our commitment to permanently lower business rates for the hospitality sector—we have already taken steps in that regard—and she will set out our plans to do even more. That is one way in which we are backing up our commitment to SMEs in the hospitality sector and more generally.

#### Capital and Export Finance: SMEs

9. **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that SMEs in Buckingham and Bletchley constituency can access capital and export finance as part of the UK's recent trade agreements. [905243]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** On 26 June, the Department published our trade strategy, announcing the expansion of UK Export Finance's capacity to £80 billion. We also

announced measures to give smaller firms, including those in Buckingham and Bletchley, better access to export protection insurance. The significant increase in the capacity of the British Business Bank will also help to improve access to capital for SMEs, including, potentially, in my hon. Friend's constituency.

**Callum Anderson:** Innovative high-growth companies, such as Envisics in Bletchley, are developing and exporting world-leading technology-driven products but face difficulties securing the domestic capital needed to scale up. Too often, overseas investors and, sometimes, Governments, offer both finance and other incentives for them to relocate. Will the Minister set out in more detail how his Department is working across Whitehall to ensure that domestic financial institutions, including Government-backed entities, are helping companies like Envisics to firmly anchor their innovations here in the UK?

**Gareth Thomas:** We heard during our SME consultation that one of the biggest issues facing small and medium-sized businesses that want to scale up relates to access to finance. Indeed, since 2011, the stock of bank lending to SMEs relative to GDP has fallen by around 50%, which graphically demonstrates the significance of my hon. Friend's point. We have been working closely with Treasury colleagues in particular, and when we launched the industrial strategy, we also launched a funding arrangement for the British Business Bank that will provide £4 billion of capital to our high-growth innovative businesses to ensure that they remain anchored in the UK and are able to scale up here.

#### Industrial Strategy: Cornwall

10. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the industrial strategy on Cornwall. [905244]

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds):** As we have heard, the industrial strategy is a plan to lift every part of the country, and it specifically recognises clean energy opportunities for offshore wind and nuclear in the great south-west. The strategy also highlights foundational industries relevant to its eight sectors' supply chains, including spotlighting critical minerals clusters in Cornwall. It included the launch of a new UK Export Finance loan guarantee scheme for domestic suppliers selling critical minerals to UK exporters. The upcoming 2025 critical minerals strategy will aim to secure a steady supply of minerals, optimising domestic resources and enhancing international collaboration.

**Perran Moon:** As the Secretary of State mentions, with its vast renewable energy and critical mineral resources, Cornwall is uniquely positioned to become a key driver of UK economic growth. Although the industrial strategy emphasises the role of mayoral strategic authorities and city regions, particularly in the north and midlands, does the Secretary of State agree that Cornwall's immense industrial potential must not be overlooked, and can he reassure me that unleashing the Cornish Celtic tiger with the economic investment that we need is not contingent on joining a mayoral combined authority?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I was dismayed this morning to wake up and hear the Reform party actively arguing for less investment



in Britain and telling businesses they should not invest in the UK. I find that absolutely absurd. There are a whole range of tools for local areas to shape their economies in the industrial strategy. Some relate to mayors, but many do not. It has the mix of tools that is required to unleash the potential of every part of the country, including his own.

**Andrew George (St Ives) (LD):** Further to that very encouraging response from the Secretary of State, does he acknowledge that Cornwall is the poorest region in the United Kingdom? It has great opportunities, as the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) pointed out, but it has been hampered since losing the highest level of EU structural aid. If we are going to take the opportunities and overcome the challenges that Cornwall faces, would the Secretary of State be prepared to meet the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth, me and other Cornish Members to establish a bespoke strategy for Cornwall to drive the private and public investment needed?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** First, let me say that, as someone who used to spend their family holidays in Cornwall, I must protest: I have had two questions from Cornish colleagues and not a single invite to visit Cornwall over the summer holidays. I really think that is unacceptable.

The economic history of Cornwall is particularly interesting—I have had this discussion with my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon)—and I recognise some of the specific issues that the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) has identified there. Of course, I am always willing to meet him, either in Cornwall or here in Parliament, to have that discussion. I believe there are key parts of the industrial strategy that will deliver the opportunities and the tools required to unleash what both colleagues are trying to achieve.

### Independent Retailers

11. **Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to support independent retailers. [905245]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** We have frozen the small business multiplier for 2025-26, protecting over 1 million ratepayers from bill increases, and we are creating a fairer business rates system that protects the high street and supports investment. Our forthcoming SME strategy will set out further plans to help businesses on the high street and beyond.

**Lee Barron:** In Corby and East Northamptonshire, retail and wholesale jobs account for the largest share of employment, supporting thousands of jobs. Will the Minister confirm that, unlike the last Tory Government, which promised to reform business rates but did absolutely nothing, this Labour Government are committed to delivering a fairer business rates system to support the vibrant high streets that our communities deserve?

**Gareth Thomas:** I know that Northamptonshire has a thriving retail and wholesale sector, and I commend my hon. Friend for championing the jobs and businesses in his constituency. He rightly says that the Conservatives

promised to reform business rates. What he did not say was that they promised many times to reform business rates and never did so. We have committed to permanently lower business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. The Government are committed to publishing soon an interim report that sets out further details on the direction of travel, and confirmation of our plans will come at the autumn Budget.

**Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con):** I recently met the owners of Bababing in my constituency, who have opened up new premises in Keighley. They want to grow and expand as quickly as possible, but they told me that this Government are stifling business growth for not only Bababing but many other SMEs across the country due to the decisions they made in the Budget last year to increase employer national insurance and the minimum wage, and the Employment Rights Bill, which is coming down the line. Do the Government recognise that they are stifling growth, and if so, what are they doing about it?

**Gareth Thomas:** I welcome the establishment of Bababing in the hon. Member's constituency. I recognise that difficult decisions had to be taken in the Budget. I am sure he has pointed out to the owners of Bababing that those difficult decisions were taken as a direct result of the £22 billion black hole that his party left us to tackle. Our small business strategy will set out a range of measures we are taking to support businesses, which I hope will help Bababing and other businesses in his constituency.

### Hospitality Sector

13. **Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD):** What steps he is taking to support the hospitality sector. [905247]

19. **Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** What steps he is taking to support the hospitality sector. [905258]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** We recognise the vital role hospitality plays in driving growth and strengthening all our communities. That is why we have committed to permanently lower business rates for the sector from 2026-27 and announced a hospitality fund to co-invest in projects that boost productivity and help community pubs adapt to local needs. It is also why we have launched an industry-led licensing taskforce to reduce red tape and other barriers.

**Tom Gordon:** I regularly meet the Harrogate business improvement district and the chamber of commerce, and we have a thriving hospitality and tourism sector in Harrogate and Knaresborough. I recently met Alison, a constituent who runs a number of local bars and restaurants, and she is worried that with the increase in employer NICs, rising energy costs and the other pressures that this Government are not getting to grips with, businesses like hers will not be there to see the benefits of business rates reform. What is the Minister doing with Treasury colleagues to support local hospitality?

**Gareth Thomas:** One of the most important measures that will help the hospitality sector is business rates reform. We have set out our commitment to do that, and we are working with all the different parts of the business community, including the hospitality sector, to get our reform proposals right. As I alluded to in a previous answer, we will publish an interim report giving more detail of our thinking on business rates reform, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer will confirm our plans in the Budget later this year.

**Christine Jardine:** I hope the Minister will join me in thanking all the hard-working hospitality staff who are about to have a very busy summer, particularly in Edinburgh West, where they are about to be immersed in the Edinburgh international festival, to which the Minister and the Secretary of State—all the Ministers, in fact—are, of course, invited. We are very hospitable in Edinburgh.

The hospitality industry is worth £198 million to my constituency, but businesses are suffering because of the national insurance changes, and in Scotland we will not benefit from business rates reform. With the national insurance changes and the impacts of Brexit and covid, it is a very uncertain time. What else will the Minister do to help businesses across Scotland that will not have the benefit of business rates reform?

**Gareth Thomas:** I thank the hon. Lady for her kind invitation. It is possible that I will be darkening the door of businesses in her constituency this summer.

We are determined to continue working with hospitality businesses, whether in Scotland or in the rest of the country. As I said in an earlier answer, we have set out plans for a licensing taskforce to look at what else we can do to lower the cost of red tape and regulation. As the hon. Lady rightly says, we are taking measures to reform business rates, and perhaps the Scottish Government might like to follow our example.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In my constituency, Lydia and Frankie both run businesses that employ around 50 individuals. They both have covid loans and energy loans on top of the usual business pressures they suffer. Beyond maintaining the current discount on business rates, may I urge the Government urgently to review business rates reform, which is so desperately needed?

**Gareth Thomas:** I recognise that my hon. Friend is a great champion of businesses in his constituency, and I was pleased to meet one of them when I was there recently. I absolutely recognise the significance of business rates reform. The Chancellor has been very clear that she is committed to business rates reform, and we will set out further detail on our plans in the Budget later this year.

**Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): Despite public transport linking people from the Braes, Bonnybridge, Bainsford and beyond to Falkirk, the high street has been dwindling over the past 20 years. SNP and Tory councillors decided to cut the “free after 3” parking scheme for Falkirk town centre businesses and further drive footfall away from our high street restaurants, cafés and pubs. In the forthcoming small business strategy, will the Minister

consider looking at how this Labour Government can support accessible and cheap parking in Scottish town centres?

**Gareth Thomas:** I very much sympathise with my hon. Friend’s frustration about what both the SNP and the Conservatives have done to free parking in his constituency. I sympathise because the Tory-run council in my constituency has taken similar steps to curtail free parking, which has undoubtedly had an impact on the town centre. I hope that the concerns my hon. Friend has articulated today will be heard loud and clear in his constituency, and that action will be taken. Our SME strategy will set out a range of steps that we are determined to take to back small businesses and help entrepreneurs across Britain.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): The value that hospitality businesses bring to their local communities goes far beyond their economic contributions: they also provide a vital social value and essential entry-level jobs. Flexible hours and conditions in the sector help those with other responsibilities, such as carers and new parents, to access work, while also offering many young people their first jobs. However, retail and hospitality businesses have been hit hard by tax changes in the October Budget, and they are reporting reduced hours, cancelled investment and closures; there have been nearly 70,000 hospitality job losses just since October. As economic strategies are rolled out, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Department for Work and Pensions goals to get people back to work are not being undermined by policies that shrink job opportunities in these sectors?

**Gareth Thomas:** I completely agree with the hon. Lady about the huge importance of hospitality to all our communities and to helping many people who have difficult routes into employment to get their first steps back into a job. One of the steps we have taken is to set up our hospitality fund, working with the great organisation Pub is The Hub, to help landlords to diversify what they offer and drive more footfall into the pub. The fund also supports charities that are working with those furthest away from the jobs market to get into jobs. It is strongly supported by hospitality businesses through the Hospitality Sector Council. As I have said, we have a commitment to a small business strategy and we will set out further measures to help hospitality in that regard.

### SME Operating Costs

14. **Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of operating costs for SMEs. [905248]

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Over the past five years, SMEs have faced a challenging operating environment because of the consequences of the Liz Truss Budget, the poorly negotiated trade deal with Europe, covid and increasing global uncertainty. Interest rates have come down four times under this Government, we have negotiated a new trade deal with Europe and, complementing our industrial and trade

strategies, we will bring forward an SME strategy to put in place further long-term support to help SMEs start up and expand.

**Susan Murray:** In my constituency and across Scotland, small and medium-sized businesses have taken blow after blow. The Conservatives bungled Brexit, increasing import costs, and energy costs are soaring. Most recently, the hike in national insurance contributions is decimating job opportunities in small and medium-sized businesses. What are the Government doing to support SMEs, which are at the heart of our economic growth, and to get people off benefits and back into work?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. Shorter answers please, Minister.

**Gareth Thomas:** Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker. I gently say to the hon. Lady that in a recent survey almost three quarters of SME businesses were confident about the future. She is right to challenge us to go further in increasing support for SMEs. One of the ways that we are doing that is by increasing access to finance for SMEs, through the significant expansion in the capacity of the British Business Bank.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call Bill Esterson to ask a short question.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): SME manufacturers are a key part of the planned renaissance in manufacturing in this country. Some of them are raising concerns about a lack of involvement in the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council. Will the Minister confirm that they are very much involved and have an important role to play in developing the SME strategy that he referred to?

**Gareth Thomas:** Absolutely. We want to hear from businesses up and down the UK, across different sectors, about the practical measures that we can take to support them and their plans to grow and develop. If my hon. Friend has particular examples of businesses that want to make representations, I am sure that we as a ministerial team would want to hear from them.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the plans in the recently announced industrial strategy to reduce some of the world's highest industrial energy prices. However, businesses across the UK, especially in hospitality and on our high streets, are still struggling with unaffordable energy costs. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that small businesses can benefit from more sustainable pricing? Will he encourage his Cabinet colleagues to consider proposals set out by the Liberal Democrats yesterday to break the link between gas prices and energy costs, which would halve energy bills in a decade, so that people and businesses across the country can enjoy the true benefits of cheap, clean and renewable power?

**Gareth Thomas:** I have to apologise to the hon. Lady, because I have not yet seen the Liberal Democrats' policy proposals, but I look forward to that treat over the summer. I am grateful to her for backing our plans on energy

costs. We are supporting a pilot in the west midlands to help SMEs to reduce their energy costs. It offers full energy audits and funding to implement measures that can bring down energy costs. The scheme seems to be working well, and we have recently extended it.

### Topical Questions

T1. [905259] **Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds):** This has been a year of real achievement for the Department for Business and Trade. From holding our record-breaking international investment summit, which saw £63 billion committed to the UK, to intervening decisively to save British Steel's Scunthorpe site and all the shipyards at Harland and Wolff, we have safeguarded thousands of jobs. We have reformed the Competition and Markets Authority, changed the zero emission vehicle mandate, altered the remit of the Low Pay Commission and introduced the Employment Rights Bill.

We have quadrupled compensation payments to victims of the Horizon scandal. We have agreed trade deals with India, the EU and the US and published a comprehensive trade strategy to help us to secure greater access to global markets for British business. We have brought forward our industrial strategy, and last week a survey by Deloitte found that Britain has become the most attractive place to invest in the world. We are delivering this Government's plan for change, putting money into people's pockets, driving growth and kickstarting a decade of national renewal.

**Martin Vickers:** The Secretary of State has tried to paint a glowing picture of what is happening, but I can tell him that in northern Lincolnshire there are growing concerns. There have been a number of business failures in the last few weeks in the Grimsby and Immingham areas, and he will be aware of the threat to hundreds of jobs at the Prax oil refinery. All that makes it even more important that the Scunthorpe steelworks has a long-term future. Can he update the House on the state of things at Scunthorpe?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I am always keen to update the hon. Member and colleagues on the situation with British Steel. We have cancelled the redundancy consultation and removed the immediate risk to 2,700 jobs. We have taken on new apprentices and invested significantly in improving health and safety on the site. We have provided significant working capital—that does not take into account yet the future revenue that will come. I am sure he will have been pleased to see that Network Rail has awarded British Steel a contract worth £500 million. We will continue to ensure that there is a long-term future for British Steel, and we will keep the House and himself updated to that effect.

T2. [905260] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): The Government's £500 million investment to support under-represented entrepreneurs was hugely welcomed by business leaders in my constituency, but access to capital is only part of the challenge. Many still face entrenched barriers around networks, mentoring and market access. Will the Minister set out



the steps that the Government are taking to ensure that that investment is complemented by wider reforms to break down any structural obstacles to scaling businesses in Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** The Government-backed invest in women taskforce is addressing many of these issues through its ecosystem working group, which promotes better access to networks, to support and to procurement opportunities. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, though, to say that we need to go further. The small business strategy will set out a range of further measures in that regard.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con):** May I start by paying tribute to Norman Tebbit? He was a former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and a great reformer who did a great deal to unleash growth in this country.

The only thing growing under this Government are the unemployment queues. Today, the Office for National Statistics revealed that the number of payrolled employees has fallen by 180,000 over the last year and 40,000 in the last month alone. Unemployment has been higher in every month since the Chancellor has been in office. In the last hour, we have heard news of another 500 job losses at Jaguar Land Rover. This is a great country with great people. When the Secretary of State talks to businesses, what reason do they give to him for unemployment rising?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** It is always nice to hear from the shadow Secretary of State. First, as he knows, the Office for National Statistics workforce survey shows that the overall number of jobs is higher after a year of this Government than it would have been if the Conservatives had remained in government—there are 380,000 additional jobs. He mentioned payroll jobs. Of course, they are important; they are one key factor, as is wages, which, as he knows, have risen faster in the first 10 months of this Government than they did in the first 10 years of the previous Government. Our productivity figures have also risen, and of course, we closely monitor the impacts of technology.

The shadow Secretary of State asked what businesses say to me. They say that this Government have brought stability after the mini-Budget disaster, which he was a key part of. They say that we have brought openness to the world and are navigating a difficult trading environment better than anyone else, and they recognise that our pro-business, pro-growth measures are delivering. There was nothing like the list I just gave of problems after 14 years of the previous Government.

**Andrew Griffith:** That answer was complacent and unsympathetic. It is the most vulnerable—those looking for their first shot, their first chance—who pay the price of unemployment.

Let us start again. Last night in the other place, the unemployment Bill was improved with sensible amendments to probation periods, a definition of seasonal workers that protects hospitality and agriculture, and provision

for a consultation about the impact on the smallest businesses. Those measures have been proposed by employers, and by independent business groups such as the Confederation of British Industry, Make UK and the Federation of Small Businesses, who say that the Bill in its current form is deeply damaging. If the Secretary of State will not shelve the Bill entirely, will he at least commit to accepting those entirely reasonable amendments?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** The shadow Secretary of State talks about vulnerable people. Which Government left one in eight young people not in education, employment or training, while net immigration hit 1 million? It was absolutely shameful, and we will take no lessons from Conservative Members. He talks about tackling barriers; who gave us the highest industrial energy prices in the developed world? The Conservative party. Who is dealing with that? Who has put millions into skills and training, finance, and the tools that local areas need? Those are the things that businesses want.

The shadow Secretary of State also talks about the Employment Rights Bill. I regret the Conservatives' knee-jerk ideological opposition to it; they could have been pragmatic. The Bill was a manifesto commitment, and we will deliver our manifesto commitments in full. There are issues on which we have to get the balance right, such as probation periods and the future monitoring of zero-hours contracts, and the commitment is of course real. Pragmatic engagement would have been a more constructive way forward than this knee-jerk ideological opposition.

**Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab):** The Business and Trade Committee's inquiry on small business is still open for evidence from Members from across the House. On Tuesday, we took evidence from the chief executive of Ofgem, who made it perfectly clear that a complete collapse of regulation in the years after covid led to thousands of businesses across our country paying higher energy bills than they needed to. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that the small business strategy, when published, will contain a strategy for bearing down on the energy rip-off that is challenging small businesses across our country?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I am always grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for his helpful and pragmatic work and engagement. I recognise the issue that he has highlighted. A lot of small businesses were locked into uncompetitive contracts after covid, and the legacy of that has been very difficult. Of course, we will always look at measures to address that. Fundamentally, we must break the link that means that gas sets the price of electricity in the UK. There are no shortcuts to that; we have to get enough clean energy on to the system to make that possible, which is exactly what the Government are doing.

T3. [905261] **John Glen (Salisbury) (Con):** On Monday, Tina McKenzie, the policy chair of the Federation of Small Businesses, said:

"For the first time in the history of the Small Business Index more small businesses are predicting they will shrink than expand, meaning that as a country we are potentially facing a very dangerous situation."



I have listened carefully to what the Economic Secretary to the Treasury has said about the concierge service, which I welcome, and have seen the Leeds reforms this week, much of which I welcome. However, will the Minister respond to that stark warning from a very credible source of information?

**Gareth Thomas:** I have a high regard for Tina McKenzie and the Federation of Small Businesses more generally, and we have been working extremely closely with them on thinking through what measures should be in the small business strategy to help businesses start up, scale up and thrive more generally. I gently point the right hon. Gentleman to the slightly more positive picture painted by the fact that the bosses of small and medium-sized enterprises have more confidence. We will continue to talk to the Federation of Small Businesses, and will do so in a lot more detail.

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK Labour Government are getting on with the serious business of delivering an industrial strategy that will support jobs in my Livingston constituency? That is in sharp contrast to the failing SNP Government, who have no industrial strategy, no plan for workers, and no plan to support Scotland's key sectors.

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Nationalism is fundamentally a creed based on grievance, rather than real solutions, and that stands in contrast to our approach. There are specific instances where we could deliver billions of pounds of investment to Scotland if there was a change in policy from the Scottish Government, be it on new nuclear in places where Scotland could benefit from small modular reactors, or on the recent decision to pull support for the Rolls-Royce-led plan for a welding centre for apprentices in the defence sector, which would enable them to support the maintenance of Royal Navy submarines. The SNP Government are actively making decisions that get in the way of that investment. If we cannot change their policy, let us change the Scottish Government.

T4. [905264] **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Eastbourne's posties are legends, including Manuel, who covers my patch. Upstream issues in the Royal Mail, however, mean that constituents like Michaela are not receiving letters for medical appointments until after the appointment time has passed. Will the Minister meet me to discuss these appalling delays, and the urgent action that must be taken to ensure that our residents get their post on time?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** The hon. Member is right to pay tribute to the tremendous work that posties do up and down the country, rain or shine, to deliver the mail. There have, of course, been issues with performance in the Royal Mail. I am happy to discuss that further with him, and to make sure, with the help of Ofcom, that we get the service that everyone deserves.

**Dame Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): On Friday, the Select Committee on Science, Innovation and Technology published its report on social media algorithms, following the Southport

riots. Indeed, there is a Select Committee statement on the report this afternoon. Stakeholders have expressed concern that ongoing trade negotiations with the United States might prevent the Government from responding to the report's recommendations, holding social media companies to account and keeping the public safe online. Can the Minister reassure us that that is not the case?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I can reassure my hon. Friend and all colleagues that those decisions will always be in the domain of this Government and this Parliament in the UK. There has been a lot of speculation, during the trade negotiations, about what may or may not be involved, but we have shown that we deliver on jobs, goods and services, and that is the basis of sound trade negotiations.

T6. [905267] **Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): My constituents, Mr and Mrs Greathead, supply specialist industrial products to businesses across the UK and Europe. Since Brexit, they have faced many extra layers of difficulty, delays and costs, and they are in the middle of a three-year battle with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to ensure that correct tariffs are charged. Will the Minister please look into the barriers that my constituents face when trading with Europe, and ensure that excessive red tape does not hold them back?

**Gareth Thomas:** I sympathise with the hon. Member's constituents on the difficulties that they face. On the challenges that he says they face with HMRC, he may want to get in contact with my colleague, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, who has responsibility for HMRC.

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): At a panel discussion earlier this year, I joined a group of leading women in the hospitality sector, who repeatedly highlighted that the lack of female representation in leadership roles and ownership is a persistent barrier to progress in the sector. What steps is the Minister taking to support women in the hospitality industry into leadership and ownership roles?

**Gareth Thomas:** This is an important issue. The Invest in Women taskforce is looking at some of the very real barriers that women entrepreneurs face, both in hospitality and more generally. Access to finance is one of the challenges that we have heard back about. A fund is being put together to help women entrepreneurs with that, but we need to do more, and our SMEs strategy will set out our plans in that regard.

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): We have heard this morning that the review of the UK Internal Market Act 2020 somehow tramples on Holyrood, but in fact, the Government say:

"Devolved Governments will have greater flexibility to set rules".

Is there not a danger that this invites the SNP Government to introduce change for the sake of change, and divergence for the sake of divergence, thus damaging trade right across the country?

**The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander):** Well, if I am simultaneously being criticised by the SNP and the Conservative party, I am pretty sure that we have got the balance right.

The UK Internal Market Act seeks to strike the appropriate balance between giving devolved Governments flexibility on policy and avoiding unnecessary barriers for UK businesses. I believe we have got that balance exactly right.

**Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): The over 1,000 employees at the Lotus plant in South Norfolk and Norwich North are the pride of our constituencies, and I thank the Secretary of State for his support in recent weeks. May I ask for a meeting with him and my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), so that we can talk about our discussions with local employees?

**Jonathan Reynolds:** I can absolutely guarantee my hon. Friend that we will have that meeting. I appreciate the work that we have been able to do together, reacting

to the media reports that initially surfaced. There is some clarity from the company, but not the full degree of clarity that we need. I will make sure that we get that meeting set up for him and his colleagues.

**Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): We have just had our fifth consecutive month of job losses announced, and research shows that as many as 17% of companies are considering redundancies. What is the Government's analysis of why this is happening?

**Gareth Thomas:** I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that we have had four interest rate cuts, almost 400,000 jobs have been created, our industrial strategy has been hugely welcomed, and we have had three deals, so it is perhaps not a surprise that recent surveys point to a nine-year high in business confidence.

## Strategy for Elections

10.41 am

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if she will make a statement on the new policies announced in the Government's strategy for elections.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** The Government have today published our strategy for modern and secure elections. When we came into power just over a year ago, the Government committed through our manifesto to bringing forward measures to strengthen our precious democracy and uphold the integrity of our elections. The strategy we have published today sets out how we will legislate and implement provisions to extend the voter franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds, increase participation in our elections, tackle the inconsistencies in voter identification rules, and protect our democracy by overhauling our political finance rules.

We recognise that there is a growing and worrying trend of candidates, administrators and electors facing harassment and intimidation, which has a chilling effect on our democracy. We are bringing forward measures to tackle this issue. I thank Mr Speaker and the Speaker's Conference for the work that is being conducted, and the report that has been published, on harassment and intimidation. We will fix the foundations of how elections operate by taking forward a range of practical measures to ensure that elections continue to be delivered successfully.

Our democracy is central to who we are as a country. We can take pride in its evolution, and in how it continues to inspire. The Government have a responsibility to protect and strengthen it. The plans we have announced today will future-proof our democracy, secure our elections and protect them against interference. We will deliver on these plans during the lifetime of this Parliament through a programme of reforms, which will include an elections Bill that will be introduced in due course. Through this strategy, we will usher in a new chapter in our democracy that reflects our principles and restores faith in our politics. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House on this very important agenda.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Minister.

**Paul Holmes:** Yesterday, the Department gave notice of a written ministerial statement on the Government's new strategy for elections, which is a significant policy document on changes to election law and political finance law—something that affects us all in this House. Instead of the Minister using this democratic Chamber to announce a new and wide-ranging strategy on democracy, the Government chose to announce it to the press in Monday's No. 10 lobby briefing—typical government by press release. In fact, it has just been announced on "BBC News". There will be no opportunity for parliamentary scrutiny until September, due to the pending recess.

Why did the Minister not choose to come to the House to announce this policy, despite us having been given word through a written ministerial statement that the Government would do so? Why did she not think it right to come here of her own accord to announce it?

Why has there been no consultation of political parties to date? This is contrary to the approach of the last Government, who actively consulted on changes.

This strategy has finally revealed the Government's ambition to allow a 16-year-old to vote in an election, but not to stand in it, probably because young people are abandoning the Labour party in droves. Why do they think a 16-year-old should be able vote, but not be allowed to buy a lottery ticket or an alcoholic drink, marry, go to war or even stand in the elections they are voting in? Is not the Government's position on the age of majority just hopelessly confused?

Does the Minister agree that, while foreign donations are already illegal and should remain so, steps should be taken to tighten the law to prevent donations from those who are not properly on the electoral roll, including the funnelling of money from impermissible sources? We welcome the U-turn on not scrapping voter ID, but will using bank cards not undermine the security of the ballot box, and what security measures will she bring in now that automatic registration has been announced?

Finally, what steps will the Minister take to tackle the important issue of intimidation in public life? Will the Government still abide by the long-standing convention that the Government of the day do not unilaterally impose measures directly affecting political parties without proper engagement and discussion? And will they stop announcing constitutional policy by press release?

**Rushanara Ali:** This Government were elected on a manifesto that committed us to granting 16-year-olds the right to vote and protecting our democracy from foreign money. I remind the hon. Gentleman that his party lost the general election, in the worst general election defeat for decades, so it is no wonder that the Conservatives are scared of the electorate. The truth is that young people deserve to have a stake and have a say in the future of our democracy. Young people can vote for any party they like, and it speaks volumes that he would prefer them to be silenced.

I remind the House that the hon. Gentleman's party sat in government for 14 years, and did nothing to close the gaping loopholes allowing foreign interference and foreign money to enter our system, despite independent experts calling for change. The Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report exposed malign efforts to channel foreign money into UK politics. Both the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Electoral Commission have called for strengthened regulations and greater transparency in political donations, alongside modernised enforcement. We make no apologies for finally taking the tough choices, and protecting Britain's democracy from malign foreign interference.

The real question for the hon. Gentleman is whether the Conservatives will finally end their addiction to donations from shell companies. Under the new laws, they will not have a choice, and we will not stop there, because they will finally have to update their weak due diligence checks and conduct enhanced checks. We will give the Electoral Commission the power to administer a hefty fine, of up to a maximum of £500,000, to deter bad behaviour. Instead of pointing the finger, the hon. Gentleman should be welcoming these changes, and taking the opportunity to finally clean up his party.

[*Rushanara Ali*]

We have published the elections strategy, and we have laid a written statement. I have responded in the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. I will continue to engage with parliamentary colleagues in the coming days, over the summer recess and in the autumn.

We want to make a series of changes, and I am determined to make sure we get as much cross-party agreement as possible. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman, because I believe that there is common ground on a range of issues. He knows all too well the harassment and intimidation, and threats to our lives, that many of us have faced. It is really important that we work on these agendas together.

On moving towards automated voter registration, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, we will carefully consider how we implement those changes to ensure they are done safely, and I look forward to working with colleagues on that. We have retained the voter ID changes made under the previous Government, but we recognise that certain groups of legitimate voters, particularly disabled voters, were excluded. We need to address that gap, and I know his party recognises that challenge, so we will ensure that we do not exclude legitimate voters. I look forward to working with him on issues of common interest and agreement.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the written statement and for her work behind the scenes.

We should welcome the opportunity for more people to be enfranchised. We should be very clear that one person losing the right to vote at the ballot box is one person too many. It is really important that we look at the issues around voter ID, and ensure more opportunities for people to have other forms of voter ID at the ballot box. It is important that we enfranchise our young people to vote. They participate in public life already, so they should also be entitled to vote.

It is really important to have system where it is easier to be registered to vote. When you move home, before you have even unpacked you get a council tax bill—the council already has your details—so it is good that we are looking at a system to ensure people are registered to vote. For far too long we have knocked on doors and people have said that they are interested but not registered to vote, so that is vital.

On ensuring candidates still feel safe, this is a big challenge and a threat to democracy. Will my hon. Friend outline what work she will be doing with the Electoral Commission on the intimidation and abuse faced by candidates?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. We do need questions and answers to be short.

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank my hon. Friend for her questions; she does important work in her Committee. The changes we are introducing will ensure that elected representatives,

candidates, campaigners and electoral staff, who play a unique role in our democracy, are properly protected. We will give courts the power to increase sentences for those who are hostile to candidates. An aggravated factor for intimidatory offence will be introduced, allowing courts to pass tougher sentences. We will also remove the requirement to publish candidates' addresses. We will consult with the Crown Prosecution Service, the Sentencing Council and other judicial bodies.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): We are very pleased that the Government have published the strategy, many aspects of which have the support of the Liberal Democrats. We have, for many years, championed votes at 16 and we are really glad that the Government have listened to those calls. We also welcome the measures to tackle dark and illicit money in our politics, and the recent plans to introduce supplementary voting for mayoral elections.

However, I am concerned that the strategy shows nowhere near the kind of ambition that we need to fix a system of elections that has left large swathes of the public feeling like their vote simply does not count. As Members across the House will know, last year's general election turned out the most disproportionate result in history, with nearly 60% of people who voted not represented in Parliament by the candidate they voted for.

This opportunity cannot be wasted. Will the Government go further? Will they look at scrapping voter ID in its entirety? Will they look at introducing further measures to ensure that foreign oligarchs such as Elon Musk are not able to interfere in British politics, including through party funding? And will they finally scrap first past the post and introduce fair votes via proportional representation?

**Rushanara Ali:** The hon. Lady has a lot of questions. The Government have no plans to change the electoral system for UK parliamentary and local elections. Her party, in the coalition Government, had the opportunity, through a referendum, to campaign and institute the appropriate changes. Our focus is on ensuring we address the manifesto commitments we made, including a voting age of 16. I am grateful to her and her party for their support. We are also taking action to tackle illicit finance and foreign interference. I very much hope that she and her colleagues will work with us on that very important agenda.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the Speaker's Conference, which is looking at the security of MPs, candidates and elections. Does my hon. Friend agree that a wide number of behaviours in our democratic system are intimidating candidates and, indeed, Members of this House, and that that is detrimental to our values and democracy? Will she expand on the measures in the strategy that will seek to alleviate those very serious problems?

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. In the 15 years I have been a Member of Parliament, we have seen a rise in hatred and hostility towards candidates and elected officials, and have sadly faced the loss of our dear colleagues, Jo Cox and Sir David Amess. This Government are determined to ensure that elected representatives,



candidates and election officials are protected, because this trend is having a devastating chilling effect on our democracy. We need to work together to protect our democracy while protecting freedom of speech. I would be happy to speak to my hon. Friend on the specific proposals as we proceed with their implementation.

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement, but I have not heard her say anything about the work of the boundary commissions for local government and constituencies. I think they should form part of this discussion, particularly to ensure that constituencies can be made up of genuine communities by getting rid of the pointless rule that a constituency cannot go beyond a certain region. Areas of Essex near my constituency, for instance, cannot be included within Romford, which only goes into London. Similarly, local council wards would surely be better if they were one-member wards, whereby they could be like mini-constituencies looking after a particular community. Would that not be a better way forward, and would the Minister consider it as part of the review?

**Rushanara Ali**: The hon. Gentleman will understand the process and work of the boundary commissions. This strategy is focused on the themes that I spoke to earlier, and that is what we will be focusing on.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections, I warmly welcome this policy paper. I think my hon. Friend the Minister and I were much more poorly equipped to vote when we were 18 than today's 16-year-olds, so I warmly welcome that measure. I also welcome the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, introduced last week, with the Government saying that first past the post

"can lead to individuals being elected with only a small proportion of the total votes cast",

and that Mayors and police and crime commissioners "should be elected with a greater consensus among their electors."

The Government have also claimed that this change will give the local electorate an "increased voice" and will "better support the democratic mandate of people elected to such positions".

Given the flawed nature of first past the post, will the Minister consider also reviewing the system for elections to this place?

**Rushanara Ali**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work with the APPG. He is aware of the policy of the Labour party and this Government on first past the post. I refer him to my previous answer on that question.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Fair elections must be elections that we can all trust. The most important element of our electoral system is that it is a secret ballot and that it should be down to the individual to make up their own mind. I am therefore deeply concerned that the widespread use of postal voting across the country is allowing dangerous fraud with many voters still intimidated and coerced into using postal votes on the instruction of somebody else. The review covers many practical aspects of postal voting, but what steps are the Government taking to ensure the accuracy and honesty of the postal voting system?

**Rushanara Ali**: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that his party introduced a series of changes, including on voter ID and other checks as electors register to vote. I am all too aware of the areas that need particular focus. We have retained the protections on postal voting. The hon. Gentleman is aware of a number of issues around postal votes, but I reassure him that there are laws to ensure that forgery and personation do not happen. We will retain the appropriate checks and safeguards that were introduced in the past.

**Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): May I put on record my profound thanks to the Minister for her personal commitment to ensuring that we renew confidence in democracy? I warmly welcome proposals around moving away from the first-past-the-post system in regional elections and restoring that part of our democracy. Will she outline how she will tackle the illicit finance that is flowing into our democracy? I have real concerns about how foreign influence damaging our democracy and I would be grateful for more information on how this strategy will deliver for our country.

**Rushanara Ali**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her work in this area. As I mentioned, the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report exposed malign efforts to channel foreign money into our politics. We are ensuring that the Electoral Commission will have the appropriate powers to support political parties, making sure that they do "know your donor" checks. Where parties fail in this area, a fine of up to £500,000 can be applied. We will apply that fine proportionately in recognition of the resource issues of smaller parties.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I very much welcome what is in the Government's policy, particularly votes for 16 and 17-year-olds. We already have this in Scotland for the Scottish parliamentary elections and I have also campaigned for the change to be made for general elections. Will the Minister confirm that this will be in place in time for the next general election, and how the information will be passed out to 16 and 17-year-olds that they will now be able to vote in general elections?

**Rushanara Ali**: I thank the hon. Lady for her support. We are looking very closely at the work in Scotland and Wales. We want to make sure that we take the time to implement the appropriate changes in time for the next general election, but we will work with the relevant institutions, including the Electoral Commission, education establishments, the Department for Education, charities, youth organisations and other interested bodies to make sure that we get this right.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I welcome the measures to take out dark money from our politics, but they will mean nothing unless we move forward aggressively to ban cryptocurrency donations in British politics. They are used for money laundering and to disguise dark money. They have no role in British politics. Will the Minister confirm that the elections Bill will ban cryptocurrency donations?

**Rushanara Ali**: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his work in this area through his Committee and for raising these issues. There are already a number of rules

[*Rushanara Ali*]

in place on political donations and they must be abided by, regardless of the type of donations made—including cryptocurrency donations. Our reforms of political finance to further strengthen our democracy will also apply to all donations, including those in cryptocurrency.

**Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Democracy is fragile and, here in the United Kingdom, our democracy is strongly in the crosshairs of nefarious states including Russia and China, which do not share our values. We are seeing increasing activity online, particularly to distort the outcome of elections, via platforms including TikTok, which have links to communist regimes in China. Can the Minister update the House on what steps are being taken in particular to protect our democracy from misinformation that vehemently seeks to distort the outcome of elections?

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important question. He will be aware that the defending democracy taskforce is leading the work on a range of issues—including, of course, in relation to the points that he has made. We are taking action to bear down on those issues, with a cross-Government approach. The Online Safety Act 2023 is important in relation to some of the points that he has made. As I have pointed out, we are also aware of the dangers of foreign interference and foreign state actors, and these reforms are really important to protect the integrity of our system and our democracy.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): As a member of the Speaker's Conference, I have heard evidence that has shocked me to my core, so I know how much needed these reforms are.

This week I have held my first summer school with 16 and 17-year-olds this week. Twenty of them have been learning about how they can make a change not only in their community, but in the country they live in. Does the Minister agree that they deserve to have their voices heard at the ballot box, too?

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank my hon. Friend for her work to support young people to participate in our democracy. Young people can work at 16, pay taxes and join the Army. There is no reason that they should not have the right to a say in who represents them and the right to shape their future. They are passionate about the issues affecting their communities and country; I know that at first hand from the work I have done over the years to support young people in their leadership journeys and in participating in our elections.

**Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): The SNP welcomes that the UK Government are catching up to Scotland, where we have had votes for 16-year-olds for the last nine years. However, it is clear that real change also requires looking at this Parliament's electoral system. Recent polls have shown that the leading party currently would win a majority of seats in the next election on less than 30% of the vote. Is it not long overdue that this Government reformed the UK Parliament's broken electoral system and introduced proportional representation, as Welsh Labour is doing in the Senedd?

**Rushanara Ali:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous answer. The Government have no plans to change the electoral system for UK parliamentary or local elections.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I welcome this announcement, and I can only speculate about why the Conservatives did not decide to clean up party funding when they were in Government. I want to echo some of the comments about proportional representation. Personally, I feel that it is at the heart of many of the problems the country has faced in recent times. I absolutely accept that proportional representation is not part of the Government's proposals, but will the Minister keep an open mind and look at how other strong democracies around the world have been able to use PR to both strengthen their democracy and create a more collaborative political culture?

**Rushanara Ali:** I refer my hon. Friend to my previous answer on the Labour party's position: the Government have no plans to change the electoral system. He is of course right that we should always learn from international experience. We are certainly doing that on a range of different agendas, including some of the themes of this strategy, and we will continue to do so.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): The Prime Minister has previously talked about extending the franchise to include additional foreign nationals. Will the Government take this opportunity to rule out ever extending the franchise to foreign nationals beyond existing rules?

**Rushanara Ali:** The focus of this strategy is on eligible voters in this country.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, which I chair, has been doing a lot of work on defending democracy. I am sure we will welcome the proposals, particularly on illicit finance and cracking down on unincorporated associations. I gently urge her to look closely at cryptocurrencies, which are clearly the currency of choice for criminals and rogue states. For example, one individual has routed £13 million into political organisations in this country through such a currency.

**Rushanara Ali:** My hon. Friend is right to be concerned about new challenges in relation to crypto, and I refer him to my previous answer on this point. We will look very closely at these issues to make sure that loopholes are closed, but I reassure him that the current powers cover donations through crypto and the changes we are making will also include crypto.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): There is lots in the strategy that the Liberal Democrats and I welcome. Could the Minister explain why there is a difference between Westminster elections and combined mayoral elections? We know that the majority of the British public want to see the scrapping of first past the post, and we know from when we had a ten-minute rule Bill on this subject during this Parliament that the majority of Members in this place want to see the scrapping of first past the post—indeed, we know that a

majority of Labour Members want to see the scrapping of first past the post. So why is there a difference between the different types of elections?

**Rushanara Ali:** The hon. Member may have critiques of the first-past-the-post system, but it provides a direct relationship between Members of the legislature and local constituencies, which is really important. The Liberal Democrats, in coalition with the Conservatives for five years, had the opportunity to introduce a referendum, but they lost that referendum. The supplementary voting system was implemented on the introduction of both mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections. We believe that it is more appropriate for selecting single-person executives.

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): I declare a former interest as a lawyer specialising in election law. I can say from that previous life that the previous Tory Government left our election law in an unfair and dangerous state: unfair in that they made it harder for people to vote, and dangerous in that they did nothing to prevent foreign actors from spending millions of pounds, roubles or dollars to interfere with our democracy. Does the Minister agree that it is high time to take robust action to make our democracy safe and fair for everyone, and will she assure the House that this will be a speedy and fair process?

**Rushanara Ali:** I look forward to using the expertise of colleagues—not only in my party but in others—so that we get this right. It is in all our interests to close the loopholes that are so dangerous and damaging for our democracy.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): There is much to welcome in these proposals to enhance our democracy, particularly on the safety of candidates. Reform is very much against votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, who, it is interesting to note, are completely split down the middle on this issue. However, I urge the Minister to consider our grave concerns with particular regard to postal voting, its security and the risks of personation. I have seen people carrying bag loads of postal votes to a polling station on election day. Surely that is completely wrong.

**Rushanara Ali:** I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we take those issues very seriously. Personating another voter is a deliberate act of fraud. It completely undermines our democracy and is a serious criminal offence that will continue to be prosecuted. If he has examples, he should report them to the police.

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): For 14 years, young people in my constituency were frustrated by politicians who simply did not listen to their concerns on affordable housing, on the climate crisis or on good local jobs. Does the Minister agree that listening to young people and engaging them in the process is a key first step in rebuilding some of the damage done to our democracy over the 14 years of incompetence we saw from the Tories?

**Rushanara Ali:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful case for giving young people, from the age of 16, the right to vote and participate in our democracy. Young people are the future, and it is vital that we all work

together to ensure that they learn about, and can participate in, our political system and our democracy. That is how we will ensure that our democracy is appreciated and that its value and influence, both in this country and globally, is shared by the next generation.

**Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): The Conservative Government seemingly tried to do everything possible to destroy trust in politics and to make it harder for people to vote. In my constituency, that led to just a 49% turnout at the last election. Will the Minister set out more about how the announcement will make it easier for people to engage in our democracy and how the Government will give the next generation a say in the future of our country through giving votes at 16?

**Rushanara Ali:** It is crucial that we engage electors—both young electors and the millions who are not registered to vote. We will do careful work to move towards automated voter registration and to ensure that it is a success. It is about making sure that every citizen who is eligible to vote registers and is able to vote.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): A previous parliamentary inquiry into the funding of Northern Ireland political parties expressed a concern about the lack of visibility on how cross-border parties—the likes of Sinn Féin—manage their fundraising and the difficulty for regulators in verifying that no Republic of Ireland, or indeed US-based, funds were used in UK elections. It recommended stronger audit requirements and a clear separation of cross-jurisdictional finances. Will the Minister assure me that these measures will apply equally across all parts of the United Kingdom and that regulators outside the United Kingdom will work together to ensure that we do not have those cross-jurisdictional moneys?

**Rushanara Ali:** I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are working through the interministerial group, which includes the relevant Northern Ireland Minister, to ensure that we introduce changes that are consistent with the Good Friday agreement and that recognise specific issues affecting different parts of the United Kingdom? I would be very happy to discuss our proposals further with him.

**Chris Kane** (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): In Scotland, where we have votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in council and Scottish Parliament elections, I have found that some of the most engaging, respectful and searching questions have come from those in that age group, whereas in general elections a 16 or 17-year-old's response is often, "I'll go and see if my mum or dad are in", or occasionally, "My dad's told me to tell you that he's not in." Given how respectful and engaged 16 and 17-year-olds are, does the Minister agree that they should have the right to express that engagement at the ballot box?

**Rushanara Ali:** I could not agree more. As my hon. Friend says, young people are passionate, engaged and interested in the issues that affect their lives. It is right that they should have the opportunity to participate in our democracy.

**Shokat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): According to the latest British social attitudes survey, 60% of the British public now support proportional representation.



[Shockat Adam]

Given that mayors will be elected under this system from 2027 onwards, why does the Minister refuse even to consider that fairer system so that by the time the next general election comes along, voters will have their views more fully and fairly represented?

**Rushanara Ali:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous answers on the same question.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend reflect on the fact that my experience of being elected under three electoral systems—additional member system, single transferable vote and first past the post—suggests that none of them are perfect? However, there are advantages to first past the post that we should be very careful about doing away with. The other two systems that I have been elected with served my constituents far worse than first past the post does.

Voting for 16 and 17-year-olds was passed by the Scottish Parliament a number of years ago and enabled young people to vote in elections as of 2016 in Scotland. I was delighted to vote for that measure, as were all members of the Scottish Parliament, so will the Scottish Conservatives give a lesson to their colleagues at Westminster about why they voted for it in 2016?

**Rushanara Ali:** I very much hope that the Scottish Conservatives will join us in supporting votes at 16.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Given that Northern Ireland has been used to photo ID for voting since the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, I have seen the benefits there of that simple form of accountability. However, difficulty remains with the abuse of the postal vote system. Looking to Northern Ireland as an evidential example of that, does the Minister intend to make changes to ensure that the ability to vote by post is not abused, as it currently is in some parts of Northern Ireland?

**Rushanara Ali:** I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am working with ministerial colleagues, including the Northern Ireland Minister, and we are sensitive to the differences in different contexts. I am happy to continue the dialogue with him.

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): Having spent more than a decade tackling financial crime before I came to this place, I welcome the Minister's remarks and the strategy on elections, which will protect our hard-won democracy from foreign interference and which also incorporates demands from the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, along with asks from the Electoral Commission on political finance rules. Does the Minister expect the forthcoming elections Bill to be in force before the local elections next May? Will company donations be permitted only from firms with UK ultimate beneficial owners? What guidance does she envisage being made available to political parties to fulfil their "know your donor" obligations? On enforcement, does she foresee that the Electoral

Commission and the Crown Prosecution Service will require additional resources to fulfil potential obligations under the forthcoming elections Bill?

**Rushanara Ali:** My hon. Friend has huge expertise in this area. I am happy to write to him on his specific questions, of which there were a number, but I want to reassure him that we will continue to work closely with the Electoral Commission. We want to ensure that the powers the commission is given go hand in hand with the support it provides to political parties on "know your donor" checks and on ensuring that we have put in place the appropriate safeguards.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome this strategy from the Government. Under the previous Government, we saw serious issues with MPs taking thousands of pounds from a Russia-linked entity, despite the Ministry of Defence raising "significant security concerns". I am concerned that we are still seeing such issues today. We have seen reports of Reform UK taking tens of thousands of pounds from a company whose owner is apparently based overseas. Does the Minister agree that this raises the urgent need to tighten donation rules and protect our democracy?

**Rushanara Ali:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right; foreign interference in British politics is a growing danger to our democracy and it is right that we tackle it. Our changes will boost transparency and accountability in politics by closing the loopholes that allow foreign funding to influence our politics and elections. This evolving and sophisticated threat has made it all too easy to funnel illicit money from abroad to political parties, which is why we are introducing these checks. We will legislate as soon as parliamentary time allows, in this Parliament.

**Florence Eshalomi:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is really important that Members of Parliament are accurate in our statements, and I just want some clarity. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) mentioned bags of postal votes, but you will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, that under the Elections Act 2022 and a subsequent statutory instrument—I served on its Committee as the shadow Minister for democracy—people handling postal votes will now be limited to handling no more than five postal votes for elections, plus their own postal votes. Does the hon. Member want to reflect on his statement about people carrying multiple bags of postal votes?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. I take it that she has notified the hon. Member mentioned.

**Florence Eshalomi** *indicated assent.*

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Obviously, the hon. Member's point of order is not a matter for the Chair, but she has put it on the record.



## NHS Pensions: Frontline Patient Care

11.22 am

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on NHS pensions and the impact of administrative delays on frontline patient care.

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth)**: As the House knows, the NHS pension scheme is administered by the NHS Business Services Authority, which is facing challenges, as are all public sector pension schemes, as a result of the coalition Government's public sector pension reforms in 2015, which in 2018 were found to have been discriminatory—known as the McCloud remedy. The work to remedy that is complex, and much of that I have already detailed in a written ministerial statement on 31 March and a subsequent urgent question. It is complex, technical work, and as the NHSBSA began to produce individual statements, it became clear that its initial estimate of the time needed for each one was too low. My written statement of 1 July updated the House that the NHSBSA did not meet its deadline to deliver statements to certain classes of member by that date and set out the actions that I was taking.

Let me be clear that this Government remain absolutely committed to providing affected members with their statements at the earliest opportunity, and that is what we are doing. The authority is developing a revised plan, and I will hold it to account against the new deadlines. I met the chief executive of the authority and was very clear about my disappointment in the progress, my expectation for the authority to remedy the situation for members, and the need to have a more robust assessment of the delivery plan. I also ensured that the independent chair of the NHS pension board is ready to set up an independent review of the delivery plans. I met her yesterday and was clear that I expect a thorough review of the process and a realistic assessment of delivery, and to hear her initial assessment. She will give her full report after the summer recess.

I will set new deadlines, including for members who are expecting statements this month. I will update the House as soon as possible, of course, both on the progress with the assessment and on the revised deadlines. Let me be clear that members will not face further financial detriment as a consequence of remediable service statement delays, interest on related pension arrears will be paid at 8%, and my Department and the authority have already put in place compensation arrangements for direct financial losses that members may have incurred.

People who have served in our NHS deserve their dues, and we will prioritise members based on need. Let me end by reassuring the House that there will be no direct impact on frontline care. I will continue to update the House.

**Dr Evans**: I declare an interest, for myself and on behalf of the shadow Front-Bench team, as we all have NHS pensions.

In April, Mr Speaker granted us an urgent question because the Government have no real plan for NHS pension statements. Today we return because the Government have now admitted in writing that a new plan is failing—

deadlines were missed, then pushed back, and now we have no idea what they are. Just 1,359 statements have been issued out of a required total of 381,920—just 0.35%. Further still, there is no comment on the remediable pension savings statements. Has the Government's own delayed deadline of July been met or discussed?

This matters. Hundreds of thousands of frontline doctors are not getting their pension statements. The British Medical Association is clear that senior doctors are stepping back from extra work for fear of unexpected tax liabilities. In short, taking on extra work risks an extra tax bill of thousands of pounds. When I raised this in April, the Minister retorted that I could have asked about the impact on services of cancelling the strikes. Well, I will do so now, as the strikes are back on. It will be the senior doctors who have to pick up the slack—the very doctors who are avoiding extra shifts for fear of the tax. If they will not take on the extra work for fear of the heavy tax burden, we have a huge problem.

This should be a priority for the Government, especially as we plan for winter pressures. What will the Minister do to remedy the situation with RSS? What will she do regarding RPSS? Ministers cannot just announce new deadlines and then miss them, so would she be kind enough to publish a delivery plan? Finally, she said that the Government have faith in the NHS Business Services Authority. Is that still the case? Will she demand that the Pensions Regulator steps up and expedites its investigation, given that the referral was made in December 2024? In the end, doctors are counting on her, and so are their patients.

**Karin Smyth**: As I outlined in my initial response and further to the written ministerial statement, we have asked for an independent review of the process and will report back as soon as possible with a realistic deadline for that. With regard to the strikes, we will continue to be open to discussing the avoidance of those strikes, and I hope that the Opposition will support us in that.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): Given that the summer recess is imminent, will the Minister use this opportunity to update the House on the number of additional appointments and, more importantly, the number by which the NHS waiting lists have fallen under this Government? Does she agree that it would be very nice if the Conservative party addressed the crisis in which they left our NHS? It is a mess that this Labour Government are proud to be clearing up.

**Karin Smyth**: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a superb advocate for his constituents. I met him again yesterday as he advocated for services in his constituency—that is the focus of Labour Members. He is absolutely right; as I said in my statement, this is part of the overall mess that we inherited from the Conservatives. As I said in my previous response on this issue, the problems outlined by Lord Darzi are wide and deep. It is still shocking, after a year in government, to be faced with the level of disaster that was left to us after a complete abdication of responsibility for sorting out the problems. We will continue to focus on getting more of the appointments that people so need and on reducing waiting lists, which is what our constituents expect.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to answer this urgent question. These administrative delays are deeply worrying. They make financial planning for those affected very difficult and, more importantly, stop doctors taking on additional work for the NHS as they could face large and unknown tax penalties. That was highlighted at the start of the year, when 4,000 NHS staff missed out on pension tax compensation after administrative failings.

This is having a direct impact on patient care, so how will the Minister reassure NHS staff regarding their pension entitlements, and when can they expect to see the compensation the Minister mentioned to encourage them back into the workforce? Can she assure the House that the Government are taking steps to prevent doctors with missing pension records from being unfairly penalised? Can she tell us how the Government will address the 156,000 years of missing pension data for GPs? Finally, will the major reorganisation of the NHS—especially the 50% cut to the organisations that oversee local health services—potentially compound this problem?

**Karin Smyth:** I thank the hon. Lady for those questions. She highlights a number of important issues regarding the complexity for the NHS Business Services Authority of dealing with this. There is a large number of high earners in this scheme. With regard to tax liabilities, that makes the system complex, as does the movement of doctors throughout the system in their career.

One issue I discussed with the independent reviewer yesterday is the need to ensure there is a technical look at solutions to issues such as missing years. The hon. Lady is right to highlight that changes make a difference to following people's careers through the system. There are wider lessons, which I have already started to discuss with the reviewer, about how we make the best use of technology so that we can track people through their careers and give confidence to the current workforce that we are addressing this not just for the cohort who have immediate issues but for the future. That is the sort of action this Government are taking. We do not do sticking plasters. We are looking at this very seriously.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I declare an interest, as a trustee of the parliamentary contributory pension fund.. Many people in the public sector receive a significant pension contribution, but they are not aware of its value. The Pension Schemes Bill currently going through Parliament presents an opportunity to place on someone's pay cheque and pay offer the annual value of that incredibly important contribution to a public sector pension fund. That is something that very few people in the private sector are now able to enjoy, and it feels like it is undervalued by those who benefit from it. Will she consider taking that opportunity?

**Karin Smyth:** I thank the hon. Lady for that really constructive suggestion. In my discussions with the NHSBSA, the reviewer and officials at the Department, I have raised similar issues. I am a member of the NHS pension scheme and the parliamentary pension scheme. I tell my young people that this is a really valuable asset, and I encourage my constituents who are looking for jobs in the NHS to consider the pension scheme, because people sometimes do not look at it immediately. We should look at ways to encourage people to take part in

the pension scheme—particularly for lower earners, it is a really valuable and stable contribution—and the value of it from the public purse should be well known.

I am not across the detail of the hon. Lady's point on the Pension Schemes Bill, but I will talk with my colleagues across Government about how we can look to do that and come back to her, because I agree that it is a really valuable thing—it rewards the contribution of public service, and we should make the most of it.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I would like to take this opportunity to put my thanks on the record to the Minister. I have spoken to her outside this place about the money we have secured for removing reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete at Harrogate district hospital, which I have been campaigning on for years.

It is great having state-of-the-art hospital facilities, but if we do not have the staff there, it is all a bit moot. I want to press the Minister on the concerns raised by colleagues that people might not come back or take on additional hours in the NHS as a result of this issue. Will she commit to updating Members throughout the recess on progress on this matter?

**Karin Smyth:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on, yet again, shoehorning in a reference to his local hospital, for which he does a great job.

People are determined to work in and support the national health service. We take remedying confidence in pensions seriously. I will not give further deadlines before we hear from the assessor. I have asked her to come back and make a very clear statement as soon as possible after the summer recess. I will then be happy to update the House.

Coming forward to work in the NHS is a matter of choice for individuals, and we particularly want to work with consultants to ensure that their career progression is the best it can be. We very much value their work in the service.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): With the British Medical Association set to strike, and with the Health Secretary reduced to pleading with it not to, thousands of patients are set to have their appointments cancelled. Can the Minister assure the House that she will grip this issue so that senior doctors do not also reduce their hours? And will she rule out bonuses for NHS Business Services Authority executives?

**Karin Smyth:** We are working very closely to ensure that resident doctors do not go on strike. We are very clear that we cannot negotiate on pay this year, but we will work with everybody to improve conditions. Some of those conditions are shocking, and we want to work constructively with them to avoid disruptive strike action.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): *The Daily Telegraph* reported in April that a quarter of doctors have reduced their overtime to avoid potential five-figure tax bills, and NHS capacity has been reduced by about 10% as a result. This has been raised many times when I have been out and about door-knocking across Keighley and Ilkley. What steps will the Government take to rectify this absurd situation, which is preventing doctors from working more to reduce waiting lists?

**Karin Smyth:** The hon. Gentleman highlights yet another mess that we inherited due to his party's lack of proper engagement with the workforce over the last decade to resolve the disincentives to making the system work more effectively.

Making the system work more efficiently and more effectively is a key part of our 10-year plan announced, I think, only last week—the days keep rolling by. We not only involved the public in those conversations but had valuable conversations and received insights from all staff groups. There is a real spirit of optimism that everyone wants to pull together to ensure that the incentives are right for staff at all levels—over 1.5 million of them—to make the NHS fit for the future, and that is what we are focused on.

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): The Minister knows that I have a keen interest in NHS reorganisation and the impact on frontline services, particularly in Mid Bedfordshire. Given the failures of NHSBSA, has consideration been given to reorganising that authority? I also repeat the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild): given the failures, will the Minister rule out bonuses for the NHSBSA's leadership?

**Karin Smyth:** I am totally focused on remedying this situation and learning from the mistakes. If further action is required, I will happily update the House at that point. My absolute focus at the moment is on getting everybody in that organisation and the independent review focused on sorting out the pension situation for those who have already lost out.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): As always, I thank the Minister very much for her answers. I recently read an article that referred to the mechanism of the NHS pension scheme as a “Ponzi scheme”, which gives me great concern about the scheme's ability to cope in 20 years' time. How do the Government and the Minister intend to convert the transitional arrangement in place since 2019—of topping up pensions from another source—into permanent and transparent arrangements so that we can stop robbing Peter to pay Paul and ensure that those who are working 70 hours a week in 2025 have a real pension and retirement fund in 2065?

**Karin Smyth:** The hon. Gentleman tempts me to stray further from the urgent question, but he raises an important point, further to the one raised by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), who is a trustee of the parliamentary contributory pension fund.

The NHS pension scheme is an extremely important part of the reward package that NHS staff at all levels absolutely deserve. We want to ensure that it, like the rest of the NHS, is fit for the future. If hon. Members have suggestions for how to make it work better, as part of ongoing discussions, I am happy to hear them.

## Business of the House

11.39 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell):** The business for the week commencing 21 July includes:

**MONDAY 21 JULY**—General debate on the 80th anniversary of victory over Japan.

**TUESDAY 22 JULY**—The Sir David Amess summer adjournment debate. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the summer recess at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 22 July and return on Monday 1 September.

The business for the week commencing 1 September will include:

**MONDAY 1 SEPTEMBER**—General debate on regional transport inequality, followed by general debate on devolution in Scotland. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**TUESDAY 2 SEPTEMBER**—Second Reading of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 3 SEPTEMBER**—Opposition day (10th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

**THURSDAY 4 SEPTEMBER**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill.

**FRIDAY 5 SEPTEMBER**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 8 September includes:

**MONDAY 8 SEPTEMBER**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Renters' Rights Bill. Further to the dates that have already been announced for the conference recess, when the House will rise at the close of business on Tuesday 16 September and return on Monday 13 October, Members may also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the November recess at the close of business on Wednesday 5 November and return on Tuesday 11 November.

The House will rise for the Christmas recess at the close of business on Thursday 18 December and return on Monday 5 January.

The House will rise for the February recess at the close of business on Thursday 12 February and return on Monday 23 February.

The House will rise for the Easter recess at the close of business on Thursday 26 March and return on Monday 13 April.

The House will rise for the early May bank holiday at the close of business on Thursday 30 April and return on Tuesday 5 May.

The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the close of business on Thursday 21 May and return on Monday 1 June.

And the House will rise for the summer recess at the close of business on Thursday 16 July 2026.



**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Where do we go from there? I call the shadow Leader of the House.

**Jesse Norman:** I doubt if the Leader of the House has ever given a more popular statement to the House of Commons. More seriously, this is a welcome development as it will give guidance to colleagues and their families, and I am sure it will be widely welcomed across the House, so I thank her for that.

I understand that Robert Gibbs, the acting director of catering services, will be leaving on Friday, after 25 years in this House. One shudders to think of the thousands of Members of the House of Commons and their staff whose lives will have been enriched by the joy of eating the food of the catering services under his command, and we thank him very much for his service. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in thanking him for his work.

We are getting close to the end of term and I want to thank all the staff for their service, and, of course, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, and the Clerks for the resilience, courage, determination and poker faces that they have kept through all the business questions that we have had since the beginning of the year.

It may come as slightly more of a surprise to the House that I also want to thank the Leader of the House. No one who has not held that position understands the amount of work that is involved in scheduling and managing the business of this House, let alone the amount of work involved in scheduling and managing the Prime Minister and Cabinet colleagues. The Leader of the House distinguished herself with her very graceful response to my remarks about my father some months ago, and I thank her again for that. I also thank her for her engagement and humour and, I must say, more than a few groan-inducing puns, of which we will undoubtedly see considerably more this morning and with which she has dealt with questions from colleagues across all parts of this House.

I hope I may register that it is a slight sadness to me that the Leader of the House has not been willing to answer my own questions in the same spirit. I ask these questions not in a personal capacity, but as the spokesman for His Majesty's official Opposition, whose function is, after all, to hold the Government to account. The refusal to answer genuine, sensible questions is actually a discourtesy not just to the House, but to our wider constitutional framework and ultimately the supreme source of sovereign authority in this country: the King in Parliament. I think any fair-minded person reviewing our exchanges would conclude that my questions are almost always directed at some public purpose, and it would undoubtedly improve business questions and the accountability and authority of the Leader of the House if she were able to engage with them.

In the same spirit, I will raise some serious questions about what the Government's position is with regard to Northern Ireland veterans. As the Leader of the House will know, hundreds and thousands of men and women went to Northern Ireland not of their own accord, but under orders and in a chain of command on the Queen's business, to combat the most serious terrorist organisation in the world at the time and to protect human lives and

human society. Many of those veterans, including many members of the special forces, cannot respond to the terrible injustice being done to them.

Almost exactly a year ago, barely three weeks after the election, the Government decided to abandon the appeals to the Supreme Court to uphold the key sections of the legacy Act against a High Court judgment in Northern Ireland. In the veterans debate on Monday, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that those sections were "unlawful" as a result of the judgment. Yesterday, in Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister himself said twice that the legacy Act had been "struck down". Unfortunately, those statements are both untrue and misleading.

There can be no doubt what the law is on this topic. A succession of the most senior judges in recent British history—Judges Steyn, Hope, Bingham, Hale and Reed among them—have made it absolutely clear that a declaration of incompatibility does not mean that the law is unlawful or has been struck down. As the then Senior Law Lord, Lord Bingham, said in 2004, in such cases the validity of the law "remains unaffected".

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is no lawyer, but he should understand that basic point, given his job. The Prime Minister, however, has been a barrister for 38 years, and a human rights lawyer for most of that time. It is inconceivable that he did not understand the distinction. To that extent, he was, whether deliberately or inadvertently, misleading the House.

The Secretary of State appeared to say that he had abandoned these appeals on political grounds. It is plain that the Government are split and have been unable to develop a satisfactory legal remedy in the 12 months since they abandoned the appeals, leaving thousands of veterans, many in their 70s and older, exposed to legal harassment, anxiety and trauma.

I put two serious and substantive questions to the Leader of the House. As the Leader of the House, in upholding the practices, tradition and honour of this House, will she ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister to correct those false and misleading statements to the House? When will we see legislation to address the legal gap that the Government's decision to abandon these legacy Act appeals has created?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Before the Leader of the House responds, in case I misheard, let me say that the shadow Leader of the House knows we do not accuse colleagues of misleading the House. "Inadvertent" is the language.

**Lucy Powell:** I was very pleased to announce the recess dates for the whole of the next academic year. That is one modernisation that I said I would bring in to give colleagues more certainty a year in advance, and I am pleased that we have been able to announce those dates today. As the House goes into recess next week, I join the shadow Leader of the House in thanking you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as Mr Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and all the House staff, for all the incredible work they do for us all year round.

In the spirit of the shadow Leader of the House's comments, I also thank him. We work closely behind the scenes on a number of boards and committees, and I always find his contributions to be valuable and considered. I share his comments about Robert Gibbs.

As the shadow Leader of the House said, he is the acting director of catering services, and will be leaving the House after 25 years of service. He has definitely kept us all very well fed—perhaps, at times, too well fed—and I wish him all the best.

I will also take this opportunity to mention that I know many Members across the House are deeply concerned by the use of a super-injunction that had the effect of keeping important policy and Government developments from this House. As Leader of the House of Commons, the fact that this situation continued for so long makes me deeply uncomfortable and concerned. We have long-established mechanisms and Committees for scrutinising secret and sensitive information in such cases, and as the Prime Minister said yesterday, the previous Government have some serious questions to answer, including about why the House was kept in the dark. I look forward to the Defence Committee and other Committees looking into these issues.

The shadow Leader of the House asked me to answer his questions. I am always happy to do so when he brings them to me, and he has raised some questions today about the Northern Ireland legacy Act. It is important that these issues are discussed sensitively, and that we work together on them without raising the temperature or using irresponsible rhetoric about them, because we all have profound respect for our veterans and owe a debt to them.

This is a complex situation, and we need to resolve it. The shadow Leader of the House might disagree, but the previous Government's legacy Act was found to be unlawful and unworkable, and is now subject to further court action. That means that currently no one is protected by that Act; neither does it give people the justice they want, because there would be so much legal uncertainty about doing so. That is why our priority is finding a way forward that gives veterans, survivors and communities confidence in the process. We will take our time to do this, and of course we will regularly update the House as we consider how to do so.

Today marks the year's anniversary of the first Labour monarch's speech in 15 years. The story of our Labour Government is told through the legislation we have already brought in. We are standing up for ordinary working people against the vested interests that hold our country back, giving people powers, new rights and opportunities and making the powerful more accountable. This has already led to real change and real-life impacts, and if you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, the House might want to think about a few of those today.

We have stopped water bosses taking bonuses for polluting our waters; we have brought South Western Railway back into public ownership, with more to come; we have saved the jobs of steelworkers in Scunthorpe; and we have banned zombie knives and ninja swords. Soon, off-road vehicles will be seized and crushed, and shoplifting will once again be taken seriously.

We have put fans and communities back at the heart of our national game. We are ending no-fault evictions and ensuring renters have rights over their landlords. We are capping the cost of school uniforms and have introduced free breakfast clubs, and we have changed the right to buy so that councils can build more social homes. We are ensuring that buses are run for people, not for profit, and we have capped bus fares. We have increased the national living wage—the biggest increase

since it was introduced—and very soon, we will see an end to exploitative zero-hours contracts and it will be against the law to fire and rehire. There is much more, but I will not go on.

It has also been a year since my first business questions. In that time, I have answered over 1,700 questions. I have had countless invitations to cafés and pubs—more of those, please. I have also had some invitations to sporting events and runs—less of those, thank you very much. We have heard about the wonderful people in communities in all corners of our country, who we are all here to represent. There is healthy competition about who represents the most beautiful, most active, most charitable, most visited, worst connected and most congested constituency, but I am sure colleagues will allow me to abuse my position at the Dispatch Box today to say that Manchester Central is obviously the best constituency overall.

Talking of which, I could not let this opportunity pass without telling the House that Manchester is buzzing right now with its bucket hats, its music and even parkas in this hot weather, as we have all come together to celebrate the Oasis reunion. As we say, "Manchester vibes in the area!" Let us not forget that when Oasis were last performing at Heaton Park, it was under a Labour Government. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] The shadow Leader of the House invited me to give the House a few more groaning puns, so if he will forgive me, "Some Might Say" that this Government have "The Masterplan" for change. I know it has not been a great year for the Conservatives since their biggest election defeat in history, but perhaps they need to "Stop Crying Your Heart Out", "Don't Look Back in Anger" and hope that Reform "Fade Away".

Talking of which, in the past year we have seen Reform come on the scene in the House of Commons. Some of their MPs have had better attendance rates than others. The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is, as usual, probably on a beach "Half the World Away". [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] No? There is more. [Interruption.] Come on, there is one last one. Let us hope that this Labour Government "Live Forever".

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Well, that was interesting. [Laughter.] To correct the record, Sussex Weald is the greatest constituency on Earth. I call Perran Moon.

**Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab):** Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. In Cornwall, the word dreckly means at some unspecified time in the future—a bit like mañana. I have learned since arriving in this place that there is an equivalent parliamentary expression: "in due course". Of the five Celtic languages, which include Manx Gaelic, only the Cornish language does not have part III minority language status. Can the Leader of the House advise me how I can get a Minister to tell me—without using the words dreckly, mañana or in due course—when this ridiculous Cornish language anomaly will be rectified?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is a powerful representative for Cornwall and his constituency. I will not use that phrase for him, but I will ensure that a Minister gives him a more immediate response about when we can see action on the Cornish language.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): If you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I join the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House in thanking you, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker, as well as the Clerks of the House and the House staff, for all the amazing work that they do to support us in our jobs. It is not an exaggeration to say that we would not be able to do it without all of them and all of you.

I also join the shadow Leader of the House in thanking the Leader of the House for the responses that she gives to business questions, which I see every single week. It has been a pleasure to get to know both of them on the various Committees and boards that we serve on, and I thank them for that.

Turning to a slightly more serious matter, last week the Secretary of State for Transport announced that the Government have cancelled the A12 widening scheme between Chelmsford and Colchester. That is incredibly disappointing news and a real blow to my Chelmsford constituents, Essex residents and the east of England as a whole. The A12 is a crucial link for communities across Essex, which supports logistics to the major international ports and airports in the region. It is also dangerously congested.

The scheme would have addressed both of those problems and improved the journeys of the approximately 90,000 vehicles that travel on the road every day. More critically, the cancellation's impact on house building could be profound. Local plans, including that of Chelmsford city council, are reliant on the A12 widening scheme going ahead. The cancellation could severely hamper the building of an estimated 55,000 new homes in the area.

With Labour pledging to build 1.5 million new homes by the end of this Parliament, this issue cuts across party lines. While I appreciate the financial constraints under which the Treasury is operating, it is notable that the two major road schemes that were cancelled in the recent announcement were both in the east of England, yet this region is a net contributor to the UK economy and has huge growth potential. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Housing, Communities and Local Government to meet me and a cross-party group of MPs so that we can discuss how we might still find ways to move forward with this vital project that will help the Government to deliver on their promises?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Lady for working with me over the last year in her role as the shadow Leader of the House for the Liberal Democrats. We work very closely together on the Modernisation Committee, the House of Commons Commission and a number of other Committees and boards, and I feel like she has been here for a long time, because she has really got into the detail of some of the issues, particularly the restoration and renewal programme. She has dedicated a huge amount of her time and energy to that, and I thank her for that. Hopefully, it can finally move forward. Now that she is shadow Leader of the House for the Liberal Democrats, I hope we see a change in MO over the recess, and that we do not get the first press release calling for a recall of Parliament a week yesterday, as we generally do. If she could arrange that, I am sure that she would be very popular with the House.

The hon. Lady raises a really important issue. We must make sure that we have the transport infrastructure that we need in our communities, especially to deliver our ambitious house building programme. She will be aware that the previous Government announced a raft of projects—including some in her constituency and in Essex—without having any plan to pay for them. We have had to look at all those projects and make sure that only those that are fully costed and affordable are given the green light. I hope she understands that, but I recognise that she, her constituents and many in the surrounding area will be frustrated about A12 expansion not progressing as they had hoped. I am very happy to arrange for her to have a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss options for the way forward.

**Chris Kane** (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Sometimes, when the puns keep coming, you just have to “Roll With It”.

In my constituency, Braehead community garden is a remarkable 2-acre, community-led project where residents grow fruit and vegetables in raised beds and polytunnels. It also has an apiary, a workshop and a 30 kW solar array. It hosts pumpkin festivals and flower shows, and it was once called the UK's “best community space” by the Society of Garden Designers. This year, it celebrates its 10th birthday. Just 2 miles away, in Fallin, a new community garden opened this year and is off to a strong start. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the remarkable volunteers at both projects for all that they do, and will she make time for a debate on the value of community gardens to wellbeing, food education and local life? I suspect that I know the answer to my next question: volunteers are now weeding, so will she join me to do a spot of weeding, in order to give them a break?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend has given a very good audition for parliamentary pun of the year. It was probably better than most of mine—but that is not hard, is it? I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those involved in the Braehead community garden project. It sounds like a really wonderful project, and he is absolutely right to say that gardening, and getting people outdoors and active, brings so much to our communities, in terms of wellbeing and tackling issues around food poverty and the like. I may be up for a bit of weeding, when I have time. Maybe I will go on gardening leave at some point in the future.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call Martin Vickers to speak on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee sends his apologies, and has asked me to report on his behalf. The Leader of the House has already drawn attention to next week's debates, particularly the Sir David Amess debate, which I urge Members to participate in. Sir David used to rattle off about 20 issues in the space of 10 minutes, and that provided him with a press release for every other day of the recess. It is a tactic that I can recommend to Members.

I thank the Leader of the House for giving Government time for the Victory over Japan Day debate; that debate was originally applied for through the Backbench Business



Committee. She drew attention to the debates in the Chamber on 1 September. I also draw attention to the fact that in Westminster Hall that week, there will be debates on defibrillator access, the adoption and special guardian support fund, and the future of terrestrial television.

Turning to my question, I am sure that the Leader of the House will be familiar with the Welfare of Animals (Transport) (Amendment) Regulations 2025. If she is not, may I ask her to look at them? They affect a major business in my constituency. The hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) has already prayed against the regulations, and I have added my name to that prayer. May I ask the Leader of the House to approach the relevant Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and ask for a delay to the implementation of the regulations to allow greater consultation with the industry?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for deputising for the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. He and the Chair are both regular attenders; until today, I think the Chair had not missed any of my sessions, apart from the one after Tottenham won the Europa league, which was a once-in-a-lifetime event for him.

The hon. Member is absolutely right to draw hon. Members' attention to the Sir David Amess debate. I strongly recommend that those who were not in the House with Sir David look back through *Hansard* at his speeches in those debates, or view them. The pre-summer Adjournment debate carries his name for a reason. He really did make the very best use of it, and he is a role model that I am sure many will want to follow next week.

The hon. Member asked me about the statutory instrument brought forward under, I think, the welfare of animals legislation. I have not studied that statutory instrument, but I will ensure that a Minister is in touch with him directly to discuss his concerns and make sure they are addressed.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): Members who are frequent flyers at business questions may contradict me when I say that Stafford is the best constituency, but I do not think that any would contradict its being the most gridlocked, so I thank the Leader of the House for her answer last week.

I have recently seen a huge surge in casework from constituents who are unable to access blood tests; there are long delays. There are 20 venues in north Staffordshire at which to get blood tests, but only one in south Staffordshire. Our area is being left behind, and it is just not fair on my constituents. Please could we have a debate in Government time on access to primary care?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for being a regular attender; she uses these sessions to great effect on behalf of her constituents. I am sorry to hear about the difficulties that her constituents face in accessing basic services such as routine blood tests; that is clearly not good enough. Our 10-year plan will expand the availability of appointments—we got in another 4 million GP appointments since the election last year—as well as opening hours and community diagnostic services. I hope her constituents will see an improvement soon.

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): I would like to make the Leader of the House aware of the serious delays to cladding remediation faced by residents of the Axis apartments in Mercury Gardens, Romford. It is a common problem across the country. Residents of the Axis apartments have endured years of uncertainty since fire safety issues were identified nearly four years ago, following the Grenfell Tower fire. Despite the building's management agent applying for permission for remediation works over a year ago, the Building Safety Regulator has still not approved the application. This regulatory delay has left leaseholders trapped; they are unable to remortgage or sell their homes, and face ever-increasing insurance premiums and unaffordable safety costs. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to make an urgent statement on this matter, so that my constituents, and others across the country facing similar problems, can escape financial ruin and move on with their lives?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Member's constituency. It is one with which I am extremely familiar; in my constituency, dozens and dozens of buildings face many of the same problems. As he says, there have been very serious teething challenges for the Building Safety Regulator in processing its caseload. That is why the Secretary of State recently announced some quite big changes to its leadership, capacity and management; they were laid before this House two or three weeks ago. I am confident that will speed up the cases he describes. We have a remediation action plan as well, and the Secretary of State will come to the House soon to keep us updated.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): In April, I raised the issue of the need for blood donations, and of people from diverse communities being turned away. In response to parliamentary questions about diversity and blood referrals, I initially received data, provided by NHS Blood and Transplant, stating that 70% of black blood donors were being turned away for low haemoglobin levels. The Department of Health and Social Care withdrew that data, stating that it was incorrect. Two months and a point of order later, I received new data saying that 40% of black and mixed-heritage blood donors were being turned away for low haemoglobin levels, but that data was not even for the same period.

The NHS needs three blood donations every single minute for people in emergency situations, women who have given birth, and people with blood cancer and conditions such as sickle cell, the fastest growing genetic condition in the country, whose sufferers require specifically matched blood, if they receive donations. On NHS Blood and Transplant's website, it indicates that it can meet that demand only 50% of the time. When we return from recess, may we have an urgent debate in Government time on what happens the other 50% of the time? Receiving mismatched blood is very, very serious. With increasing demand, we simply cannot afford to turn away blood donors, particularly those from diverse communities.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that incredibly important issue. I am really sorry to hear that she has had confusing, incorrect or slow responses to parliamentary questions or correspondence from the

[Lucy Powell]

Department of Health and Social Care. I will certainly take that up for her. She is right that we need as many people as possible giving blood, especially from diverse communities, because we have blood supply shortages. We need to break down the barriers to doing so, which is why her question is so important. I will ensure that she gets a full response.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): With no garden waste or recycling collections since the start of the year, all-out bin collection strikes now entering day 129, and no sign of an agreement, Birmingham's bin strike is having an impact on not just the residents and reputation of the UK's second city, but on the broader west midlands. We have had radio silence from the Deputy Prime Minister and those on the Labour Benches, and not a squeak from Mayor Parker. Before the House rises for the summer recess, and given the incredibly hot weather, will the Leader of the House urge her ministerial colleagues to make a statement to the House, and to update us on how we will fix the problem? Perhaps she will do better than me, because I have been trying and failing to secure an urgent question all week.

**Lucy Powell:** This is an issue of great concern to the right hon. Lady, her constituents and many others across the House. The Government's priority is, and has always been, Birmingham's residents and dealing with the issue. We have worked closely and intensively with the council to ensure rubbish collections have continued, and to clean up the streets for residents and in the interests of public health. We remain in close contact with the council. We want an end to the dispute as soon as possible, which is why we continue to urge the unions to come to the table and engage in conversations constructively.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): This morning, we heard the incredible news that a novel in vitro fertilisation procedure, developed at Newcastle University, has resulted in eight babies being born free from mitochondrial disease. That is life-changing for families affected by this devastating and previously incurable condition. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) and I pay tribute to all the academics and clinicians who, over many years, have played a vital role in developing these treatments and supporting patients. In the course of my work on rare diseases, I have had the chance to visit the centre, and to see the research and clinical work that it does on mitochondrial disease, which affects so many conditions. May we have a debate in Government time, please, on the north-east's role in advancing world-leading, patient-led, life science research?

**Lucy Powell:** First of all, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist), and for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), for all the campaigning and excellent work that they have done on this issue. I am sure it brought a smile to every Member, as it did to me last night and this morning, to have good news on the airwaves for a change. It just goes to show, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett says, how world-leading we are in this country, and in the north-east, on some of

these issues. The mitochondrial donation treatment is groundbreaking. I remember when we discussed the issue in Parliament; we grappled with the ethical issues, but seeing the results come through years later, I think we can all be pleased that we took the right decision back then.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): The Leader of the House mentioned the statement by the Secretary of State for Defence about the super-injunction. The Defence Committee will undoubtedly embark on an inquiry, but before we do, can the Leader of the House state very clearly the Government's position? Is it ever right to use a super-injunction?

**Lucy Powell:** As I said, the Defence Secretary, the Prime Minister, the rest of the Government and I are deeply uncomfortable about how the situation unfolded. Many of us did not even know about this until this week. The House was kept in the dark, which it should not be at any time. I understand the intention, which was to try to keep people safe, but I think some of the actions could have been different, and the House could have been informed of some of the issues. We look at things on a case-by-case basis, but I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that we are deeply uncomfortable and concerned about how the matter progressed.

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House will agree that grassroots community football clubs, such as North Sunderland and Berwick Rangers in my constituency, play a vital role in the development of elite footballers, such as Lucy Bronze, who hopefully tonight will go "Supersonic" in her game for the Lionesses in the quarter-finals of the Euros. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating players such as Lucy Bronze, who started out at another football club in my constituency, Alnwick Town, and grant a debate in Government time on how we can ensure that the money from elite football gets to grassroots football to develop the Lucy Bronzes of the future?

**Lucy Powell:** I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Lucy Bronze and the rest of the women's Euros team. We are all getting behind them in the coming days. He is absolutely right that our grassroots clubs, whether in men's or women's football, are the engine of the football pyramid. That is why I am really pleased, and I am sure the whole House—well, those of us on the Labour Benches, anyway—will be pleased that the Football Governance Bill has now passed all its stages and will hopefully soon receive Royal Assent. We are putting fans and community clubs right back at the heart of the football pyramid, which is as it should be.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): A couple of weeks ago at a Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network event in Harrogate, I met constituents who came to the UK from Afghanistan under the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy scheme, and who still have family living in Afghanistan. They showed me photos of their loved ones, some smiling and some a lot more brutal and bleak after attacks they had faced. The statement earlier this week focused rightly on the Afghanistan Response Route scheme and the associated super-injunction. Will the Leader of the House liaise

with her Cabinet colleagues and look for further opportunities for MPs to meet relevant Ministers to discuss existing applications under the ARAP scheme, such as those of my constituents and their families?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue on behalf of the Afghan refugees in his constituency. He is absolutely right that the UK made a commitment—the right commitment—to honour our moral obligation that we owe to those Afghans who stood with us through all those years of conflict and terror. He will be aware that, to date, around 36,000 Afghans have resettled in the UK under Government schemes—a significant number. We have to keep the schemes under constant review and assess the risks to those in countries such as Afghanistan. That is why we have taken the decisions we have to close some of the schemes recently, but I will ensure he gets a response from a Minister.

**Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): On Monday, I hosted the second Corby and East Northamptonshire special educational needs roundtable, and on Tuesday we had SENDS 4 Dad in Parliament. Parents and professionals keep telling me how important early years support and intervention is for children with special educational needs. With the Government rightly rolling out Best Start family hubs across the country, including one in Corby and one in East Northamptonshire, will the Leader of the House back those calls to make sure the hubs give real early intervention and support for families with special educational needs?

**Lucy Powell:** I think special educational needs is the issue that has been raised most with me in the year of business questions I have answered. I thank my hon. Friend for raising it today. He is absolutely right that early intervention, early diagnosis and early support are absolutely critical, and that is what the Best Start family hubs are all about. At the moment, the special educational needs system is adversarial, and it takes far too long for people to get the kind of support that they need. In the end, that does not give us good outcomes; it costs more, and it means we have to take more serious interventions later on. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this matter today.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The SNP Government's fire and rescue service is consulting on plans to downgrade Hawick fire station from 24/7 cover to weekday daytime hours only. Thousands of people locally have signed a petition, with residents concerned that these proposals could put lives at risk. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the hard-working local fire crews and in calling on the SNP Government to properly fund the Scottish fire and rescue service so that fire stations like Hawick are not put at risk?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for being such a doughty champion for his constituency and for the many invitations I have had to his constituency over the past year, which I will take him up on at some stage. He has previously raised with me the shocking situation with the Scottish fire and rescue service, and I am sorry to hear of this downgrade today. I absolutely join him in pressing the Scottish Government to take heed of his

calls. They were given their biggest ever settlement in the recent Budget; there really are no excuses for not properly supporting and funding the Scottish fire and rescue service.

**Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I am happy and so proud that the Dialogue Express Café has recently opened in my constituency on the Carpenters estate. Operating out of a refurbished train carriage, the café is a vibrant community hub that combines the experience of enjoying a great coffee with learning and interacting through British Sign Language. Customers will see a video of how to order a drink in sign language, and can then communicate with the baristas, some of whom are deaf and some of whom are hearing.

As one of the first ever Labour candidates to make a video in sign language more than a decade ago, it is something close to my heart. British Sign Language is not just a language, but a gateway to learning and opportunity for thousands. It is part of deaf identity and culture—one we should all embrace and be part of. I am so pleased that in Stratford and Bow and Newham council, we see this at first hand. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Dialogue Express Café, its founder Hakan, as well as Karissa, Victor and the whole team, and agree that theirs is a trailblazing example of how to celebrate BSL and to celebrate and create visibility of deaf culture and deaf pride?

**Lucy Powell:** I could not have put that better myself. What a great tribute my hon. Friend has paid to the Dialogue Express Café in her constituency and to its work in bringing people together, breaking down barriers, creating opportunity for those from the deaf community, celebrating deaf culture and identity and celebrating BSL. I will dig out her video—perhaps we could all have a bit of training on how to order a coffee in sign language.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): In a few weeks' time, more than 500 Kate Bush fans from up and down the UK and across the world will descend on to the moors near Haworth for what is billed as the "The Most Wuthering Heights Day Ever". This year, the mass wuther is doubling up as a protest against environmentally damaging proposals to place a huge onshore wind farm at the very heart of Brontë country, damaging protected peatland. I do not know whether the Leader of the House is a Kate Bush fan, but will she consider joining the hundreds on the moors for "The Most Wuthering Heights Day Ever", and does she agree with me, climate experts, nature organisations and the Brontë Society that destroying carbon-rich peatland in the name of net zero makes net zero sense?

**Lucy Powell:** Well, maybe we will be coming up that hill—is that one of Kate Bush's songs? I do not know; I have just thought of that on the hoof, so it might be wrong. The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, which gets raised with me a lot, about the balance we need to strike between our goal to be a clean energy superpower, ensuring that we have energy independence and security going forward—that has meant lifting the moratorium on onshore wind—and, at the same time, the need to protect our nature and communities. We are seeking to get that balance right. I will ensure the hon. Gentleman gets an update from the relevant Minister.



**Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): This week I joined the Youth Futures Foundation for the launch of a new report, which reveals the root causes of declining mental health among young people. The report identified four key factors: not just social media and smartphone use, but financial insecurity, declining sleep quality and cuts to youth services. Given the urgent need to address this crisis among young people, including the links with unemployment, would the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time, after recess, on young people's mental health? Will she also join me in wishing all the young people finishing school in Bangor Aberconwy this week a very brilliant summer?

**Lucy Powell:** I will certainly join my hon. Friend in wishing all the young people and children finishing school this week in her constituency and elsewhere a full and happy summer, which I hope they will get. She rightly raises the issue of children's mental health. She will know that we inherited a dire situation, especially post covid, and that a whole generation of our children have been let down on mental health support. We are determined to put that right; it is a priority for this Government. That is why we are putting in specialist mental health professionals in every school and ensuring support for a million more children this year. We will be doing a lot more to tackle this issue in coming months.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I refer the House to my registered interest as co-chair of the justice unions parliamentary group. Substantial changes to skilled worker visa thresholds will automatically come into effect on 22 July under a procedural anomaly that permits no opportunity for debate. Trade unions have warned that thousands of the UK Government's own staff could face deportation because their pay will now be too low. That includes prison officers, whose going rate appears to fall short by at least £3,000. I note my early-day motion 1686, which I tabled against the statement of changes.

*[That the Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules, HC 997, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 July, be disapproved.]*

Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to scrutinise those decisions? Otherwise, how will that scrutiny be done?

**Lucy Powell:** These issues are laid before the House and scrutinised by the House, but I will ensure that the relevant Minister responds to the right hon. Lady. We have had to get net migration down from record levels of nearly a million a year over the last year of the previous Conservative Government, which was unacceptably high and put pressure on our housing and services. That is why we have had to look at the appropriate levels of pay and income and the skills that this country needs in order to ensure we are giving skilled worker visas to people in the areas we need and not giving visas where British workers could fill those roles.

**Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): Last week I had the privilege of visiting the outstanding Red Watch at Eccles fire station, where officers' professionalism and dedication were plain to see as they talked me through their lifesaving work. The station is home to one of only two specialist water incident units across

Greater Manchester, which can often be called upon as a national asset, and officers raised the challenges posed by surging demand for water rescue services during the hot weather. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to their service, and will she consider a debate in Government time on the importance of properly funded water rescue services, including whether it should be a statutory service?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of water rescue services, especially at this time of year, when people—particularly young people—are out and about. I am pleased to hear he had such a good time visiting the Red Watch firefighting service in his constituency. I think that would actually make a very good topic for debate—maybe when we get back after the summer.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): If I asked the Leader of the House, “1666—what happened in that year?”, I am not quite sure—*[Interruption.]* There we are: the great fire of London. In fact, it was also the last time anyone in Parliament was fined for lying to Parliament. Of course, there is the ministerial code, the Nolan principles and the contempt of Parliament procedures, but there has not been a fine since that year. For Members and non-Members alike, where is the deterrent? What is the incentive, even, for telling the truth to this place? Ministers, of course, can be brought back to the House to correct the record, but for people giving evidence to Select Committees, for instance, there really is a gap at the moment. Is it not time we put fines on a statutory basis for Members and non-Members alike so that we can be assured that people are incentivised to tell the truth and, should they be tempted not to tell the truth, there is a deterrent?

**Lucy Powell:** The right hon. Member obviously did not see me on last year's Christmas special of “University Challenge”, where I did answer a question on 1666—which, for the record, I got right. That aside, he raises a very serious issue. He knows that knowingly misleading Parliament and this House carries with it the most serious of consequences. We found that out in the last Parliament, when a sitting Prime Minister found to have misled the House and was forced out of office as a result. No higher punishment could have been found. That investigation was done by the Committee of Privileges. There are many ways for Members to hold Ministers to account for the things that they say at the Dispatch Box, and for other Members to hold people to account—whether that is through points of orders, questions, interrogation, requiring people to correct the record, or, indeed, making complaints to our very high standards regime and, of course, to the Privileges Committee.

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting St Matthew's Catholic primary school in my constituency and to meet all the students. I particularly enjoyed meeting the pupils in year 1, who have since written to me with some of their concerns about global debt and its impact on poorer countries and the citizens living there. Will she join me in recognising the incredible initiative and dedication of those students in that class, and commend them and their teachers for taking such an interest in global affairs? Can we also have a debate about global debt, perhaps when we come back from the summer recess?

**Lucy Powell:** It is pretty amazing that year 1 students, who would be five, six—maybe seven at the most—are taking such a keen interest in issues around global debt and global affairs. It is a testament to my hon. Friend's constituents and the teachers in that school that they are taking such a keen interest. This is a matter of importance to the House and I thank him for raising it today. I think it would make a very good topic for a debate.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): Starting a family is a huge moment for all who choose to start one, and for those facing fertility issues a time that can be fraught with difficulties. IVF offers a beacon of light for those who cannot conceive without help. My constituents in Chichester will no doubt be disappointed that NHS Sussex has chosen to reduce its offering of IVF cycles from three down to just one, citing financial difficulties, when data clearly shows that multiple cycles are more likely to result in a positive outcome. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on introducing a national strategy for IVF, so that those who want to start a family do not face barriers based on their postcode?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for raising the issue of the IVF postcode lottery. It has been raised with me before, and I know that it can be very distressing for those seeking to conceive a child and those with fertility issues when these things are changed and access to treatment is reduced. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is currently reviewing the fertility guidelines, and will consider whether the current recommendations for access to NHS-funded treatment are still appropriate. I would hope the information would apply across all areas, meaning people were not subject to a postcode lottery. I know that this is an issue of importance to the House, so when those guidelines are reviewed, I will ensure that a Minister comes here.

**James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I recently visited Richard House hospice in west Beckton in my constituency. It is the first dedicated children's hospice in London, and currently supports more than 300 families every year. This summer, it is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the hospice on its silver jubilee? Does she agree that, when we discuss hospices in this place, as we often do, we need to make sure that we put time aside specifically to discuss children's hospices, which do such important work supporting families, children and parents in what is often the most difficult time of their family's life?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those at Richard House children's hospice and everybody around the country who works in and with children's hospices. It is a job that I personally would not be able to do. We are incredibly grateful for all the people who work in children's hospices, who support children and their families at one of the most difficult times in their lives—and who actually make that experience a happy one. As I say, it is a job that I just would not be able to do myself.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Further to the previous question, people the beautiful constituency of West Worcestershire look back in anger at some of the decisions made by Labour during its first

year in office—not least the decision in the Budget to bring in a tax on my local children's hospice, Acorns, which has added £400,000 to its bills. Will the Leader of the House find time between now and recess to schedule a debate, or a statement from a Health Minister, on renewing the children's hospice grant from 2026 onwards?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue of Acorns children's hospice in her constituency, which I am sure does an amazing job, along with all those other children's hospices. I know that this is an issue of concern; it is raised in the House a lot. We have had many debates on the subject. We have increased the revenue for children's hospices by £26 million, and have provided some capital funding for all hospices. Through our 10-year health plan and our plans for the NHS, we are supporting hospices and others as best we can. We have taken decisions, which I am not sure the hon. Lady agrees with, to support the NHS through tax rises, but we have had to make those decisions to pay for the healthcare and hospice care that she describes. I will ensure that the House is updated on these issues.

**Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): For more than 200 years, the Gurkhas have served our country with extraordinary loyalty alongside our British forces, yet thousands who enlisted in or before 1993 remain on an inferior pension scheme that leaves too many of them living in poverty, including in my constituency of Aldershot and Farnborough. I know just how deeply this injustice is felt across the community from the many meetings that I have held as chair of the Nepal all-party parliamentary group, including with the G10 in Parliament a fortnight ago. I am delighted to hear that the Ministry of Defence has started Government-to-Government talks, but will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on honouring the service and the sacrifice of the Gurkhas, so that this House can properly consider how we can do right by those who have stood by us?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend has been a great campaigner on this matter as Chair of the Nepal all-party parliamentary group. She will know—and share with us, I am sure—that we greatly value the Gurkhas' long and distinguished history of service in our armed forces, and we remain committed to supporting the welfare of Gurkha veterans and their families both in the UK and in Nepal. The Secretary of State for Defence was in his place as she asked her question, so I am sure that he will take up those issues, but if he does not, I will make sure that he does.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): The shadow Leader of the House referenced Monday's Westminster Hall debate on Northern Ireland veterans. Unfortunately, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland ran out of time before he could give his full response. There seems to be a difference in the Government's response between the Ministry of Defence and the Northern Ireland Office on how legacy matters can be progressed. Has the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland given the Leader of the House notification that he intends to make a statement to the House next Monday on how legacy matters in Northern Ireland will proceed? If he has, can she give this House an assurance that it will be made in this place, and not at a press conference in Belfast?

**Lucy Powell:** First, may I repeat what I said earlier and acknowledge the outstanding service given to this country by our British service personnel who worked in Northern Ireland over many, many years? As I said earlier, this is a complicated issue, which is now subject to a great deal of legal uncertainty and legal challenge, and that is why we need to get it right—and we are keen to work together to get it right. I can absolutely assure the hon. Member that the Secretary of State takes seriously his obligation makes statements on these kind of matters to this House, and to this House first. He will bring forward those statements as he progresses that dialogue to get these issues right over the coming weeks.

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): In 1942, 57 men and boys were killed in the Sneyd colliery disaster while serving King and country. Their work helped to power our country and the war effort. I recently spoke at a memorial service led by Father Andrew Swift at the Holy Trinity church in Burslem, in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Father Swift and all who organised the service memory of those who were killed?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the House's attention to the Sneyd colliery disaster and the tragedy that unfolded. The aftermath of the disaster saw great acts of generosity and selflessness, bringing people together. I pay tribute to Father Andrew Swift at the Holy Trinity church for putting on the service of remembrance.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): On Tuesday, the second phase of health investment happened at the planning meeting in Hinckley. The planning for the £10 million day case unit was approved, but with a condition after a third party put in an appeal about a listing that had been declined twice before. Often when we come to this Chamber, it is to raise a complaint, but I would like to offer some congratulations. I have contacted the planning department and the NHS, and spoken to the CEO of the council, but I see that the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant) is in his place, and his Department deserves recognition, because I have heard today that the designation review team have already looked at the application and said that the old one stands. That means that we now have a green light. Will the Leader of the House thank all those involved, from the NHS to the Department itself, the planning department and all the people who have got behind this effort—1,600 people in two weeks signed my petition—to get this over the line? It has now got the green light, so will she congratulate them and urge them forward, because if we do not get on with it, we lose the funding by 2026?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for his leadership and for bringing everyone together to get the green light for the project. I am sure that his constituents will be very grateful for the role he has played in ensuring that all those various agencies pull together to get this over the line. For that he should be congratulated.

**Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): I am so proud that High Peak's very own George Bloor has qualified for the golf Open championship and will be playing his

first round this afternoon. This is a tremendous achievement. It was George's childhood dream, and all his hard work and dedication is paying off. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating George and wishing him every success in the Open? Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can make sports accessible, particularly golf and tennis, so that all children can achieve their childhood dreams?

**Lucy Powell:** I of course join my hon. Friend in congratulating George Bloor on qualifying for the golf Open championship, and what an achievement—it is a very high bar to attain. I will watch out for him later, when he will hopefully get a few under par golf things—whatever they are called—under his belt and maybe beat Rory McIlroy in the Open. [*Laughter.*]

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I had to talk about cricket the other day and could not quite remember what bowling is, so instead I said, “throw a ball”!

One of my young constituents has had virtually no meaningful education since year 1. Now nearly at the end of his primary education, he cannot cope with being at school at all, as he is traumatised by repeated failures in the special educational needs and disabilities system. I know that the Government are planning long-term transformation of the SEND system and early intervention—that is all very welcome—but the crisis is now. The Leader of the House knows, as I do, that long-term transformation takes years to take hold, and people need help now. Can we have a statement from the Government on how they are dealing with the immediate crisis so that the people who are immediately facing all these difficulties can get immediate answers?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Lady raises the important issue of SEND, and the case she outlines explains the challenges that many families face in navigating the current SEND system. Support comes far too late, outcomes are poor, and it is very costly to all concerned. That is why we need to take a proper, concerted and long-term look over time at how we can reform the SEND system. To her question about immediate support, we have put in an extra £1 billion for this financial year, and we hope that that will reach the frontline so that constituents like hers can get the support that they need.

**Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): Residents of the new Goodrich Mews estate in Gornal, which was completed in 2013, have been dealing with a collapsed retaining wall for years now. The management agency originally confessed that it was poorly constructed, and it was repaired. It should have had a 60-year lifespan after that, but it has once again collapsed, and the management agency is demanding £6,000 from local residents to repair the wall. This is simply disgraceful and completely unjust. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on holding builders, housing developers and management agencies to account to protect residents and deliver value for money for residents?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear about the ongoing situation on the estate in my hon. Friend's constituency. She is right that the buck is being passed for too long from developers to freeholders and others, with no action being taken. This Government are absolutely committed to putting power and agency back into the



hands of leaseholders, homeowners and residents, so that they can hold people to account and get remediation works done quickly.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): Autism and other neurodiversity conditions in children present challenges to any parents, but sadly stigma and ignorance remain particularly high in some communities, including some parts of the South Asian community. This already adds deep emotional strain to families suffering and navigating complex journeys. That is why the Leader of the House will join me, I am sure, in congratulating sisters Shamina and Hawa Khan, who have just opened Café Neuro in Leicester South. It is a warm welcoming space that is offering not just tea, samosas and sweet treats but training, advocacy and community support. If the Leader of the House is ever in Leicester South, I would be delighted to share a masala chai and samosa with her there.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for his question. As a regular attendee at these sessions for a year now, he has raised issues around autism with me before, so I know it is a keen interest of his. Café Neuro sounds like a great spot, and I will certainly check it out next time I am in Leicester South. NHS England has established a cross-sector taskforce to look at how we can better support people with autism and ADHD, and I will ensure that he is kept updated on that.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement, and for the good humour and patience that she has brought to the Dispatch Box over the last year. Last week Mike and Clare, two climate activists from Edinburgh South West, brought to this place dozens of climate change posters created by children in primary 4 at Bonaly primary school in my constituency. The posters were absolutely fantastic, covering everything from supporting bees and planting trees to encouraging their parents to drive less and perhaps install solar panels. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the children for the leadership they are showing? They are not waiting for us to take action but are demanding that we do so. Will she also wish them well for the summer holiday, which is under way already in Scotland, and for their coming academic year in primary 5?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words about business questions. I join him in congratulating Mike and Clare and all those from Bonaly primary school. Their posters sound like an education and ones that we should all look at. The children are right to say that the climate and nature emergency is happening now, and we all need educating and training on how we can take steps to deal with it.

**Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Coming from a rural background and constituency, and having visited London only a handful of times before becoming an MP, it was a massive culture shock to come here last July. Representing our constituents would not be possible without the kindness and consideration of the whole of the House, including the Speaker's Office, the Table Office, the Vote Office, the Tea Room, the catering staff and those who ensure our offices are clean and tidy in the morning. All the staff play their part in ensuring that we are able to

do our work. On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) and myself from Plaid Cymru, as well as all the 2024 intake, I thank them for all the help we have received over the past year. I hope that the Leader of the House will join me in thanking everybody who ensures that the cogs of this place run so efficiently. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for that lovely appreciation of the Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, the Doorkeepers, all the House staff and all those who make our jobs in this place possible. I did not realise that the hon. Lady was from the 2024 intake. Because she does such an excellent job, I thought she had been here for a lot longer than that. She represents her constituents brilliantly and is a regular attendee at these sessions. Notwithstanding that—I might sound like Bruce Forsyth now—I think the 2024 intake are my favourite intake.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am not the only Member who is deeply concerned by reports this week of armed police in Kent threatening a peaceful protester with arrest for holding a Palestinian flag and having signs saying, “Free Gaza” and, “Israel is committing genocide”. Many people across our country, and Members across the House, are rightly horrified by Israel's actions against Palestinians, which this morning appeared to include bombing Gaza's only Catholic church, where people with special needs were sheltering. People want to exercise their legal right to protest against what is happening, and they must be free to do so without police harassment. Will the Leader of the House please ask Home Office Ministers to meet with concerned MPs about this?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. What we see happening in Gaza right now is truly horrifying. I do not think there is any Member of the House, or indeed the public, who is not moved to want to see action taken to stop what is happening in Gaza, with the killing of innocent civilians and children, the withholding of aid from distribution and the withholding of much-needed hospital care. It is absolutely right that we say loudly and clearly that people who want to protest and make their views known—whether against this Government, the Israeli Government or whoever else—should be able to do so freely, without fear of arrest or action being taken. I will ensure that she gets a ministerial meeting on that.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, as this is the last business questions before recess, I give my sincere thanks to the Leader of the House for all her answers. More importantly, I give thanks on behalf of all the voiceless people across the world who have a voice through this Chamber and, ultimately, the Leader of the House, who conveys all the requests that I and others give directly to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

There are reports of rising economic discrimination against Christians in northern and central Nigeria, including destruction of Christian-owned businesses and denial of employment on religious grounds, with widespread impunity. Given the UK's incredibly strong trade and development ties with Nigeria, will the Leader of the House ask the FCDO to update the House on its

[*Jim Shannon*]

assessment of those concerns and on what steps the UK has taken to ensure that its partnerships promote religious freedom and protect the livelihoods of minority communities, giving that voice to the voiceless today in this Chamber?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I think he is the only person who has never missed a business questions session since I began in this role. In fact, I am not sure he has missed any Adjournment debate in the House over the last year. Whether he or I have the highest number of speaking contributions, he should win the award anyway because every day in this place he gives a voice to those around the world and his constituents. I thank him for that.

We have previously discussed the issues in Nigeria. I will ensure that the Foreign Office updates the hon. Gentleman on that, but, as he knows, those conversations are ongoing, and we do ask the Nigerian Government to take action.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): Residents in areas of my constituency have raised the poor postal service they have been receiving in recent weeks, which has led to their not receiving important financial information on time and missing hospital appointments. I realise that that issue is often raised with the Leader of the House, but will she join me in saying that Royal Mail and Ofcom really do need to get their act together and ensure that my constituents do not continue to receive such a second-class service?

**Lucy Powell:** This issue is often raised in these sessions. There have been systematic problems at Royal Mail over recent years, which is why Ofcom has recently sanctioned it twice over its service levels and is further investigating it. I know from meetings for my constituents that under Royal Mail's new ownership and new leadership we are seeing some improvements to services. I implore my hon. Friend to arrange such meetings in her constituency as well. I think this topic would make for a very popular and well-attended debate.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): Last week, I had the pleasure of meeting Martyn Waters to discuss the closure of Cublington's only and much-loved pub, the Unicorn. Martyn is working hard with the community to buy it and to give it a future, and I have told him that he has my full support. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for making space to debate and progress our manifesto pledge to introduce a community right to buy. Will she share more about how that will help protect places like the Unicorn pub in Cublington?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear of the proposed closure of the Unicorn pub in her constituency. On the community efforts to keep it open, last week we introduced the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, which will bring a generational shift in community empowerment including the community right to buy, which she rightly mentioned, so that communities such as hers can take over assets like the Unicorn. I just announced the Second Reading of that Bill for when we return, and I am sure that she will raise those issues.

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): In my constituency, East Calder has been let down by the SNP Scottish Government's repeated failure to deliver a long promised health centre. Despite record funding, including £5.8 billion in Barnett consequential for health, the SNP Scottish Government have failed in their promises to the people of East Calder. Meanwhile, the UK Labour Government are showing how public money can be used to rebuild, reform and reinvest in our NHS right across the country. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is time for a debate on how the SNP Scottish Government can learn from that approach and that places like East Calder deserve better than the SNP's dither and delay?

**Lucy Powell:** I could not have put it better myself. The contrast between the NHS in England and the NHS in Scotland under the SNP Government could not be clearer. As my hon. Friend said, they have just had a record Budget settlement, so there really is no excuse. They should definitely learn some lessons from what we are doing here.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Under the previous Conservative Government, changes were made to how claimants access the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme, which is designed to compensate those with rare asbestos-related lung cancers. Those changes forced claimants to use outdated paper forms instead of online applications. As a result, people facing terminal illness experienced unacceptable delays in receiving the support they were rightly entitled to, including my constituent Carolanne's husband Jack—sadly no longer with us—who was left waiting months because of that bureaucracy. Will the Leader of the House help to facilitate a meeting between me, my constituent and the relevant Minister to ensure that the process is streamlined to better support those who need it?

**Lucy Powell:** I am really sorry to hear about that case. Those who suffered with mesothelioma still suffer a great injustice. I will absolutely ensure that my hon. Friend gets a full response from a Minister, and hopefully a meeting on the matter.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to provide homes for heroes, but some social housing providers are focusing on those with very recent service only. My constituent Arthur is a veteran with 12 years' service, but he is living in an overcrowded property; in fact, he is sleeping on the floor in the living room so that his children can have a bed. Will the Leader of the House ensure that I can obtain a meeting with the relevant Minister to ensure that veterans like Arthur get the housing they need?

**Lucy Powell:** The levels of homelessness and housing need among our veterans is shocking and a wake-up call for all of us, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend has a meeting with the Minister. That is why we are taking steps to ensure that there is more housing provision for veterans and everybody else.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): In July 2023, two Warwickshire police officers stationed in my constituency, PC Mateusz Dabrowski and PC Dominic Strange, courageously rescued someone from a burning car, risking

their lives in the process, before attempting to save the person's life with immediate first aid. Recently, the chief constable of Warwickshire police awarded the two officers the chief constable's commendation and described their actions as

"an act of bravery of the highest degree."

They have both been nominated for the national police bravery awards 2025. Will the Leader of the House join me in honouring the brave actions of those police officers? Does she agree that their actions epitomise the very best of our police service: selfless dedication to protecting the public?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in giving our heartfelt thanks to PC Dabrowski and PC Strange for their heroic efforts. I hope their nomination for the national police bravery awards is taken forward and that they are given one of those awards, because it sounds like they are deserved winners.

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Following the recent Channel 4 documentary "Poisoned: Killer in the Post", may we have a statement from the Ministry of Justice on the action being taken to tackle a specific and growing threat of online content promoting chemical methods of suicide? One of my constituents in south-east Cornwall was tragically affected by that and I know they are not alone. This is a serious failure of online safety, and we need clarity on how platforms are being held accountable, how victims are being supported and what steps are being taken to prevent further harm.

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear of that case. My hon. Friend will be aware that the content duties in the Online Safety Act 2023 require platforms to tackle illegal suicide and self-harm content and activity. The Act is now coming into force, with new guidance being put forward regularly. We will keep those matters under review, however, and if we need to strengthen the law, we will.

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for confirming the recess dates for the next 12 months, which my wife has already messaged me about to say thanks.

The Leader of the House will be aware that, despite important draft Government legislation banning single-use vapes, vape shops masquerading as candy stores continue to spring up everywhere across my Bolton West constituency. A new shop has just popped up in Horwich near Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic high school. The school has done excellent work in tackling vape use among children but it is fighting a rising tide. Will the Leader of the House set aside Government time to debate how the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and other measures are implemented to improve public health and prevent stores from being used as front businesses by organised crime gangs?

**Lucy Powell:** I am pleased to have announced the full year of recess dates. I feel like that is my most important key performance indicator as Leader of the House.

My hon. Friend raises an important issue about the proliferation and use of vapes, and the challenge that that brings to our high streets and for young people, public health and many other areas. We have already

banned single-use vapes through a statutory instrument and our flagship Tobacco and Vapes Bill is progressing through this House and will shortly make further progress.

**Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I recently had a meeting with one of my constituents, Sian from Palmersville, who is one of the founders of the Safe Clicks foundation. The foundation calls for greater accountability of social media companies to tackle bullying online and to ensure that digital spaces are safe, respectful and rooted in responsibility. It has also recently launched a parliamentary petition. Can we have a debate about the action that the Government are taking to protect online spaces and ensure that social media companies take action to stamp out bullying and harassment online?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that tackling online abuse and hate is one of the biggest challenges of our time. The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant) is in his place. The Online Safety Act 2023 has been an important first step, but tech platforms need to do more and we will hold them to account for that. The Government want to go further and we will keep the House updated.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): May I thank the Leader of the House for her courtesy and generosity over the past year during business question sessions? She deserves a well-earned rest and holiday during recess—for which I suggest no better place than my constituency. There, she can enjoy a round of golf at Dalmuir golf course, run by a community trust, visit the bonnie banks of Loch Lomond, or accept my invitation to join me at the Scottish pipe band championships in Dumbarton on Saturday 26 July. Admission is free.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend; I am looking forward to a well-earned rest. He is very much on-theme today in inviting me to his favourite spots in his constituency, and he has done that very well. The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms sitting next to me just said about my hon. Friend's constituency, "It is very, very nice." Maybe one day I will visit Loch Lomond and perhaps do better at golf than I did in answering the previous question.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Hanson Springs in Rochdale was founded 62 years ago by Malcolm Hanson, and it has gone from strength to strength. This year the company is investing £3 million in new plant, machinery and expanded factory space. Malcolm turns 80 next month, but still works 40 hours a week and his granddaughter Lucy joined the firm only this week, straight from Rochdale sixth-form college. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Malcolm a very happy 80th birthday, because he is exactly the sort of grafter and entrepreneur that makes our town and this country such a special place?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in wishing Malcolm Hanson a very good 80th birthday. His granddaughter has a very good name; I will say that. It is great to see that he is offering great job opportunities to young people in his constituency, and Hanson Springs sounds like it is going from strength to strength.



**Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): For the past year, I have been working with the Midlands Partnership University NHS foundation trust to secure and unlock the funds to build a new neighbourhood health centre in Longton, which, incidentally, is the home of Gladstone pottery museum featured in “The Great Pottery Throw Down”—the Leader of the House is welcome to come and visit. The plan is to deliver better joined-up healthcare in the community. Naturally, I am delighted to see this Government’s commitment to moving healthcare from hospital to community in the 10-year plan. Will the Leader of the House allow for a debate in Government time on how we can deliver a neighbourhood health service as quickly as possible?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituency. “The Great Pottery Throw Down” is one of my favourite shows, so maybe I will visit her constituency. She is absolutely right to call for more healthcare provision in her constituency—an integrated care hub in Longton. I will happily work with her to get that off the ground.

**Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Last Friday, I met business owners who operate in Morley Bottoms and who have managed to turn one of the most undesirable parts of our town into one of the destinations that people travel into Morley to experience. Madam Deputy Speaker, you have an invitation to come along and join me any time, as does the Leader of the House, and the first round is on me.

Those business owners are, however, victims of their own success. Unfortunately, a spate of burglaries over the past few years has affected the businesses. We have met the police and are working with them to sort it out. I welcome the Government’s move to ensure that our town centres are protected this summer with increased police presence. However, we have to go further, we have to go faster, we have to increase the number of police and we have to increase the powers available to them, too. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on

that in Government time, and perhaps encourage the other place to send our Crime and Policing Bill back as soon as possible so that we can do just what I have mentioned?

**Lucy Powell:** Absolutely. We have introduced our neighbourhood policing guarantee to put more neighbourhood police on the streets, along with our Crime and Policing Bill and the many other measures that we are taking, so that town centres such as Morley can thrive and businesses can go about their work without fear of the blight of antisocial behaviour, shoplifting or crime.

**Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): As the final person to ask a question of the Leader of the House today, may I join the thanks to all in the House and to the Leader of the House for her commitment to these sessions?

The Motor Neurone Disease Association is holding a day of action in Parliament Square today to raise awareness of Tofersen, a groundbreaking precision therapy for SOD1 MND. The association’s aim is to highlight the growing number of patients eligible to access the drug, but who are unable to do so due to a lack of capacity and clinical support. Will my right hon. Friend provide Government time for a debate to explore what more can be done to break down the barriers to that MND treatment, and what more Government can do in partnership with scientists, researchers and clinicians to find a cure ultimately for this devastating disease?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for his thanks. It has been my absolute pleasure to answer all the hundreds of questions that I have answered over the last year, and he raises another important one, too. He is absolutely right that motor neurone disease is an utterly devastating disease that is currently incurable. I wish all those well who are here for the day of action. I know that Tofersen is currently being reviewed. That review is happening rapidly, so that we can get these innovative new treatments in use as quickly as possible and end this devastating disease once and for all.

## Ukraine

1.10 pm

**The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):** With permission, I wish to make a statement on the war in Ukraine.

Today is day 1,239 since President Putin launched his full-scale invasion and it is more than a decade since the Ukrainians have known peace in their homeland. They have had homes destroyed, lands seized, children abducted and loved ones killed by Putin's forces. Yet the Ukrainian people still fight with remarkable determination—military and civilian alike. Almost three and a half years on, I am proud to say that this House remains united for Ukraine. Britain remains united for Ukraine, too. Polling shows that we retain the strongest public support for Ukraine of any European nation. Our solidarity is grounded in our deep respect for the Ukrainian people's courage, and in recognition of the fact that the defence of Europe starts in Ukraine—because we know that if Putin prevails in Ukraine, he will not stop with Ukraine.

Let me begin by providing a battlefield update. Russia is maintaining pressure along the whole length of the frontline, with a special focus on Sumy in the north-east and Pokrovsk in the south-east, as well as in Kursk. Last month, Russian ground forces seized approximately 550 sq km of Ukrainian territory—an area greater than the size of Greater Manchester—yet they face continuing difficulties attempting to take fortified towns and cities, and they have not taken a significant town for months. Indeed, they have tried without success to seize Pokrovsk for nearly a year. What ground they do gain comes at great cost. Last month, the number of Russian troops killed and wounded surpassed more than 1 million. This year alone, Russia has sustained 240,000 casualties.

Despite those catastrophic Russian losses, Putin's ruthless ambitions do not appear to be waning. Russia is escalating the high numbers of one-way attack drones launched at Ukraine: 1,900 in April, 4,000 in May, 5,000 in June and already 3,200 in July. On 9 July, a week ago today, the largest aerial strike of the war was recorded when Russia launched more than 700 attack drones in a single night.

Despite the onslaught, Ukrainians are taking the fight to Putin, striking military targets in Russia that his people see and know about. Spider Web was an operation of remarkable precision and extraordinary success that dealt a fierce blow to Putin. After one year of meticulous planning, it resulted in the damage of 41 long-range bombers—planes that threaten not only Ukraine but NATO.

We must now step up efforts to get further military support to the frontline. Last month, on the eve of the NATO summit, we welcomed President Zelensky to No. 10 Downing Street, where the Prime Minister signed a UK-Ukraine agreement to share advanced battlefield capabilities and technologies—a deal that means our defence industry can rapidly develop cutting-edge technologies from Ukraine, and step up production for Ukraine. At the NATO summit that followed, 32 nations came together to sign a new investment pledge to spend 5% of GDP on defence and national security by 2035. Those 32 nations reaffirmed their commitment to Ukraine, with €40 billion pledged in security assistance for this year. It was a good summit for Ukraine, for Britain and for NATO; it was a bad summit for Putin.

On the basis of those commitments at NATO, President Trump signalled a significant shift this week on Ukraine: he announced NATO weapons transfers, and a 50-day deadline for Putin to agree to peace. Together with the NATO Secretary-General, President Trump agreed to large-scale purchases by NATO allies of US military equipment, including Patriot missiles and other air defence systems and munitions, which he committed to getting

“quickly distributed to the battlefield”.

The UK backs the scheme, and we plan to play our full part. On Monday, we will discuss this further when I chair the next meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group alongside my German counterpart, Minister Boris Pistorius. The contact group continues to be the forum through which more than 50 nations provide Ukraine with what it needs to fight back against Putin's war machine. I am pleased that Monday's meeting will be attended by US Secretary Hegseth; NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte; and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Grynkewich.

Britain is providing more than £4.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine this year—more than ever before. At the UDCG, I will provide the following updates. First, on the extraordinary revenue acceleration scheme, two thirds of the UK's ERA total of £2.26 billion has now been disbursed, including £700 million on artillery shells, long-range rockets and air defence missiles—exactly what Ukraine needs most. Secondly, on drones, since March the UK has supplied nearly 50,000 drones to Ukraine. This helps us to meet our commitment to increasing tenfold our supply this year. Thirdly, on air defence, the UK and Germany have agreed to partner in providing critical air defence missiles to Ukraine. Fourthly, on the NATO comprehensive assistance package, the UK will donate a further £40 million, which Ukraine can use, through a range of programmes, on anything from de-mining to rehabilitating its wounded.

It is four months since President Zelensky responded to President Trump's peace negotiations with Ukraine's full commitment to an unconditional ceasefire. President Putin has shown no such interest in an end to the fighting, but peace in Ukraine is possible, and we must be ready for when that peace comes. Since March, the UK and France have led the coalition of the willing on planning new security arrangements to support Ukraine in any ceasefire. More than 200 military planners from 30 nations have worked intensively for weeks with Ukraine; that includes work on reconnaissance in Ukraine, led by UK personnel.

Last week, at the summit, President Macron and Prime Minister Starmer said that this initial phase of detailed military planning had concluded. I can confirm that the military command and control structures have been agreed for a future Multinational Force Ukraine. The force's mission will be to strengthen Ukraine's defences on the land, at sea and in the air, because the Ukrainian armed forces are the best deterrent against future Russian aggression. The force will include a three-star multinational command headquarters in Paris, rotating to London after the first 12 months. When the force deploys, there will be a co-ordination HQ in Kyiv, headed by a UK two-star military officer. It will regenerate land forces by providing logistics, armament and training experts. It will secure Ukraine's skies by using aircraft to deliver a level of support similar to that used for

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NATO's air policing mission, and it will support safer seas by bolstering the Black sea taskforce with additional specialist teams.

When peace comes, we will be ready, and we will play our part in securing it for the long term. Next month, on 24 August, Ukrainians will gather to celebrate their independence day. For another year, the anniversary of Ukraine's liberation will be marked under the pain of occupation. Whatever else commands the world's attention, we must never lose sight of this war. We must never lose sight of Putin's brutal, illegal invasion of that proud and sovereign nation, and we must never forget the price that Ukraine is paying in fighting for its own freedom and the security of all free nations, including ours. The UK will stand with the Ukrainian people today, tomorrow, the day after, and for as long it takes for Ukraine to prevail.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.21 pm

**James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con):** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

It was less than a month ago that the United States undertook a bombing raid on Iranian nuclear facilities—one of the most significant military actions undertaken anywhere in the world for years. With such developments understandably dominating the headlines, and almost three and a half years having elapsed since Russia first launched its unprovoked and illegal all-out invasion, it is right that the Government regularly update the House—as we did—on developments in Ukraine.

The reality is that there has been no let-up in Russian aggression. As the Secretary of State confirmed, 9 July saw the largest drone attack of the war by Russia, and there were reports yesterday of Russia using 400 drones to target energy infrastructure and cities across Ukraine. That indiscriminate barbarism has inevitably led to further civilian casualties, but on the military side, can the Secretary of State confirm that Russia has suffered by far the greatest losses? He confirmed that last month, Russian battlefield casualties surpassed 1 million. Does that not show the extent to which Putin has nothing but callous disregard for the human impact of his actions on either side?

I am proud of the decisive assistance that we provided to Ukraine when we were in office. We continue to stand with the Government in seeking to provide all possible support, but it is vital that all our allies play their part. On France, and what was previously called the coalition of the willing, I agree that we need to be ready for when that peace comes, so can the Secretary of State confirm how many other nations will provide fighter jets to the Multinational Force Ukraine? Can he confirm that there is no longer any planning for a land combat element to the MNFU?

We welcome the additional provision of military hardware by the US, but the Secretary of State said that “we plan to play our full part.”

Will the UK therefore be purchasing military equipment from the United States to pass on to Ukraine? The Secretary of State did not mention potential sanctions

or tariffs. It has been widely reported that President Trump is considering tariffs of 100% on goods entering the US from any country that imports any product from Russia. Have the Government discussed this plan with the US, and will the UK follow suit? *The Times* reports today that Andriy Yermak, senior adviser to President Zelensky, has stated that the imposition of secondary sanctions on nations buying oil and gas from Russia could end the war

“before the end of this year.”

Does the Secretary of State agree with that analysis, and again, would the UK join in any secondary sanctions policy directed against countries importing Russian oil and gas?

On Germany, we understand that the Prime Minister is meeting Chancellor Merz today. May I urge the Government to push their German counterparts on provision of Taurus missiles to Ukraine? Alternatively, given that the missiles are, we understand, compatible with Typhoon, will the Government backfill UK stocks to enable the provision of more Storm Shadow missiles?

Turning to the impact of all this on the UK, we understand that Germany will today sign an agreement with the Prime Minister to come to each other's aid in the event of an attack on the other. Will the Secretary of State outline how that is different from NATO article 5? I have had recent discussions with senior German parliamentarians on the impact on our nations of supporting Ukraine, and the Germans believe, as has been widely reported, that drone overflights of their military bases were linked to nefarious Russian activity. In the context of recent threats to RAF bases, and drone overflights at Suffolk RAF bases and elsewhere last November, can he update us at all—I appreciate the sensitivity of this—on whether there is yet any indication of Russian involvement? In particular, will he update us on progress on the review of security at UK bases, which he launched last month?

When I was Minister for Defence Procurement, I stripped out a whole load of processes and red tape to bring forward the in-service date of our groundbreaking DragonFire anti-drone laser from 2032 to 2027. Given the extraordinary potential for directed energy weapons, will the Secretary of State accelerate adoption even further, and ensure rapid testing of anti-drone defences for our military bases?

On drones more broadly, in a written answer in March, Ministers confirmed that they had ordered just three military drones for our armed forces since the election. I have tabled subsequent written questions on progress, and Ministers are now saying that they cannot answer the question. What is the latest figure? UK small and medium-sized enterprises have provided some of the best drones and counter-drone measures used on the live battlefield in Ukraine, so why are we not ordering the same kit in parallel for our own Army, at scale and at pace, so that it can train today—not years in the future—in how war is fought right now in Ukraine?

After three and half years of war, we must keep reminding the British public of the most important point for our national interest—namely, that the best way to defend our homeland right now is to give all possible support to Ukraine, so that the democracy triumphs over the dictatorship, and to prevent Putin's aggression from spreading westwards.



**John Healey:** I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for his welcome for the update. I welcome the Opposition's continued backing for the steps that we are taking to support Ukraine, just as we gave our backing to their Government when we were in opposition.

The shadow Secretary of State is right to point out that the massive scale of Russian casualties shows the contempt that President Putin has for the life of his own people, as well as for the life of those in Ukraine. He is also right to point out that Russian casualties far outnumber those in Ukraine.

On the coalition of the willing, 30 nations are involved in the planning. The military planning is now complete, and we will keep it refreshed until renewed ceasefire negotiations, which we hope to see soon. Under the plans, there will be a land force, and activity in the air and on the sea. I am pleased to hear the shadow Secretary of State back the aid that we are putting into Ukraine. He asks about the coalition of the willing, but I really cannot recall—and I have checked—him backing the coalition. Does his party support Britain's leadership of the Multinational Force Ukraine?

Discussions on the Trump NATO plan will be developed on Monday at the Ukraine Defence Contact Group meeting, which I will co-chair with Boris Pistorius. If sanctions and economic measures play a part in the actions that the international community need to take to bring Putin to the negotiating table, we will of course use them. The shadow Secretary of State's Government had a good record; we have gone a lot further in the past year. Since July, we have introduced over 500 new sanctions against individuals, entities and ships across all the regimes, and as a nation we have now sanctioned over 289 vessels in the Russian shadow fleet.

On base security, I will update the House when the full base security review is complete. On DragonFire, the shadow Secretary of State is right to say that he was instrumental in the UK taking its first steps on that technology, but he left the programme largely unfunded. We are already accelerating it, and will put that technology into four of our naval vessels, not just the one that he planned to put it in.

On drones, the hon. Gentleman knows that what he keeps citing was a very specific answer to a very specific question. He knows that following the strategic defence review, we are doubling to more than £4 billion the amount of money in this Parliament that we will invest in autonomy and drones. He knows that we will establish a new drone centre of excellence. This will mean we can accelerate the use of uncrewed systems or drones in every service. The Army, for instance, will train thousands of operators. This summer, we will start rolling out 3,000 strike drones. That will be followed by more than 1,000 surveillance drones, and we will equip every section with drones for the future. That is what we mean in the strategic defence review when we talk about combining the power of new technology with the heavy metal of platforms like tanks, planes and ships to make Britain the most innovative armed forces in NATO.

**Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): As the Member for Aldershot, I know how deeply people in my constituency understand the cost of conflict and the value of standing by our allies, so I welcome this statement and thank the Secretary of State for his leadership on this issue. Does he agree that the outcome in Ukraine matters for not

just European security but the UK's standing as a reliable defence partner, and that for us to maintain this reputation, long-term investment in British capabilities and industries in constituencies like mine—where, incidentally, DragonFire was created—is essential to sustaining our support and deterring further aggression?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is entirely right: the UK has been the most reliable ally for Ukraine since before the full-scale invasion almost three and a half years ago. She is also right to say that a test of this nation is whether we are willing to step up the leadership on Ukraine, as we have; whether we are ready to step up the leadership in NATO, as we have; and, underpinning all, whether we are ready to step up the level of defence investment in this country, which we have. The Prime Minister announced in February that this country would invest 2.5% of GDP in defence by 2027, alongside the £5 billion extra in defence this year—Labour's first year in government. This is the largest increase in defence investment since the end of the cold war.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Defence Secretary for advance sight of his statement. We welcome the additional support to Ukraine, because we must continue to support Ukraine to defend Europe. Russia's increased attacks are devastating, and we recognise the resilience of the Ukrainians and support them.

President Trump only now seems to be realising what has always been clear: that Russia's brutal dictator has no interest in peace. While I was surprised and relieved to see the President announce potential secondary sanctions if no ceasefire is agreed within 50 days, we all know that he is as changeable as the wind. No one has forgotten the humiliating ambush he laid for President Zelensky in the Oval Office, and there is no guarantee he will not soon revert to praising Putin again. A 50-day deadline could even encourage Putin to escalate his attacks in the meantime. That is why the UK must go further to support Ukraine and increase pressure on the Kremlin.

Could the Defence Secretary update the House on progress towards seizing the £25 billion in frozen Russian assets here in the UK and deploying them to Ukraine? What discussions are under way with European partners, especially Belgium and Germany, on doing the same across the continent? More must be done to cut off the oil revenues fuelling Russia's war machine. The Secretary of State spoke about the shadow fleet, but will the Government expand the UK's designation of vessels in Russia's shadow fleet, including those that are already sanctioned by the EU, Canada and the US?

Finally, I turn to the announcement on the Multinational Force Ukraine. We welcome the conclusion of this first phase of planning and the UK's leading role in shaping the future security architecture for Ukraine, but we need clarity on what this means in practical terms. Can the Defence Secretary confirm what the specific UK armed forces contribution will be to the Multinational Force Ukraine? Will there be any planned deployment of UK personnel on land, at sea or in the air once the mission is operational, and if so, what role will the UK play in that deployment?

**John Healey:** First, we stand ready to expand sanctions on the Russian shadow fleet. Secondly, the hon. Lady asked about the coalition of the willing. The military planning is complete. With the prospect of a ceasefire, which we hope to see soon but cannot see immediately, the commitments and the details will be firmed up, and they will be reported appropriately to the House at that stage.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about the use of frozen assets. She will know the complexity of this challenge and the interest and will of the Government to work on this, but she will also recognise that the majority of those assets are held outside the UK, so any action on this front must be taken with and alongside others. Therein lies the complexity of the discussions at present.

**Dame Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for this statement and for expressing his, and indeed this House's, unwavering commitment to the Ukrainian people against Putin's illegal war. I welcome the 50,000 drones that the UK has sent to Ukraine and express my admiration for the Ukrainian people, who are fighting on behalf of all of us.

No one predicted the role of drones in this conflict and the astounding speed of the evolution of that technology in Ukraine, but also in Russia and China. What steps is the Secretary of State taking with our allies to ensure that we maintain or develop technological advantage in key defence capabilities and get it to the frontline?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is entirely right: for the first time in human conflict history, drones are killing far more and causing far more casualties than heavy artillery. She asks the challenging question that was at the heart of the strategic defence review that we published at the beginning of last month: in learning lessons from Ukraine, how do we recognise the way that the change in warfare is accelerated by the rapidly advancing technology? That is the reason we are making a £4 billion investment in this Parliament alone in the drone technology that she cites and the potential of autonomy to reinforce the warfighting readiness of our forces and therefore the deterrence that we can provide as a nation within NATO.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): Operation Orbital is the UK training programme for the Ukrainian military. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that personal and personnel data is safe at the Ministry of Defence? He mentioned there being 15,000 drone attacks over the last four months, and he referenced meeting with Germans to look at counter-drone munitions and capabilities, but of course, Ukrainians are being attacked right now—today. What thought has been given to the use of the RAF's Tucano aircraft, which I think are now out of service? I wonder where they are. Could they be redeployed? Could a variant of the Grob turboprop trainer perhaps be provided? These slow-flying aircraft could interdict Shahed drones, for example, and they are low-cost and low-maintenance.

**John Healey:** I am not familiar with the Tucano aircraft—if they are still in our inventory, they have not come across my desk—but I will certainly look into that and write to the right hon. Gentleman.

On the Orbital training programme, I am confident that the data relating to those personnel are secure. I am proud of that programme. It did not just follow Putin's full-scale invasion in February three and a half years ago; it was in place after Russia first took Crimea and had proxy forces move into Donetsk and Luhansk. There was a UK-Canadian training programme supporting Ukrainians well before Putin's invasion, and since then, we have trained more than 56,000 Ukrainian forces through the UK-led multinational training programme.

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the actions of Russia on 9 July, when it launched the largest aerial bombardment of the war to date, show that Ukrainian civilians and military are still in a fight for their lives and the future of their country, and that this House, our Government and our country must do everything possible to stand with them in that fight?

**John Healey:** I do, and my hon. Friend is right to remind the House and the public. These Russian attacks are directed not just at Ukrainian frontline forces, but at Ukrainian cities, Ukrainian civilians and Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. That is a harsh reminder of Putin's character. His brutal, illegal invasion is entirely contemptuous of the lives of his own people, and he is attacking civilians and civilian infrastructure.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I fully support the work of the UK Government in providing military assistance to Ukraine.

Like so many voluntary groups across the United Kingdom, the Rotary club of Duns has been actively involved in supporting Ukraine during the war. It has delivered several pick-up trucks loaded with medical equipment and other essential supplies to Ukraine. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the Rotary club and the other voluntary groups that have been involved? What more support can the Government provide to UK voluntary groups that want to provide assistance to Ukraine?

**John Healey:** I certainly pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's local Rotary club and the other local groups that reflect the continuing public will to offer support where we can to Ukraine. If those groups, including his local Rotary club, are looking for specific support to get such supplies to Ukraine, I would encourage him to contact me with the details.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Defence Secretary for his comprehensive statement. As a trade envoy, I was with the UK Government's mission to last week's Ukraine recovery conference in Rome, where two of the top asks for civilian recovery were improved air defence and de-mining, so I was very pleased to hear those mentioned. His statement is about our support for Ukraine, but for the long-term security of our own country and the whole of Europe, what lessons are the Ministry of Defence and the UK defence industry learning from Ukraine's innovation in defence?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is one of the most energetic and ceaseless supporters of Ukraine, and not just in this House. I know he has gone out with supplies

to support civilians and comrades in Ukraine. I am glad that he was at the Ukraine recovery conference in Italy last week. If he is looking for the lessons that the UK Ministry of Defence is pulling from Ukraine, I will send him a personal copy of the strategic defence review.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): These plans for a so-called coalition of the willing are contingency plans. They are designed for a time when Putin agrees to a ceasefire in Ukraine, which, as the Secretary of State acknowledged, he shows no sign of doing. How does the prospect of Ukraine's allies, such as the UK, deploying armed forces to Ukraine after a ceasefire incentivise the Kremlin to sue for peace?

**John Healey:** One of the signals that the coalition of the willing underlines to President Putin is that a large number of deeply committed democratic countries are willing to stand with Ukraine in its fight against his invasion, and are willing to stand alongside Ukraine in any peace to secure a long-lasting and just settlement. The single message that Putin should take is that Ukraine will keep fighting, that we will keep supporting it, and that the best way for him is now to accept that he needs to come to the negotiating table to talk and put an end to this fighting.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his important update. It is clear that Russia's growing aggression undermines our security at home. Does he agree that the outcome of the war in Ukraine matters deeply to every one of my constituents in Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy, as much as it does across the whole country and, indeed, all of Europe? Can he update us any further on the measures he is taking to counter Russian aggression?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend's constituents in Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy share the sentiment across the UK of strong support for Ukraine, three and a half years into this war. *[Interruption.]* There is a recognition that this matter rises above party politics, and a recognition in general that the UK not only needs to say that we stand with Ukraine, but needs to demonstrate that through our actions. I hope her constituents will support the Government in what we are doing.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. That is the fifth time I have heard a phone go off. Silence is golden.

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I can confirm that it was not my phone. My ringtone is "633 Squadron", which is very distinctive.

It is tremendous that the planning for the coalition of the willing has been put together so quickly, but plans are paper tigers. We need flying tigers. If we are to secure a peace that is eventually secure, we will need air superiority over Ukraine. Can the Secretary of State give us a clue, perhaps not naming individual countries, of how many of the 30 members of the coalition of the willing are prepared to put combat aircraft into this plan?

**John Healey:** Madam Deputy Speaker, it was not my phone either.

The hon. Gentleman does an injustice to the more than 200 military planners, from more than 30 nations, who have worked over the last four months on the detail of the military planning. It has not just been an exercise based and led in France and the UK; it has involved detailed reconnaissance in Ukraine, led by UK personnel.

These are serious military plans. They are designed for the circumstances of a ceasefire—circumstances that are not entirely clear now, but that we hope to see. They will be refined regularly between now and any point of peace. They are designed to make sure that, when we get that peace, we are ready to support it as a multinational force for Ukraine.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his update and for his leadership on this issue. In Russia and the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, Russian authorities have introduced military-patriotic training in schools and youth groups, exposing Ukrainian children to military propaganda urging enlistment in the Russian armed forces. There are also reports that Russia is recruiting Ukrainian teenagers and young adults to carry out espionage and sabotage within Ukraine.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ukraine's children have no place on the battlefield in this war? Can he say a little more about the work he is doing with colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to hold to account those responsible for the militarisation and forced deportation of Ukraine's children?

**John Healey:** I pay a huge tribute to my hon. Friend for her ceaseless work to draw public attention in the UK to the plight of abducted Ukrainian children and teenagers in Russia. Abducted Ukrainian children have no place on the Russian frontline, they have no place on the battlefield, and they have no place in Russia.

When the Foreign Secretary and I first went to Ukraine together, when we were still in opposition, we met a magnificent charity that was bringing abducted Ukrainian children back from Russia. We sat down with four young teenagers who had been subject to exactly the sort of treatment that my hon. Friend identifies. I will look to work with her and Foreign Office colleagues to reinforce any of the steps we can take in this country to draw greater attention to this brutal abuse of young people.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It has been three and a half years since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, and we all know that there has been huge loss of life, and incredible disruption and pain caused to many residents, not only in Ukraine but across the world. I saw that for myself when I met the Keighley Ukrainian association, which has gone above and beyond, not only raising funds for those in Ukraine but supporting many families in my constituency. The owners of Keighley Cougars are in Ukraine as we speak, delivering sports equipment to organisations involved in rugby league in Ukraine, who are unable to have the equipment they need as a result of the war.

Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to those two organisations? We all know that a divided west only benefits Russia, so following the latest talks with NATO, will the Secretary of State also comment on what more the Government could be doing to ensure



[Robbie Moore]

other nations are playing their part, both through military support and through funding and developing key defence capabilities to continue to support Ukraine?

**John Healey:** The UK is playing a leading part by co-chairing the Ukrainian defence contact group, as I will be on Monday. Through that forum, 50 nations co-ordinate support and respond to Ukraine's battlefield support needs. Alongside the French, we are also leading by developing the coalition of the willing, planning for the future. I pay tribute to the members of the Keighley Cougars who are out in Ukraine delivering sports equipment—hats off to them. I see that as typical of the generosity of the people in Yorkshire.

**John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab):** Brave Ukrainians in my constituency of Rugby, who are a long way from their compatriots at home, tell me about the continuing suffering of civilians—I repeat: civilians—due to Russian aggression. Will the Defence Secretary join me in welcoming the new drive from President Trump and NATO to ensure that Ukraine is in the best possible position both to defend itself and in any future negotiations?

**John Healey:** In reminding the House about the Ukrainian families who are in Rugby, my hon. Friend reminds us that this is a war—an invasion—that has forced many to flee their home. Many are still receiving shelter from UK families, and I pay tribute to those who are offering that shelter. We have been willing to back President Trump in his bid to secure a negotiated peace in Ukraine from the outset, and we look to this next stage as a hopeful sign. We will do whatever we can to reinforce his efforts to put pressure on President Putin now and to bring him to the negotiating table.

**Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab):** As secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on Germany, may I take this opportunity to welcome Monday's joint chairing of the Ukrainian Defence Contact Group by the Defence Secretary, alongside his German counterpart, Boris Pistorius? I also congratulate the Government on today's landmark bilateral treaty between the UK and Germany, signed here in London, between the Prime Minister and Chancellor Merz, on mutual defence, security co-operation and industrial collaboration. The treaty demonstrates our determination to stand up to Putin's continued acts of aggression, wherever they may take place, as well as the Government's enduring commitment to Ukraine.

**John Healey:** I welcome my hon. Friend's role in the all-party parliamentary group on Germany. The new coalition Government in Germany are making a massively welcome contribution to increased support to NATO and to European security. I welcome that greater contribution. I note that the Federal Ministry of Defence is still led, very ably, by a Social Democratic Party of Germany Minister, Boris Pistorius. I especially welcome that at the heart of the new friendship treaty, which Chancellor Merz and our Prime Minister will sign today, is the Trinity House agreement that Boris Pistorius and I struck back in October: a deep defence agreement, for the first time, between the UK and Germany. It means that we will do so much more together as two nations, but also as two nations within NATO.

## Social Media: Misinformation and Algorithms

### SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

#### Select Committee Statement

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** We now come to the first Select Committee statement on behalf of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. Dame Chi Onwurah will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, and not the relevant Government Minister, although Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I call Dame Chi Onwurah.

1.55 pm

**Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab):** I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this statement. Today I speak on behalf of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, but also the hundreds of thousands of people whose lives were profoundly affected by last year's riots, as well as everyone impacted by the long shadow of social media misinformation.

I want to put on the record my thanks to the Committee Clerks and specialists who have supported this inquiry, and the many witnesses who gave evidence. They have helped to shape our report, and we are very grateful, particularly to those who shared their real-life experience of the riots and the online hate that accompanied them. The Committee would also like to extend our deepest sympathies to the families of the three little girls murdered in Southport, and everyone affected.

Like many nations, the UK is grappling with the immense challenge of regulating global tech giants—companies whose platforms shape our societies, economies and democracies, often with resources that dwarf those of Governments. For example, the UK's entire public sector budget is about equal to Meta's market capitalisation. As the representative of the British people, it is essential that Parliament understands the impact of these companies, and is able to scrutinise their actions and regulate them in the public interest, where necessary. However, the Committee experienced significant challenges in seeking to do that during the course of the inquiry. We were reassured by statements from Google, Meta, TikTok and X in our evidence session that they accepted their responsibility to be accountable to the British people through Parliament, and we hope to see that in practice as our work in this area continues.

The horrific attacks in Southport on 29 July 2024 and the violent unrest that followed are a stark reminder of the real-world consequences of the viral spread of online misinformation. Hateful and misleading content spread rapidly, amplified by opaque recommendation algorithms. Protests turned violent, often targeting Muslim and migrant communities, driven in part by the spread of these messages. These events provided a snapshot of how online activity can contribute to real-world violence and hate.

Many parts of the long-awaited Online Safety Act 2023 were not fully in force at the time of the riots, but the Committee found little evidence that they would have made a difference if they were. Moreover, the Act is out of date. It regulates at a technology and content level, rather than on principles or outcomes, and therefore fails to adequately address generative artificial intelligence—ChatGPT, deep fakes and synthetic misinformation—even as it becomes cheaper and easier to access. Generative AI will make the next misinformation crisis much more dangerous.

Having spent six years working for Ofcom before entering Parliament, I believe strongly that regulating technology does not work. Our online safety regime should be based on principles that remain sound in the face of technological development. Social media has made many important and positive contributions, helping to democratise access to a public voice and connect people far and wide. It also has significant risks.

The advertisement-based business models of most social media companies mean that they promote engaging content, often regardless of its authenticity. That spills out across the entire internet via the unclear, under-regulated digital advertising market, incentivising the creation of content that will perform well on social media, as we saw during the 2024 unrest.

This is not just a social media problem; it is a systemic issue that promotes harmful content and undermines public trust. Our concerns were exacerbated when we questioned representatives of regulators and the Government. We were met with confusion and contradiction at high levels, and it became evident that the UK's online safety regime has some major holes.

After four public sessions, more than 80 written submissions and extensive deliberations, our findings are clear: the British people are not adequately protected from online harms. We have identified five key principles that we believe are crucial for the regulation of social media and related technologies and drive our recommendations to Government.

Our first principle is public safety. Algorithmically enhanced misinformation is a danger that companies, Government, law enforcement and security services need to work together to address. That is basically saying that misinformation is harmful, which may sound obvious, but it has not been recognised as such. As a consequence, platforms should be compelled to demote fact-checked misinformation and establish processes to take more stringent measures during crises. We propose that the Government carry out research into how platforms should tackle misinformation and how far recommendation algorithms spread harm. Furthermore, all AI content should be visibly labelled.

Our second principle is free and safe expression. Steps to tackle amplified misinformation should be in line with the fundamental right to free expression, and measures to meet misinformation must align with that right.

Our third principle is responsibility. Users should be held liable for what they post online, but the platforms on which they post are also responsible and should be held accountable for the impact of the amplification of harmful content. That may sound obvious—indeed, it is not the first time that a Select Committee has said this—yet widespread uncertainty remains as to whether

platforms have a responsibility for the legal content that they host and distribute. The report recommends that platforms be obliged to undertake risk assessments and report on content that is legal but harmful. New regulatory oversight, clear and enforceable standards and proportionate penalties are needed to cover the process of digital advertising.

Our fourth principle is control. Critically, users should have control over both their personal data and what they see online. We recommend that users have a right to reset the data used by platform recommendation algorithms.

Our fifth and final principle is transparency. The technology used by social media companies, including recommendation algorithms and generative AI, should be transparent, accessible and explainable to public authorities. Transparency is needed for participants in the digital advertising market. Basically, if we cannot explain it, we cannot understand the harm it may do.

I am a tech evangelist: I believe that technology, like politics, is an engine of progress, but that does not mean we have to accept it as it is. Our report sets out detailed recommendations to ensure that we do not have a repeat of the violent and harmful riots last year. We urge the Government to acknowledge that the Online Safety Act is not fit for purpose; to adopt these five principles to build a stronger, future-proof online safety regime, with clear, enforceable standards for social media platforms; and to implement our recommendations. Without action, it is only a matter of time before we face another crisis like the Southport riots, or even worse.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady and the Select Committee that she chairs for delivering this important review. I also thank her for her statement to the House, which has highlighted the scale of the challenge we face in relation to the proliferation of misleading and harmful content online. I join her in putting out my prayers and sympathies to all those affected by the horrors in Southport last year.

Given the report's findings that young people are particularly susceptible to misleading and harmful content and online radicalisation, due to the stage of their cognitive development, does the hon. Lady consider that the Government should commit to conducting a review of the evidential case for raising the digital age of consent for social media platforms from 13 to 16?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I thank the hon. Member for his comments. I also thank him for highlighting the particular issue of young people, their cognitive development and the lack of protection they enjoy from misinformation as a consequence. The Committee did not recommend that the Government should commit to a review, but we are considering a further inquiry into the impact on the cognitive development of young people. I am sure that we will have recommendations with regard to that as a consequence.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and her Committee for highlighting the challenges we face in scrutinising powerful technology companies. As she knows, I am particularly concerned about suicide and self-harm-related content. In 2022, more than three quarters of the individuals surveyed by Samaritans said that they first saw self-harm content online at the age of 14 or younger, often without

[Liz Twist]

searching for it. Worryingly, 76% said that they self-harmed more severely after viewing such content online. We have taken important steps forward by implementing the Online Safety Act, but we still face the challenge of regulating emerging technologies as well as small and risky platforms. Does she share my concern about this issue? What is her Committee's view on how we can tackle and monitor it?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for highlighting this incredibly important issue and for the work that she does in this area. She is absolutely right to say that. The Committee heard very moving and distressing evidence that suicide and self-harm content can be and has been amplified by social media algorithms and that that can play a role in suicide and self-harm, including by young people. Promoting suicide is illegal, and the Online Safety Act introduced an offence of promoting self-harm, but it does not do enough to tackle legal content that promotes suicide or self-harm, as with the rest of legal but harmful content, such as misinformation. The Committee's recommendations that platforms should be held accountable for the algorithmic amplification of misinformation would address part of what my hon. Friend is concerned about. We hope that in implementing those recommendations, the Government would set out how they would fully address her concerns.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I am a member of the Select Committee over which the hon. Lady presides as Chair, and I thank her and all the staff who helped with this report and inquiry. I know that many of us in this place wear not one, but multiple hats; I also sit on the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and we are doing an inquiry into AI and human rights. Some of the work from this report will be helpful and inform us in looking at some of the key issues, so, with another hat on, I thank her for that.

One of the evidence sessions that has stuck with me from working on the report is when we had social media company bosses in front of us. They talked about how they removed most of the content within 10 minutes in 90% of cases, but they did not accept responsibility for the proliferation of that data, information and content outside their own spheres. What worries me is that, at a time when we have advancing technologies and a great pace of change and we need to maintain regulation at a breakneck pace, companies—particularly social media companies—are unravelling and unpicking their content notes, their monitoring and how they look for and remove information that might be harmful. Does the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee agree that we need to do more in regulating current approaches and ensure that the companies do not backslide on their obligations?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, my fellow Committee member, for that question, as well as for his contribution to this report and the work of the Committee, which has been exceedingly valuable. He has raised a really important point; we heard evidence from Meta about Facebook content checking, and how outside the UK and the US it was moving from fact-checking to community notes, which X has also done.

The Committee has recommended adopting the principle that platforms are held accountable, which must go hand in hand with those platforms setting out how they can demonstrate that accountability. The report also recommends that the Government undertake research into what effective fact-checking looks like and how misinformation is spread, because one of the things that the Committee—which is a scientific Committee—observed was the lack of real evidence in that area. That is partly because the algorithms and platforms are so opaque and secretive about how they operate.

**Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee, of which I am also a member. This report makes vital recommendations to Government and social media communities about how we can make the online world safer. I am particularly concerned about the impact on young people. Does my hon. Friend agree that harm is happening today? Young people will be going home from school with harmful content being pushed at them. Does she agree that social media companies should not wait for Government to implement these recommendations, but should get on with implementing them today to stop that harm happening to children across this country?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I thank my hon. Friend, both for his outstanding contribution to the report and the Committee's work and for his question. He is absolutely right—we should not have to force the online companies to take action. They can see the evidence, and they can read this report. They know what is happening to the brains of young people. They should be able to implement the recommendations of the report without waiting for Government action, although I very much believe that Government action will be necessary to ensure those recommendations are implemented across all platforms.

**Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Our Committee's evidence supports the conclusion that social media business models, particularly the use of recommendation algorithms that push users to see more extreme content and misinformation, incentivise the spread of dangerous content and, consequently, behaviours. As both a member of the Committee and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on artificial intelligence—I am another Member who wears many hats—I welcome our Committee's conclusion that users and social media platforms should be held accountable for the impact that their amplification causes. Does my hon. Friend agree that the report provides clear recommendations to the Government and regulators as to how those platforms should be held accountable, including labelling of all AI-generated content and new regulatory oversight with clear, enforceable standards and penalties? Accountability must have teeth.

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution to the Committee's report—her understanding and knowledge of AI have been invaluable. She is absolutely right that AI content must be labelled, and that the platforms and content generators must take action to address this issue now, because the risks are only going to increase. I look forward to the Government ensuring that enforcement has teeth for those platforms that do not take action or are too reckless in the action they take.



**Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her Committee's report, and the team behind it who have drafted it. The report contains concerns and recommendations about digital marketing. WhatsApp is a direct communication tool, for good and for bad, which very few people engage with as though it is a classic social media platform such as Facebook, Instagram or X; it is a place for private conversation, and Meta prides itself on its data being encrypted and secure.

Having said that it would not do so, Meta will now start serving up ads under the guise of advertisers wanting to go where their audiences are, which translates as organisations wanting to make more money through targeted marketing, including Meta, which has 3 billion users of WhatsApp worldwide. If we have our WhatsApp connected to Facebook and Instagram, we may get more personalised ads. Never have I wanted to disconnect my WhatsApp from my Instagram and Facebook more. Already, when we click on Instagram, it follows us to our Facebook feeds. There is no escaping it, so views are being shaped and influenced relentlessly by the organisations that drive the most revenue to the platform owners.

With reference to the recommendations in this report about controlling digital advertising, does my hon. Friend agree that we should be able to communicate with our loved ones without being constantly sold to and influenced, and that we should always have options to opt out for the sake of our own mental health?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I thank my hon. Friend for championing safe and effective technology, and for the points she has made. She is absolutely right. First, it is essential that the technology be properly regulated, and that regulation be based on principles, so WhatsApp and user-to-user communication should be subject to the same principles-based regulatory environment as content communication. Secondly, we must be able to opt out, and to reset the algorithms that drive the advertising we receive. Thirdly and finally, digital advertising is unfortunately a free-for-all, with very little regulation or control. If consumers are to be adequately protected, that needs to change.

## Accountability for Daesh Crimes

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** We now come to the second Select Committee statement, on behalf of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Tom Gordon will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee member, not to the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may also take part in questioning.

2.16 pm

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I am grateful to the Government for engaging with the Joint Committee on Human Rights report, "Accountability for Daesh crimes", and for the response they have provided. There are some areas of welcome agreement; for instance, the Government have reiterated their commitment to ensuring justice for survivors. They rightly agree that where there is evidence of international crimes such as genocide, individuals should be prosecuted for those crimes, not merely for terrorism offences that fail to capture the full horror and scale of what has taken place.

However, let me be clear: for all the Government's assurances, we are still left with the sobering reality that not one single Daesh fighter has yet been prosecuted in the UK for genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes of any sort. The UK is a signatory to the genocide convention; we are one of its founding champions. We cannot continue to rely on theoretical commitment to it, while outsourcing accountability to other jurisdictions, or to international courts with limited reach and resources. The Government's response repeatedly emphasises that prosecutions are best pursued

"close to where crimes occur",

but where that is not happening—and in many cases it is not—the UK cannot, and must not, turn a blind eye. If a British national takes part in genocide abroad and returns to the UK, they should face justice here. There must be no safe haven for perpetrators of international crimes, especially not on UK soil.

Turning to universal jurisdiction, I am disappointed that the Government have rejected the recommendation to amend the International Criminal Court Act 2001 to remove the limitations based on nationality and residency. What is recommended is not a radical departure from established practice. This is about closing a clear loophole that allows perpetrators of genocide and other international crimes to escape justice simply because of where they are from. The UK exercises universal jurisdiction for torture, and for grave breaches of the Geneva conventions, so why not for genocide? This is not just a legal oversight; it is a failure of political will that continues to undermine survivors' access to justice. The Government claim that sufficient co-ordination exists between the Crown Prosecution Service and the war crimes team, but despite the structures having been in place since 2019, we are

[Tom Gordon]

yet to see any meaningful outcomes. Structures alone are not enough. Survivors want justice, not process. Co-ordination must be measured by results, and so far, the result is zero prosecutions for international crimes.

I am also deeply concerned by the Government's stance on citizenship deprivation. The assertion that there is sufficient transparency does not hold up to scrutiny. The public deserve regular, accessible reporting, and Parliament deserves the ability to scrutinise use of this powerful and exceptional tool. Deprivation of citizenship should never be a substitute for due process, or a way of quietly absolving ourselves of responsibility for British nationals being involved in atrocity crimes overseas.

Finally, I come to British nationals, including children, detained in north-east Syria. We note the Government's repeated statements about the practical challenges, and I acknowledge the complexity of the security environment, but the absence of precise public data, the slow pace of repatriation, and the ambiguity around the next steps on those detained and potential prosecutions remain deeply troubling. These children are British nationals. Some are orphaned, and others are at risk of radicalisation and violence. Leaving them in indefinite limbo in unsafe camps is a moral and strategic failure. The UK should lead with humanity, clarity and resolve.

If we are serious about upholding the rule of law; if we mean what we say about the genocide convention; and if we truly honour the memory and suffering of Yazidi survivors and other victims of Daesh crimes, we must go further than warm words and procedural reassurances. We need action, prosecutions and leadership. The Government have the opportunity to turn rhetoric into reality. I urge Ministers to reconsider the case for universal jurisdiction, for greater transparency, and for a clearer, more co-ordinated path to justice. That is our moral and legal obligation, and we owe nothing less to survivors.

## BILL PRESENTED

### PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT (COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Ben Maguire presented a Bill to require housing developers to construct any planned community infrastructure before commencing construction of housing with which the planned community infrastructure is associated; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 September, and to be printed (Bill 290).*

## Backbench Business

### Global Plastics Treaty

*[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 8 July, on Preventing waste and enabling a circular economy, HC 929; Correspondence between the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on the Global Plastics Treaty, reported to the House on 15 July.]*

2.21 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):  
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Global Plastics Treaty.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time available for this debate, and for allocating the debate to the main Chamber. That is an important signal that the House is in political consensus on the issue, and we attach a great deal of importance to that. I thank those Members who supported the application for the debate to the Backbench Business Committee, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage). She has a long and distinguished record of campaigning on this issue, but is unfortunately unable to be here.

I also express my appreciation for the support of the various campaigners—organisations and individuals—who have kept this issue in the public consciousness for so long, not always in the easiest of circumstances. At this turn of the wheel, I particularly thank Greenpeace UK for the assistance of its campaigner Rudy Schulkind, but in the past, I had a private Member's Bill on the subject, and that was supported by a whole range of organisations, from the women's institute through to Friends of the Earth. We have to call that a broad-based consensus.

This debate is timely. The next round of talks on the UN global plastics treaty will be held in Geneva between 5 and 14 August. The Government, I am happy to acknowledge, have a good story to tell, and in fairness, they inherited the record of the previous Government, who also accorded some political importance to this issue. The message I want the Chamber to send today is that the Government have to do all that they can—not just in presenting the UK case, but in supporting others.

For those of us who, like me, come from island and coastal communities, the growth of plastic pollution has been obvious for years. Ahead of this debate, I got an email just a couple of days ago from a constituent of mine, Jim Chalmers, who said:

"I can remember as a child beachcombing around the south end of Stronsay, and coming across the occasional unfamiliar plastic bottle and being intrigued by its novelty. It might have been an empty washing-up liquid bottle of a kind unknown in our household or even had words in a foreign language."

Fast-forward to 2025, and the position is very different on the beaches of the Orkney and Shetland coastline, and right around the coastline of all European countries. Even when we go out on a beach that looks pretty clear and pristine, if we start picking up the small pieces of plastic, 10 or 15 minutes later, we have a carrier bag full of them.

In Orkney and Shetland, we have a great range of community initiatives to tackle this issue. In Orkney, we have the “bag the bruck” campaign every year. In Shetland, we have Da Voar Redd Up. Despite the community effort and people taking responsibility for stretches of coastline and picking up the rubbish, weeks later, it is as if almost nobody had ever been there. The tipping point for public consciousness on this issue was the “Blue Planet” series by Sir David Attenborough a few years ago. That created sufficient public pressure, so that in 2022, there was a decision by 175 countries to develop an internationally legally binding instrument to address the problem of plastic pollution. That matters on so many levels, and it is why the word “global” is central to the treaty.

Plastics as an industry emits more carbon than the entire global aviation and shipping industries. The question we should ask ourselves is: what exactly does “good” look like at the conclusion of the talks in Geneva? I cannot improve on the fine summary in the briefing from the Environmental Investigation Agency and Greenpeace ahead of today’s debate. They state that we should be looking for:

“A global target to reduce production of primary plastic polymers and related elements such as reporting and national measures.”

Reducing production is critical; I will return to that in a minute or two. They also call for a

“Clear and legally binding obligation to phase out the most harmful plastic products and chemicals of concern in plastics...A binding obligation to improve the design of plastic products and ensure they cause minimum environmental impact and safeguard human health, including supporting reuse...Provision of ambitious finance (‘effective means of implementation’) in particular for Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States”.

Finally, they call for:

“Using regular UN procedures for decision-making if all efforts at consensus have been exhausted”.

If we can achieve something along those lines in Geneva, we will have some cause for optimism.

**Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He has outlined the important global action that we need to take on plastics. Does he agree that this Government’s action to bring forward a deposit return scheme will help address some of these issues? It will ensure that we can recycle plastics, and that will take them off the streets and beaches, where they are ending up.

**Mr Carmichael:** Yes, if it is a properly constructed, nationwide deposit return scheme. The experience in Scotland was, shall we say, not everything that it might have been. A properly constructed scheme will be critical. I see the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), on the Front Bench, and I know she has a tremendous personal commitment to this issue. This is about creating a circular economy. I know there is a genuine commitment to that in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and a deposit return scheme would very much sit within that.

We talk about such measures being somehow in conflict with business. Importantly, the fundamental truth is that the best opportunity for business comes

from having a circular economy. We can make not just an environmental and social case for that, but a business case.

Ensuring that the treaty has the strongest possible reduction targets will be absolutely critical. That is where the contention has arisen in previous rounds of talks, and we can anticipate that the same arguments will be rehearsed. The most important point to address, however, is the idea that somehow the whole thing will be fixed by recycling and that we can just keep producing virgin plastics at an exponential rate. We reckon that the current exceptionally high levels will treble by 2060 if we do not do anything to arrest the increase.

We cannot manage to fix it all by recycling, and the people who advance that idea—particularly those who work for the big plastic companies and the petrochemical companies—are downright disingenuous. Given the vast number of different plastics that are available and the different polymer combinations, they know just how difficult it is to actually recycle plastic. This country has a good record on collecting plastic for recycling, but the truth of the matter is that we recycle very little of it. We export a horrible amount of it—I think we exported 598 million kilograms for recycling in 2024. Of course, once it is exported, we do not know if it gets recycled or not, and we completely lose control of it. Then we have the growth of incineration. The number of incinerators has grown from 38 to 52 in the last five years alone, driven by the growth in plastics. I am afraid the idea that recycling alone is going to be the silver bullet will not lead to the meaningful reductions that we know we need, so we need a cap on production.

We also understand that one of the biggest barriers in Geneva is going to be the role of the plastics industry itself. It is exceptionally well resourced, and it is rooted downstream of the oil and gas industry. Personally, I am pragmatic about the use of oil and gas. Until we have other technologies that can take its place, it is foolish to push our oil and gas industry off the shelf, but I am afraid I see little to commend in its behaviour. Had the industry’s representatives all come as one delegation to the last round of talks in Korea, it would have been the largest delegation at the talks. I am pleased to say that the UK delegation is the gold standard in this space. It is well resourced, and is well informed by scientific advisers, but that is not a cause for complacency or smugness. We have to see that it gives us an opportunity to help and support others.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which I chair, took evidence on the global plastics treaty just last week, on 8 July, and some of what I heard was genuinely shocking. Professor Richard Thompson OBE, who is a fellow of the Royal Society and a professor of marine biology at the University of Plymouth, said:

“Moreover, scientists I work with have been threatened on UN premises as part of these negotiations. Almost what I would consider a fundamental right to science and to access science is being denied. It particularly falls on some of the smaller nations. DEFRA is very well blessed in that it can afford to send a big delegation of highly trained scientists, which is fantastic, but they stand alongside small island developing nations, which perhaps only have one individual there. The need for a science mechanism is actually mandated in UNEA 5/14, and we need it really urgently to address this issue.”

It was one of those moments when I had to stop and say, “Just a second, did you say what I thought you said there?” Even after we had explained to him his position as an eminent scientist giving evidence to a Select Committee



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of the House of Commons, with all the protection of privilege, he was not comfortable calling out in detail what is happening.

The fact of the matter is that we know that it is happening. If we are to get this treaty across the line, UK needs to be robust not just in presenting our own case, but in supporting and protecting those who are less fortunate than we are: the small island nations, the campaigners and the scientists who are there on their own finance. My final ask is that there should be a ministerial presence at the negotiations in Geneva, which would be a really important signal that the Government could send about the seriousness of their intent.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you said I would speak for 15 minutes and I think I have had 14, so I will return to the email that I got from Jim Chalmers. He went on to say:

“I’m sure I have a reputation as that weird guy that carries a bag with him when he’s out with the dog, picking up litter (I call it recycles). However, I know fine I’m urinating into the wind”

—he did not actually say “urinating”—

“as I have no control whatsoever over the source of the stuff and the forces that encourage and permit its growing release. I appreciate that the 17th of this month is not a good time for you to be away from Orkney”

—there is never a good time to be away from Orkney—  
“but if you can somehow bring any influence to bear, I would feel my efforts aren’t totally in vain.”

It is for people like my constituent Mr Chalmers and his likes right across this country that we are here today. We pin our hopes and their hopes on the efforts of the Government and like-minded countries to get the treaty that we know we need and that our planet deserves.

2.36 pm

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this debate. I know he is deeply committed to this issue.

I want to draw attention to a part of this crisis that is often overlooked but no less urgent: microplastics, which I know the Minister is passionate about too. These tiny fragments, much smaller than a grain of rice, are everywhere. They have reached the depths of our oceans and the highest mountain peaks, and the harm they cause is far from small. We know from science that microplastics are being eaten by fish, birds and insects. They harm wildlife from the inside out by disrupting feeding, damaging organs and carrying toxic chemicals, and the impact does not just stay in the wild. It spreads through ecosystems and food chains, and into our own bodies.

What troubles me the most is that microplastics are largely invisible. We cannot see them, but we are living with them every day. This is not just a global problem; it is a local one too. In Stafford, we are really lucky to have places such as the Doxey marshes, Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal, and the River Sow, which weaves through our towns and villages. These are places where families walk their dogs, children paddle in the water, anglers fish and wildlife thrives. They are not just part of our landscape, but part of who we are.

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is giving an incredibly powerful speech. Microplastics are also part of what we are wearing, and

microfibres are a key part of the problem with plastics. I wonder if, like me, she is interested in what the French have done to get companies to disclose when microfibres are part of the material used in clothing. In order to tackle the “fast fashion” crisis, people need to understand what they are wearing and the damage that microplastics can do to our environment.

**Leigh Ingham:** I was not familiar with the legislation that France has passed. When I buy clothes, I try to make sure that I buy natural fibres, which can be tough to do—I find that I really have to search for them. We could look at introducing similar legislation, which sounds like a very sensible piece of work.

The spaces I was talking about are now under threat. When I talk to residents in my constituency—from Eccleshall and Gnosall to Baswich—they all tell me that they are really worried. They want their children and grandchildren to grow up enjoying clean water, healthy wildlife and safe green spaces, so they are right to demand action. That is why I think microplastics must be a core part of any global plastics treaty. It is not enough to tackle the waste we can see; we also need to tackle the waste we cannot see.

I welcome the work of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and I look forward to its recommendations. I know I am speaking to Ministers who listen very carefully on this subject and consider it incredibly important, but I urge them to continue to act, because we have a responsibility to lead and a duty to protect the places we call home. We owe it to future generations to make sure that the River Penk still supports life, that our farmland remains healthy and that the natural beauty of Stafford—and other places, too—does not become a victim of short-term decisions. This is our chance now, so let us not waste it.

2.40 pm

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The world produces over 460 million tonnes of plastic each year. On our current trajectory, plastic pollution is set to triple by 2040, and every year 11 million tonnes of plastic goes into our oceans.

In Devon, this picture is very obvious. According to the Marine Conservation Society’s data, an average of 103 litter items were found per 100 metres of beach in Devon. The vast majority are single-use plastics and packaging, and anyone taking the very wise decision to have a holiday in Devon this year will see from it themselves. I have seen it for myself. When I wander along the beaches of Sidmouth, Seaton and Beer, I see bottles and wrappers washing up with the tide, wedged between pebbles and entangled in seaweed. We are very fortunate to have some fantastic volunteers, with groups such as the Sidmouth Plastic Warriors, who give freely of their time to clean our beaches. On its most recent outing last month, 30 people picked up an incredible 70 bags of litter. Their work is extraordinary, but there should not be 70 bags of plastic litter on the beaches of Sidmouth.

Of course, the problem does not start on the beach. It starts in how we produce and consume plastic in the first place, but there are serious shortcomings in the UK’s recycling. We were sold a myth that if we just spent a little bit of time each week sorting our rubbish, the problem would take care of itself. However, in 2024

CleanHub reported that the UK exported 600,000 tonnes of plastic waste to countries around the world to be recycled, and these places do not have the infrastructure to recycle properly. Much of this is burned or dumped, and we have seen evidence that it is polluting other countries' ecosystems, while we tick a box and say it has been recycled.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): On this important point about the capacity of different countries to hit certain standards, the hon. Gentleman may have reprocessors—companies that take plastic waste and repurpose it—in his constituency. An important part of this debate has to be about packaging recovery notes and packaging export recovery notes, which provide an equivalence, but waste is often taken to countries such as Turkey that have much lower standards than in this country, which is bad not only for British businesses, but for the global environment. I think the Government are working on that, and I would love to hear a bit more about that from the Minister, but what does the hon. Gentleman have to say about it?

**Richard Foord:** The hon. Member makes a very good point. The business of our standards being very different is one we should look at first. These notes plainly need to be looked at, and we will have to go about some international negotiations to try to improve standards elsewhere. The UK has high recycling standards internationally, but it is not acceptable to simply offshore the problem, which does not serve any of us well.

Not only is plastic waste a hazard to people, but it is killing seabirds, as well as hundreds of thousands of sea mammals, turtles and fish, and it is having a devastating impact on our environment more broadly.

**Deirdre Costigan:** Does the hon. Member agree that the Government's banning of disposable plastic vapes is another way we can help reduce this plastic waste?

**Richard Foord:** The hon. Member makes an excellent point. I voted in favour of that initiative when it came before us, and the banning of disposable plastic vapes was very welcome.

Too much waste still ends up in incinerators. Sometimes, what we think will be repurposed or recycled is in fact burned. The number of incinerators in the UK has risen from 38 to 52 in the last five years. This is the dirtiest form of energy production, releasing more greenhouse gases than any other method.

While my constituents may have been enjoying their ice creams at Seaton or walking the south-west coast path during the recent heatwave, these hotter summers are a stark reminder of our collective failure to tackle climate change. If we can increase the amount of plastic we reuse and create the circular economy that my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned, we can use less disposable plastic and less single-use plastic, and therefore reduce carbon emissions.

Germany is the leading recycler of municipal waste in the European Union, which is partly down to its deposit refund scheme. Recycling rates on plastic bottles have reached an outstanding 98% in Germany. I have to acknowledge that it is thanks to the measures the Government introduced in January that a deposit return

scheme for plastic and metal containers will go live in the UK in 2027. This scheme, which will offer a small refund for returning bottles and cans in the UK, is a practical step towards reusing plastic.

Although national action is welcome, we need to match our own UK action with international action, and the UK can be a real leader in this space. We can press for our ambition to be matched by other countries in the global plastics treaty negotiations. We must push for legally binding targets to reduce plastic production elsewhere, not just voluntary pledges. We offshore a lot of our production—including to China, which accounts for 40% of the world's plastic production. We know that the carbon emissions produced as a result are staggering, and we must do something about them. If the Government are serious about deepening ties with Beijing, they must also be serious about holding it to account, and that starts with applying pressure at the global plastics treaty negotiations next month.

As we know, the US President has never been a great advocate for tackling climate change or reducing plastic waste. He made that abundantly clear in his attention-seeking stunt in February, when he proudly brought back plastic straws. At the heads of delegation meeting earlier this month, the US backtracked on its previous position. It walked away from earlier commitments on control measures and financing, and came out firmly against plastic production caps. The Prime Minister has explicitly cited family values as a foundation of his strong relationship with the US President. Could the Minister urge the Prime Minister to leverage that personal connection, and ask the President to consider not just global leadership, but the world that his own family will inherit? We have to consider young people in this picture, and for that we will need serious and concrete commitments at the global plastics treaty negotiations.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech, much of which I agree with. I am sure that he, like me, visits many schools. Does he agree that when he visits them and speaks to young people, they are very, very concerned about the environment, and in particular plastic pollution? In many ways, our great hope is that their laser focus on this issue will be reflected in the policy of future generations and that plastic production is reduced.

**Richard Foord:** The hon. Gentleman is dead right. Children from Sidmouth primary school wrote to me earlier in the year, urging me to advocate for reduced plastic use and for cutting down our plastic use. I quoted them in a debate and the Minister for Nature, who is no longer in her place, summed up the debate with their words.

Let us be honest: voluntary efforts have failed. The World Wildlife Fund reports that in the past five years plastic pollution has increased by 50%, despite a 60% rise in national and voluntary initiatives. The treaty must therefore tackle the source of the problem—the production of plastic—and confront the power of the fossil fuel lobby, which is desperately trying to water down the talks. At last year's round of negotiations, 220 fossil fuel lobbyists were present in Busan. Their goal was to protect their own profit, not the planet. We cannot allow short-term commercial interests to derail the

[Richard Foord]

long-term health of our oceans and communities. Plastic production is forecast to triple by 2040. If we do not act, no recycling scheme will be enough.

I will hand my last paragraph to the children at Sidmouth primary school. They want to see “deeds, not words”.

2.50 pm

**Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord); we usually sit together on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Nowhere is global co-operation more important than on climate work. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this important debate and for his brilliant speech, which eloquently set out why this issue is so important. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford—not to be confused with Stratford—(Leigh Ingham) spoke about microplastics. Last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) had a debate on that very topic, in which many of us spoke. Following that, last November, ahead of the previous round of treaty negotiations in Busan, hon. Members came together to debate the same issue. Now, at the final round of negotiations, we have come back together. Countries are on the verge of finalising a potentially powerful international agreement, but its impact will be limited unless it addresses the root of the problem: plastic production.

UN estimates suggest that in the two and a half years since the treaty negotiations started, globally we have produced over 1 billion metric tonnes of plastic. The scale is staggering and almost unimaginable, but one thing is clear: no amount of recycling and reuse can keep up with the scale of plastic waste we are producing. If we do not act, collectively and urgently, the crisis will only escalate. Plastic production is projected to triple by 2060. Our climate, our ecosystems and our planet cannot cope. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned the impact on our ecosystem and our beaches, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) mentioned single-use items, such as disposable vapes and disposable fans. One is dumped in Britain every 90 seconds. Most end up in the global south in landfills, risking massive environmental damage. I am proud to have sat on the Committee, led by the Minister, that considered the legislation to ban this. That is the Labour Government taking real action.

There are interest groups working to undermine our ambition. Having participated in international biodiversity and climate talks, both in my previous role before I entered this House and since, I have seen at first hand what that looks like: voices in the room determined to stall talks and undermine global and national ambition. As we have heard, the shocking truth is that 220 fossil fuel lobbyists were present at the last round of talks on the plastics treaty. Taken together, fossil fuel and chemical industry lobbyists would have been the single largest delegation present: larger than the EU and all its member states’ delegations; and larger than all those for Latin America. The fossil fuel industries outnumbered delegates from the Pacific small island states two to one. Those nations already see the effects of marine plastic pollution and are already paying the price for our inaction. We cannot allow the voice of the fossil fuel industry to be louder

than the cry of our planet, or more influential than the testimony of science. We cannot allow it to be more powerful than the voices of our constituents and those wanting to create a more sustainable future for generations to come.

In London, we have shown that another future is possible. It requires bold leadership, and we are one such example of that. We are the world-leading city in eliminating single-use plastics from large sports and music venues, including “ABBA Voyage” in my constituency and locally-led movements like Plastic Free Forest Gate, which works with businesses on the high street to get rid of single-use plastic items, and Plastic Free Roman Road. I also have some eco-warriors in one of my local schools in Maryland. Last week, I met a group of constituents from Stratford and Bow at the climate coalition lobby in Parliament. Mary told me that she was there to lobby for an end to our dependency on fossil fuels. She was there for her four grandchildren—for their futures.

My constituents are clear: the time to act is now. We must put the people on our planet before the polluting industries. My constituency is home to an Earthshot prize-winning company, Notpla. The last time I mentioned Notpla in Parliament, it had single-handedly removed 21 million items of single-use plastic—and counting—using its innovative seaweed-based alternative; today, that number has risen to 26 million items. The ambition exists, but we all need to seize this moment. The cost of inaction is mass climate displacement, environmental destruction and worsening global instability.

I thank the Minister and the Government for their continued commitment to the UK’s global leadership in pushing for an ambitious treaty. I join Members from across the House in calling for all member states to agree to legally binding measures to address the production and consumption of plastic, and finally to deliver a treaty that meets the scale of the crisis for our planet.

2.55 pm

**Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for bringing forward this valuable and important debate.

I used to work as a Wiltshire councillor on the issue of plastic recycling. My constituency, like all our constituencies, can be blighted by the sight of waste plastic by the roadside. It is clear that bolder action is needed to tackle the sheer amount of plastic pollution that we have created both at home and abroad. That is why we must join and support the global plastics treaty in an international effort to reduce plastic waste, to promote sustainable, eco-friendly production, and to protect our oceans and wildlife for future generations.

In the spirit of embracing such bold action, we must embrace innovation. Chemical recycling, for instance, gives us a way to break down plastics into their fundamental building blocks, creating a new plastic circular economy. Mura Technology is just one of a number of companies doing that today in the UK. However, such innovation needs to be paid for. On the basis of the “polluter pays” principle, plastics producers must be taxed so that the problem they produce can be fixed.

For users of plastic products—whether it is the film used to cover our cucumbers, or the plastics that contain our crisps or wrap our chocolate bars—a small tax



needs to be added to ensure that wrappers do not become a blight on the environment. We created the problem, and I believe we can fix it.

2.57 pm

**Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): A number of my constituents in South Derbyshire have written to me, deeply distressed over the crisis of plastic pollution in South Derbyshire's waterways, including in the River Trent and the Foremark and Staunton Harold reservoirs, and in our farmland, where farmers—already dealing with increasing floods due to the climate crisis—are left to deal with waste. To give credit where it is due, my constituents are also pleased to see responsible actions to reduce plastic use. At Bearded Theory, a music festival held at Catton Hall in Walton-on-Trent, the organisers use only reusable polypropylene cups that are taken off site to be washed and reused year after year.

Pollution is a global problem. There is not one corner of the world that has not been affected by the over-production of plastics—microplastics are ubiquitous; they have even been found in Antarctica—yet plastic production is projected to triple by 2060.

Only 9% of plastic globally is recycled. Most of the UK's plastic is incinerated, with the number of incinerators surging from 38 to 52 in the past five years. Incineration is the dirtiest form of energy production in the UK, contributing to greenhouse gases that heat our planet and release toxic fumes that have serious and harmful health impacts. In South Derbyshire, we are expecting the result of an appeal into the proposed Swadlincote incinerator at Stanton by the end of July. I stand with my constituents in opposing the building of a new incinerator, but we also need to reduce our waste. The east midlands is the second worst region in the country for waste, with Derbyshire the worst offender. If we had less plastic, we would have less waste, and there would be no justification at all for any new incinerators.

Ahead of the next round of talks on the UN plastics treaty in Geneva in August, I urge the Government to continue to be ambitious in cutting plastic production. We will fail future generations if we accept a watered-down agreement. I call on the Government to introduce immediately a UK-wide moratorium on new incineration capacity and to secure a strong global target to cut plastic production at the UN plastics treaty negotiations.

Public support for action could not be stronger. More than 220,000 people across the UK took part in the big plastic count last year—a remarkable display of citizen science, which laid bare just how pervasive and persistent plastic is in our daily lives. More than 600,000 people have signed Greenpeace UK's petition calling for a strong, meaningful treaty. That is a public mandate that this House cannot ignore.

As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to act both for the constituents whom we represent today and for future generations to come. Plastic pollution chokes our oceans, poisons wildlife and breaks down into microplastics that we find in our soil, our food, and our bodies. I urge the Government to reject half measures. Let us seize this moment to put people and planet before plastic. Let us use this opportunity for green job investment and move further towards a circular economy that necessitates less packaging and secures a legacy

that future generations will thank us for, instead of the one that leaves so many young people fearful for their futures. We cannot let them down.

3 pm

**Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this debate. Let me highlight one point that he made about the circular economy. He said that if we get the regulation and the incentives right, it would be good not only for the environment, but for business and the economy. That is an important point to keep emphasising.

I would like to use the short amount of time that I have to talk about how we can connect this global issue to our local communities. Let me start with the global problem. Every year, more than 12 million tonnes of plastic are dumped in our oceans—I did hear 11 million tonnes from my right hon. Friend. Whichever it is, it is obviously on a huge scale. This is not just a statistic; it represents an utter crisis—one that affects marine life, ecosystems, and, ultimately, us as well.

To many people, a UN treaty might seem a bit abstract and remote. Some will even go as far as saying that it is not worth the debate time in this Chamber because it is too hard to imagine the average person bringing it up on the doorstep. However, I do not think that is right, because it matters and the population have shown that they care about this issue.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the popularity of Attenborough's TV documentary and how that has ignited people's interest. I certainly have this issue raised time and again with me. People have also noticed the impact on their local environment. Unlike my right hon. Friend, I do not have oceans anywhere near my London constituency, but I have a beautiful chalk stream that runs all the way through it. People see the litter and they care about it, and they see the plastic damage in particular. We have introduced new monitoring systems to understand the damage that some of these microplastics can do. People are incredibly proud of their local surroundings, and it is not too big a step for them to think about the oceans across the world when they are thinking about their local area.

As has already been mentioned, not just adults are starting to care more. This is a totemic issue for the next generation. I recently received a bundle of passionate letters from a year 4 class at Culvers House primary school. I say passionate because, at times, I think they were a little harsh on me. I will not take it personally, because I think they were directing their anger at politicians in general. They were at pains to point out that we were not doing enough or moving fast enough. They were quite clear about their demands, and they went into a lot of detail. They told me about their concern for our oceans, for the turtles and fish that are harmed by plastic, and for the future of the planet. Reading their letters one afternoon, I found them pretty powerful and it reminded me of the duty that we all have to act now.

When we talk about the global plastics treaty, it is important that we keep making it relevant to our local communities. It is clearly a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a legally binding agreement that tackles plastic processing at every stage of the lifecycle. For the agreement to work, it has to be ambitious, enforceable, and supported by everybody. Taking the public with us on this issue is

[Bobby Dean]

going to get more difficult. There are people even in this Chamber who will push back against it, saying that it is a waste of time, that it is a problem to be solved by others elsewhere, but we will have to keep building that support.

In doing so, we have to reverse where the pressure is brought to bear. For a long time, the pressure has been on all of us to be more responsible consumers. Consumers have played their part. They have been willing to put up with recycling yoghurt pots, washing them out in the sink. They have taken on wooden forks and spoons. They have even put up with paper straws. They have done so, despite the pain that all of those things can be compared with what we had before. They have played their part and now it is our turn in this place to put the pressure back on to producers to make sure that they play their part as well. That does not mean that we should not listen to producers when they highlight problems with the schemes we create—for instance, the Government's extended producer responsibility schemes, which are meant to introduce financial responsibility across the full lifecycle of products. There are sometimes issues with the implementation of schemes. I am hearing from pubs and the hospitality industry about the undue burden that can be placed on small businesses, and we need to work out mechanisms for correcting unintended consequences of such policies.

**John Lamont:** The hon. Member is making a very good speech. I agree with him about the need to take the public and business with us. In Scotland we had a real challenge with the deposit return scheme that the Scottish Government tried to impose, because business was up in arms about it, and it was going to impact on the internal market. Does he agree that that is an example of where it can go very badly wrong if we do not take the public and business with us?

**Bobby Dean:** I do agree; if we close our ears, we will miss these problems, frustrate the public and lose their support. If we listen hard, we can fix the schemes and rescue the action we want to take in this place to help the whole environment. If we do not do that, the other side will win the argument and shut down the sort of initiatives we need to see. We need to keep listening as we introduce these schemes and make sure that the public and small businesses do not feel fatigued by them.

I hope I am making clear that this is not just about treaties and targets but about protecting our rivers and oceans across the world. It is about linking to our communities and maintaining their support and listening to the voices of young people, like those in year 4 at Culvers House primary school. I want to end with something that I have definitely stolen from a work experience student this week. She said to me that we are burdening future generations with plastic debt, and it is about time we started paying it back.

3.6 pm

**Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for bringing forward this important debate. Plastic pollution is a global problem that requires international co-ordination, and I think everyone in this House is agreed on that. It is a serious issue and,

as is the case with many Members, it is one that my constituents really care about, particularly young people, who have contacted me about this issue over recent weeks.

This UK Government have already set out plans to end our throwaway society and stop the avalanche of rubbish that is filling our streets, rivers and oceans. If I may, I want to talk briefly about some actions that the Welsh Labour Government have taken to tackle plastic pollution. Wales became the first nation in the UK to ban single-use plastics in 2023 as part of the Government's effort to tackle the climate and nature crisis and reduce plastic pollution. Items such as polystyrene cups, balloon sticks and cotton bud sticks can no longer be sold or supplied in Wales.

The Welsh Government have also announced plans to go further and ban wet wipes that contain plastic. That has a target date of December 2026. I am delighted that the Welsh Government have just agreed to accelerate plans for a deposit return scheme, as it will enable a scheme to be brought forward on a UK-wide basis at the same time. Wales is ranked second in the world for recycling rates, which we are all very proud of.

I want to put on record my thanks to some of the organisations in my constituency that have done a stellar job in raising awareness of issues around plastic pollution and tackling behaviour change. I thank the Plastic Free Communities initiative in Betws-y-Coed and the villages around there, and I thank the North Wales Wildlife Trust, which organises an annual beach clean-up. Trash Free Trails has also done a lot of work in this area.

I also want to mention Bangor University, where the Plastic Research Centre of Wales is based, which has done a lot of work on our microplastics. As mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) and for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), microplastics are a huge issue. They have even been found on a remote lake near the top of Yr Wyddfa—Mount Snowdon. It is a super topic that the centre is dedicated to carrying out research on.

**Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the work of community groups such as the Three Towns Clean Up Crew in my constituency and Think About Plastic Arran are crucial to fighting the blight of plastics pollution and the terrible effects it is having on marine life and the wider environment?

**Claire Hughes:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Community groups across the country, whether in Wales, Scotland or England, all play a vital role in raising awareness and cleaning up beaches. That is really important for wildlife, which is often the victim of plastic pollution.

A piece of research published by Bangor University this year showed that the combined effect of ocean warming and microplastics pollution could severely damage marine ecosystems in particular, with significant consequences not just for the climate but food security. Professor Christian Dunn, co-author of this research, said:

“This is a wake-up call, but also a call to action.”

We are all agreed that we need urgent global action to guard against plastic pollution and that we need to work together to find solutions. I look forward to the Minister's comments, particularly ahead of the vital meeting that will happen in Geneva next month.

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): I am delighted to hear about all the work going on in the hon. Lady's community. That is also happening across the country; Dawlish Against Plastic and Plastic Free Newton Abbot are in my constituency. However, the Marine Conservation Society wrote to me to say that plastic pollution on UK beaches rose by 9.5% between 2023 and 2024. Indeed, in Devon, an average of 103 items of plastic are picked up on every 100 metres of beach. Does she agree that we must deal with the situation not only in our communities but internationally?

**Claire Hughes:** I agree. Perhaps the Minister could address that issue when he responds to the debate.

3.10 pm

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I make my comments in the context of my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing the debate. It is on an issue that resonates strongly with many residents in Edinburgh South West—it is not an overstatement to say that I was inundated with emails on it.

Plastics are everywhere. As we have already heard, they are in construction, healthcare, clothing and furniture. It is estimated that about 14 million tonnes of microplastics are lying on the ocean floor right now, and the fashion industry is among the biggest sources.

My former colleague at Heriot-Watt University in my constituency, Dr Mark Hartl, was part of a team who found microplastics in green mussels sold in traditional seafood markets in Jakarta. They estimated that the human intake of microplastics from mussel ingestion ranged from 9,000 to 12,000 microplastic items per person per year. Mark was also part of a team that identified microplastics in seagrass in the Deerness Sound area of the constituency of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. It was found adhering to the blades of the seagrass in some cases.

Elsewhere in Heriot-Watt University, a small team headed by Dr Lisa Macintyre, an associate professor of textiles at the university's school of textiles and design in Galashiels in the constituency of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who is also in his place, has overseen painstaking research to co-develop the world's first visual fibre fragmentation scale. That is really important work, because fashion designers—I am not sure how many of them we have in the Chamber—can use it when selecting fabrics for their designs, to understand how likely it is that those small fibres will fall off.

We know that clothing is not the only problem. Global plastic production is set to triple over the next three decades, as we have heard, but our waste management structures are ill prepared to deal with that looming threat. It is therefore right that we take the plastics treaty seriously.

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my horror that global plastic production will double by 2050? He said that his constituents in Edinburgh South West feel strongly about this; I can assure him that people across Edinburgh do. Will he join me in calling for a global plastics treaty that the Government should take forward as a priority?

**Dr Arthur:** I agree with my hon. Friend. I know that it is important to his constituency, because I can remember how people were really concerned about plastic cotton buds getting washed up on Portobello beach. Thankfully, through changes, that is now much rarer, but it is still an issue.

In Scotland alone it is estimated that we generate around 300,000 tonnes of plastic packaging items annually and, as of 2021, we were recycling only about 4,500 tonnes of that. Each month, Scotland exports about 100 tonnes of waste to different parts of the UK and right across the world. That is an export that I am not proud of. Poor planning on the part of the Scottish Government means that, by the start of next year, 100 tonnes of waste a day will be moving from Scotland to England to be processed.

That is clearly not sustainable, but it seems that we have become all too comfortable recycling being a matter of “out of sight, out of mind.” We have to remember that once we lose sight of our waste, in many cases we also lose control of what is happening to it. Many residents write to me about that.

Even if we were to develop the processing capacity at home, dealing with plastics will always be a problem so long as our consumption remains high, so a much stronger focus needs to be placed on reuse and developing a circular economy, as we heard earlier, not just in Scotland but throughout the UK. In my constituency, I am proud to say that I have several organisations that promote reuse, ranging from sharing libraries to repair and reuse charities. I recently spent an afternoon touring one such venture called The Forge, a pop-up community maker space, based in renovated shipping containers on a site in Fountainbridge, next to the canal and just along from my office. It provides tools, facilities and training to people from all walks of life, including students, artists, do-it-yourself enthusiasts and homeless people. When I visited, there was a young man making a hat block. I thought it was for him to store his hat on, but he intended to make a pirate hat for a pirate festival, of all things. I tried to google where the pirate festival was, but it turns out that pirate festivals are quite common, so it could have been almost anywhere.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Arrrr!

**Dr Arthur:** Thank you.

As well as the hat block, I also saw tables, chests of drawers and even kitchen utensils being made. We could drastically cut our overreliance on plastics if we had more such initiatives; they empower us to create our own long-lasting alternatives, reusing materials and developing lifelong skills in the process. Another charity in Edinburgh South West—one that is under a little bit of pressure just now—is Four Square's Edinburgh Furniture Initiative. It largely sells used furniture and household items, and it uses its income—a non-trivial amount of money—to help solve Edinburgh's housing crisis. It is an absolutely fantastic project.

As I noted, the plastic consumption and processing economies operate across borders, making this an issue that requires a truly joined-up approach. That is why I fully support a deposit return scheme that covers the entirety of the UK; I look forward to its introduction in 2027. That may not be quick enough for some people,



[Dr Arthur]

and I respect that, but we have to balance the pressing need for change with the economic reality for small businesses, which will have to adapt to the new regulations. As others have said, if hon. Members want to see how not to do this, they should just look to the Scottish Government. Its scheme was an absolute embarrassment. Proper consultation is important, and I think Scotland has shown that.

On a global level, I am proud that the Government have fully recognised the importance of tackling plastic pollution through internationally binding treaties. At the UN talks held in South Korea last year, we supported a draft text on legally binding global reductions in plastic production, and on phasing out certain harmful chemicals and single-use plastics. Unfortunately, a consensus could not be reached, largely due to the usual suspects—China and Russia among them—all pushing back against those targets. The negotiations will remain highly contentious as long as those countries, whose economies are heavily reliant on plastic, want to hang on to it.

Having read Dr Lindner's evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee earlier this week, I think an inclusive two-tier model could go some way towards resolving those disagreements, if we cannot get those countries to be as bold and ambitious as I hope the UK is. Some may see that as a compromise that lets major polluters off the hook, but I believe that international co-operation is vital, and similar models have worked well in getting those nations signed up to some kind of baseline target. It would help break the deadlock, and allow high-ambition states like, I hope, the UK to set and hit bolder targets, leading by example. Something is better than nothing. We must make progress on this issue, and a global treaty is essential if we want to protect our planet and the health of future generations.

3.18 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Minister, with whom I served in the shadow Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team for three years, will respond to the debate; I look forward to that.

With less than one month to go until the next round of the UN plastic treaty talks in Geneva, we must ensure that the international and domestic focus keeps us on track. We must also ensure that the UK delegation's priorities are clear, so I thank everybody for taking part in today's debate. Keeping on track is difficult when the number of fossil fuel lobbyists present at the talks rises in each and every round. Those lobbyists seek to derail the talks, and to prevent any limits to plastic production being agreed. We have seen this before with the tobacco industry. We cannot allow private interests that are damaging to health to take precedence, and we cannot allow the mismanagement of plastics, plastic leakage into the environment and the associated colossal greenhouse gas emissions.

Towards the end of my time on the Environmental Audit Committee, we undertook an inquiry on plastic waste. This was in 2021-22. In the three years since it was published, little has changed. Recycling plastic is difficult. Globally, only 9% of plastic has ever been recycled. Furthermore, the carbon emissions associated with plastics outstrip those from the entire global aviation

and shipping industries. Approximately 50% of the plastic packaging waste generated in the UK is exported for recycling—or so we think. That is what we call the UK's plastic recycling capacity gap. The UK has one of the highest per capita plastic waste levels in the world. Cheap single-use packaging is incentivised over unpackaged products, or investment into reuse and recycling and wider circular economy initiatives, which the Government are seeking to champion. On the EAC, we found that much exported waste was just being dumped, with no prospect of recycling. People diligently recycling at home in the UK would be rightly appalled if they saw what was happening to the plastic they put in their bins—green bins in Leeds—for recycling.

To support our UK delegation and address this issue head-on, the UK should take a lead on the international stage in securing global, legally binding targets to cut plastic production. Our recycling and waste treatment industry is hugely supportive of the proposed treaty set out at the discussions, and supports a binding target to reduce global virgin plastic production. The Government need to support the policy measures necessary to make that workable in practice. If the Government develop a clear road map for implementing the policies required to deliver a domestic circular economy for plastics, they could set a binding, viable target for reducing virgin plastic production. They could also set out clear policy interventions to stimulate end-market demand for recycled plastics, and create the conditions for major new investment in plastics sorting and reprocessing infrastructure, so that we end the plastics recycling capacity gap in the UK, create jobs in plastics reprocessing, ensure quality, and ensure that plastic is being recycled, not just dumped. That would be a Great British plastic initiative.

The UK exports approximately 50% of its plastic packaging waste. We must set out proposals for clamping down on illegitimate exports of plastic waste being dumped overseas. While the vast majority of plastic waste exported from the UK is for reprocessing, which is managed in an environmentally sound manner, there have been instances in the past few years where illegitimate exports of low-grade plastics have been dumped or burned overseas. A robust and properly resourced regulator could be empowered to enforce the right standards and clamp down on illegal waste exports. We must end plastic dumping.

The UK Government have already implemented strong steps to improve the quantity and quality of plastics sent for recycling. However, Governments need to address fossil fuels' influence in politics, particularly in the international plastic treaty negotiations. That is the only way we can deliver a circular economy for plastics. There needs to be sustainable long-term demand for any recycled product created. Otherwise, we will carry on with the unsustainable practice of using virgin plastics, and the fossil fuel industry will continue to have an international influence on our UN processes.

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

3.23 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate, and I thank all Members who have contributed.

Rarely do I have the privilege of being part of a debate in which there is such consensus, though we have not heard from the Conservative Front Benchers yet. I assume that there is broad consensus. That should give the Government a strong hand, allowing it to be a tough negotiator in the global plastics treaty talks.

Global plastic production and waste have doubled in the last 20 years—most of what I am saying has already been said; that is the beauty of winding-up speeches. According to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean), the figure stands at 12 million tonnes of plastic. I have another statistic for him: in 2023, the BBC reported that there are more than 170 trillion pieces of plastic floating in the world's oceans. That is no way to treat our precious planet. Indeed, it puts countless species at risk of extinction.

The global plastics treaty offers a unique opportunity for a global, United Nations-led treaty, through which all countries are held to a high common standard on plastic consumption. The treaty would create a level playing field, incentivise and support international action, and forge a clear path toward a future free from plastic pollution. We Liberal Democrats have been instrumental in the campaign to finalise the treaty, and are looking towards next month's negotiations in Geneva, in which we will, I hope, reach a breakthrough.

It is not just in this Chamber that there is great consensus on this issue. The majority of the UK public, the majority of member state Governments, the business community and civil society are all pushing in the same direction. More than 100 countries support a legally binding global target to cut plastic production. The UK must retain its ambition on this key issue.

I am one of 90 MPs who have signed Greenpeace's pledge, which states:

"I support a strong global target to cut plastic production".

Last year, a quarter of a million people took part in the big plastic count, an initiative run by Greenpeace and Everyday Plastic to count each piece of plastic and show the scale of the crisis in the UK. We have heard from many Members about how concerned the public are about this issue, and about their constituents taking part in clean-up actions.

Greenpeace is rightly concerned that, in each further round of talks, more fossil fuel lobbyists seek to derail negotiations and prevent any limits to plastic production from being agreed. The Government should look closely at precedents for how to prevent the influence of lobbyists over international agreements. The framework convention on tobacco control, for example, recognised the lobbying tactics of the tobacco industry and required parties to "act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests".

Governments across the globe must address the influence of fossil fuels in politics, and put the interests of people before polluters.

We must also address funding. A sustainable treaty that is built to last for generations must include a strong, dedicated, multilateral fund. Without a substantial financial package, the treaty will impose obligations on countries, particularly those in the global south, with which they will struggle to comply. The reality of the climate crisis globally means that countries will have to find money to clean up the mess that polluters have created. The Government should look for ways to place

that financial burden mainly on the plastics industry, which has made billions in profits. I recognise that it is important to work with industries, but this is ultimately about the "polluter pays" principle—though, of course, we need to bring industry with us, to create practical and workable solutions that do not flop.

I will touch on one issue that has not been mentioned, but which a constituent has raised with me: plastic pollution from chewing gum. I was alerted to it by Keir Carnie, one of my Bath constituents, the founder of plant-based chewing gum company Nuud Gum. Many of us are completely unaware that chewing gum is, in fact, a single-use plastic. It commonly contains synthetic polymers—plastic materials derived from fossil fuels, and found in products such as carrier bags, glue and car tyres. In the UK, over 4 billion pieces of plastic gum are consumed annually, the majority of which end up as non-biodegradable plastic pollution. That gum breaks down into microplastics, contaminating soil, waterways and wildlife. Gum pollution is also one of the UK's most pervasive types of litter, and costs local councils over £60 million per year in removal efforts. I am sure that every one of us remembers an annoying moment when we had to pick off a piece of gum from under our shoe.

Despite its similarities to other banned single-use plastics such as straws and cotton buds, chewing gum has evaded regulation. As with single-use vapes, the UK has a great opportunity to lead again in environmental and public health protection. I urge the Government to look into this issue, and I am happy to put them in contact with my constituent, who could provide evidence and support on what can be done.

We are at a pivotal moment. The scale and urgency of the plastic pollution crisis demands bold, co-ordinated global action. The treaty must be not only ambitious but fair, with proper funding and protections against vested interests. The UK must show leadership in the upcoming talks, championing a strong new global treaty that tackles plastic pollution at every stage of its lifecycle, so that future generations can enjoy the beautiful planet that we still enjoy—just about—today.

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

3.30 pm

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I begin my remarks by acknowledging an interest in this area: my family own and operate a plastic recycling business, though I make it clear to the House that I am not directly involved in the management of the business, nor do I have any financial interest in it.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this really important debate. All Members have made hugely valuable contributions. The right hon. Member spoke about the importance of responsibility for not only stakeholders but wider industry and, indeed, policymakers. In the light of the upcoming negotiations on the global plastics treaty, it is an important time to have this debate.

Before coming to the potential treaty, it is worth taking a moment to consider some of the domestic context to our national relationship with plastic, and that brings me on to the other contributions. The hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) rightly raised

[*Robbie Moore*]

concerns about microplastics, which have been mentioned by many Members in this House. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) talked about the challenges of plastic litter and plastic waste in his constituency, and he rightly called on the Government to hold China to account in their global discussions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) rightly raised the importance that young people place on reducing plastic usage, and he mentioned the concerns and letters that have been submitted to him by various schools in his constituency, as did the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean). The hon. Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran), who is not in her place, raised the importance of banning single-use vapes and the work of local businesses and organisations in her constituency—including ABBA Voyage, which I have seen, and I noted its work to reduce plastic waste.

The hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) focused on regulation and the importance of this place having an influence on the global plastics treaty. The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) rightly raised her staunch objection to the incineration of plastic waste, and I agree with her. In my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley, a planning application for an incinerator was approved by Labour-run Bradford council. I have been staunchly against that, and I wish her well in her local campaign.

The hon. Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) talked about research undertaken by Professor Christian Dunn at Bangor University, which I hope the Minister will look at. The hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) and his neighbour, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray), talked about the importance of progressing conversations on the global plastics treaty and the need for a greater focus on the concerns of their constituents, raised today by the strong voice of their Edinburgh representatives.

The hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) talked about the importance of reducing virgin plastic production and the need for a real focus on increasing recycling rates. Finally, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) referenced the importance of local groups that drive forward change.

For decades, we have used plastic in ever more roles and in ever greater amounts. Indeed, plastics have replaced many everyday items that once were made from paper, glass or metal. Plastic may have been the way forward then, but that does not mean it need be the way forward now for everything. For that reason, I welcome the important steps that were taken by the previous Conservative Government. Plastic straws, drink stirrers and single-use plastic bags are all notorious for polluting our natural environment, and it was therefore right that efforts were taken to ban them.

In fact, the plastic bag charge has successfully seen plastic bag usage reduced by 98%. Other restrictions on single-use plastic cutlery, cups, trays, plates and many other items are now in force, with the ban having an important effect on reducing residual waste. Residual waste is key. We know that the UK produces a huge amount of plastic waste—as much as the second most per capita globally—but we also know that, due to

strong environmental protections, very little of that waste is now handled irresponsibly. Of course, there is always more to be done.

For comparison, 80% of the plastics in the ocean originate from Asia, compared with just 0.4% from Europe. Reducing residual waste must be the key pillar of any international treaty on plastic waste. The previous Government understood that when they legislated in the Environment Act 2021 to halve residual waste, and I trust that the Minister will be able to reassure us that it remains the key goal of this Government.

**Bobby Dean:** The hon. Gentleman is talking well about the general state of plastic in the world, but we are debating the global plastics treaty. Can he confirm whether his party supports the UK being a signatory?

**Robbie Moore:** I will come on to those points, but I first wanted to outline the nature of the debate, because it is important to recognise the contributions that have been made.

We know that reducing our plastic use is vital for two key reasons. The first is the impact on the environment. It is estimated that as many as 1 million seabirds die each year as a result of entanglement in plastic. In fact, at current rates of increase, the weight of plastic in the oceans will outweigh all fish by 2050. Plastics also pollute our inland waterways, having a detrimental impact on nearby areas, especially when we consider the long-term chemical effects of decomposition.

The second reason is the growing body of research showing that long-term exposure to plastics is bad for our health—particularly microplastics, as the hon. Member for Stafford mentioned. Everything from hair loss to fatigue, heart conditions and strokes have been linked to microplastics. What is most concerning is that, while the health links may not yet be fully understood, we know that microplastics persist for centuries, not only in the environment but in our bodies. As we use more plastic through our lives, these levels build, potentially increasing the risks.

That is precisely why securing an effective global framework to reduce plastic use is key. The resolutions passed in 2022 were an encouraging first step and show clearly that countries across the world recognise the challenge and wish to tackle it. Crucially, this global support for progress on plastics is key to ensuring that standards are raised uniformly and that the risk that plastic waste is simply offshored is significantly reduced. We simply must not offshore our responsibility.

Equally, we must be realistic about how we manage plastics. We must recognise that unilaterally banning or heavily restricting many types of plastic will leave us uncompetitive on the global stage. We must work with other nations and bring those that are sceptical along with us. That scepticism is precisely why we must use the negotiations on this treaty to take these matters forward, and to make them concrete.

We cannot simply have goals or aspirations. We must have verifiable targets that can be measured so that we can hold organisations and stakeholders to account. Naturally, we should then expect all signatories to fulfil those obligations. I hope the Government are able to confirm that they will push for the inclusion of these measures in the treaty as they continue to negotiate, to ensure compliance by ourselves and other partners.



We must continue to work not only on the global plastics treaty but to improve our plastic waste record at home. We must continue to invest in our sorting and volume capacity within the recycling sector to ensure that the amount of recycling continues to go up, and to reduce the amount going to landfill.

Plastic pollution is not going away. Many plastics will be with us for thousands of years, so it is vital that we act to stop the flow of waste into our environment. When discussions are reopened next month in Geneva, I hope that the Minister will be in attendance and that the Government will be successful in securing the robust and practical treaty that we all hope to see.

3.39 pm

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner):** It is a pleasure to respond to the debate, so ably introduced by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). He, along with every Member from across the Chamber who made a contribution, pointed out the seriousness of the issue and the urgent need for action.

Plastic pollution is one of the biggest environmental issues that we face today. Once hailed as a miracle of modern invention, plastic is now one of our planet's most persistent threats. Its greatest strength—durability—has become its darkest flaw. These materials are designed to last and do just that—for centuries. They do not simply disappear, but break down into tiny fragments, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) so ably pointed out, and these microplastics invade our beaches, rivers, fields and even our bodies. From the depths of the oceans to the cells of living creatures, plastic pollution is everywhere.

For too long, plastic has littered our oceans and threatened our wildlife. Amounts of plastic entering the ocean are predicted to triple by 2040 compared with 2016. That is unacceptable. Plastic pollution does not respect boundaries. We urgently need to agree a plastics treaty to enable global action to address this, so with that in mind, I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and his Committee for their recent inquiry into the treaty, and for their letter of recommendations for the forthcoming negotiations on an international treaty to end plastic pollution. It is a very timely input, and I read it with interest as we finalised our preparations for the negotiations. I look forward to responding more fully in due course, but the Committee can be assured that this Government are taking every step to ensure that we secure an ambitious and effective global plastics pollution treaty. This will be both a tool for moving towards a circular economy and an opportunity to showcase some of the domestic action that the UK has taken.

A circular economy is key to delivering our Government's plan for change—to grow the economy, increase environmental resilience and improve the lives of hard-working people around the country. That is why our circular economy taskforce has brought together experts from across Government, industry, academia and civil society to develop the first circular economy strategy for England. It will include a road map on chemicals and plastics, deliver growth and fundamentally shift our relationship with the goods that we use every day, ending our throwaway society and stopping the avalanche of rubbish that is filling up our high streets, countryside and oceans, making reuse and repair the norm, and

ending the throwaway society. A circular economy is an opportunity to grow our economy and make it more resilient, to improve lives in every part of the United Kingdom, and to protect our environment for generations to come.

Domestically, the Government are already working with the devolved Governments to legislate across the UK for the ban on wet wipes containing plastic. From 1 June this year, the sale and supply of single-use vapes was banned across the UK. The deposit return scheme for single-use plastic and metal drinks containers in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland will launch in October 2027, which will drive our efforts to stop litter filling up our streets, rivers and oceans. I am grateful for the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) about the story in Scotland.

Additionally, the extended producer responsibility for packaging came into effect on 1 January this year. It will move the full cost of dealing with household packaging waste away from local taxpayers and on to the packaging producers themselves. I was pleased to hear the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) about the great successes of the Labour Government, working with people in Wales, on issues around recycling.

**Bobby Dean:** The EPR scheme is obviously welcome and Liberal Democrat Members know the intention, but the scheme appears to have some unintended effects. The scheme will not only impact producers but small businesses, hospitality businesses in particular, who have raised their concerns. Will the Minister continue to listen to those businesses and try to adjust the scheme, so it works for them as well?

**Daniel Zeichner:** Of course—absolutely. We are always working in collaboration, and we will do everything we can to ensure that. It is an important principle that has been established, and I am determined to ensure that it is successful.

Next month, at the resumed fifth session of the intergovernmental negotiating committee, we will have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to agree an ambitious and effective international agreement to end plastic pollution. We want a treaty that tackles the full life cycle of plastics and promotes a circular economy. The UK has been a key advocate for an effective treaty throughout and is a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution—a coalition of nearly 70 countries from across all regions of the world.

At INC5, the UK joined over 80 other ambitious countries to make clear the weight of support for an ambitious treaty. Recently, at the UN ocean conference in Nice, we joined nearly 100 countries in signing the Nice wake-up call for an ambitious international treaty to end plastic pollution. Those demonstrate the commitment to reaching an agreement at INC5.2 in August and the weight of support for an ambitious treaty. I am proud of the leadership role that the UK has taken in the negotiations, and we continue to take significant action to drive ambition and demonstrate leadership.

**John Lamont:** The Minister is right to highlight the leading role that the UK has played in this matter, under both the current Government and, in particular,

[John Lamont]

the previous Government. The last negotiations and progress towards the treaty came to a halt because Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia basically imposed a time limit, which meant that the treaty could not be agreed. What discussions are taking place behind the scenes to ensure that countries like those three will not do the same and stall our agreement on the treaty this time?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's well-informed intervention. I assure him that negotiations and discussions are ongoing, and we are determined to ensure that we get a good outcome.

As well as leading early work to develop criteria for problematic plastic products since the second negotiating session, INC2, the UK is co-leading work with Chile to progress discussions on product design, and co-leading work with Panama on releases and leakages of plastic.

**Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con):** I am sure the Minister is aware that His Excellency the Ambassador of Ecuador is the chairman of the UN intergovernmental negotiating committee on plastics. Is the Minister working with him? His Excellency is in London and doing incredible work in this area, and I hope that our Government are co-operating with him. He is also doing work toward and looking forward to the day when Ecuador can join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are working with all interested parties to ensure that we make progress on this issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy) recently co-hosted a ministerial event at the UN ocean conference to bring together Ministers from a range of countries, representing all regions and ambition levels, to discuss the most challenging issues.

As we look forward to August, it is clear that divergent views remain on key issues such as phasing out problematic products, how we approach the production of plastics and financing the treaty. However, it is our sense that the majority of countries want to reach an agreement at INC5.2, and there has been substantial discussion of how the treaty addresses plastic production. Many parties believe that plastic production is outside the scope of the agreement. However, the UK has been clear that the treaty should address the full life cycle of plastic, including sustainable production and consumption.

At INC5.2, we will continue to work on that basis, to ensure that the treaty sends a signal to spur investment in the market for recycled plastic and to collect the data we need to ensure that the treaty works. A provision on problematic plastic products will be one of the core treaty provisions, and the UK has worked with Brazil to carry out technical work to support that provision. The UK has also supported the call from 95 countries in Busan for a clear, legally binding obligation to phase out the most harmful plastic products and chemicals of concern in plastics.

Good progress was made at INC5 on text that provides a basis for further discussions. The key will be striking the right balance between national measures and harmonised global approaches and ensuring that measures are based on science. We are working with Chile to

promote an effective provision on the design of plastic products to keep them in use for longer and make them easier to recycle. We recognise the importance of mobilising support for the countries most in need of agreement's implementation. That is an essential element of an effective treaty. The UK supports the use of the Global Environment Facility to support the implementation of the treaty. That will avoid further fragmentation of the environmental financial architecture and allow for synergies with funding for climate and nature.

As we have heard, plastic pollution is a broad issue, with a huge variety of actors across the plastics value chain. To mobilise the resources needed at scale, we must draw on an equally broad range of funding sources—public and private, domestic and international. The UK is the largest donor to the Global Plastic Action Partnership, contributing some £20.5 million. That partnership brings together Governments, businesses and civil society to tackle plastic pollution and increase investment in the circular economy in countries eligible for official development assistance. To end plastic pollution, we need all actors in the plastics value chain to act, and we need to bring everyone along with us. That includes the marginalised, undervalued and unrecognised waste pickers, most of whom are women. They handle more than half the world's plastic waste for recycling, so it is really important that their voices are heard.

It is essential that the treaty we agree is responsive to change and emerging evidence—it cannot operate effectively if one member has a de facto veto. As such, we need effective decision-making processes, including the possibility of voting on conference of the parties decisions and amendments to annexes once all options for achieving consensus have been exhausted.

One thing is clear: addressing the problem of plastic pollution requires a joint effort between Government, industry, academia and civil society. We have partnered with the Ocean Plastics Leadership Network to run the UK treaty dialogues ahead of each round of negotiations. Those dialogues have included actors at all stages of the plastics value chain, as well as academia and environmental non-governmental organisations. They have helped us to understand diverse views on the treaty, which in turn have informed our approach to negotiations.

In June, my ministerial colleague and hon. Friend, the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice, hosted a business roundtable to discuss how the private sector can support an ambitious plastic pollution treaty. It was the second plastics treaty business roundtable, and brought together businesses from across the plastics value chain. Those roundtables were attended by His Excellency Ambassador Vayas, the INC chair. Twenty leading businesses have now signed a statement calling for an effective treaty, and four non-private sector organisations have endorsed that statement.

The Government are also clear that any treaty must be informed by science, and I noted the comments made on that topic by my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran). In that regard, we are deeply concerned to hear of the threats faced by scientists—an issue that has been raised by a number of contributors to this debate. Those threats are unacceptable. We remain steadfast in our commitment to the multilateral system and to an open, transparent and inclusive process.

This has been a timely debate, as we approach final negotiations in Geneva. While there are many challenges to overcome, a vast amount of work is under way to

find solutions to the many remaining issues. I heard the strong calls from my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), and I am confident that we can secure a robust and effective treaty. That is what the UK team will be pushing for in Geneva. Again, I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland for securing this debate.

3.52 pm

**Mr Carmichael:** I thank everybody who has taken part in this debate—it has been quite a remarkable exercise and an enormously valuable one. Every contribution has been truly excellent. We have heard from Members representing constituencies in Scotland, Wales and England; we have not had anybody from Northern Ireland, but I should place on the record that I have seen on the Annunciator that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has been in Westminster Hall this afternoon. It has also been noteworthy for the fact that, at a time of year when we all get a bit tired and scratchy, we have had remarkable consensus and a good-natured debate.

In closing, I want to address myself to not just the people in the Chamber, but those who might be watching from outside. The evidence session that our Select Committee held last week was not an easy one to pull together, especially when it came to bringing in corporate interests. Coca-Cola turned up and, to its credit, had a decent story to tell. INEOS turned up, and might or might not have had a good story to tell—it could not quite remember. The people who we really wanted to get were from Unilever, but apparently everybody in Unilever had gone to India for the day, so they could not appear before the Committee. We will return to this; they can run, but they cannot hide.

In the past, we have seen not just the national, but the corporate influences that have stood in the way of progress. If those corporate interests are watching our proceedings today, they should hear a very loud and clear message that we are watching them. If they again stand in the way of making progress on something that matters to this House and to the people who send us here, we will see them, and there will be a commercial price for them to pay for standing in the way of progress.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Global Plastics Treaty.

## Future of the Church of England

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Keir Mather.*)

3.55 pm

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is an honour to stand here in this empty Chamber to speak about the original purpose of this space, when it was a chapel in the Church of England. The old Chamber of the House of Commons, on which this space was modelled after the great fire of 1834, was St Stephen's Chapel—formerly a royal church. It was given by the heirs of Henry VIII to Parliament to serve as its debating Chamber. Madam Deputy Speaker, your Chair stands on the altar steps. The Table with the Dispatch Boxes is where the lectern stood.

I mention that because the link between this place and the Church of England is not merely ceremonial. The Prayers we say here at the start of every day are not just a nod to tradition. Our democracy is founded on Christian faith. This Parliament remains the law-giving power of the Church of England. We in this place have the responsibility to approve or disapprove the doctrine and the rules of the Church, and that is as it should be, because the Church of England is not some private club or just another eccentric denomination. The Church is a chaplain to the nation, and through the parish system, in which every square inch of England has its local church and its local priest, we are all members—we all belong. Even if you never set foot in your church from one year to the next, and even if you do not believe in its teachings, it is your church and you are its member.

When I speak of the Church of England today, I am not speaking about the internal politics of the Anglican sect; I speak of the common creed of our country, the official religion of the English and the British nation, and the institution—older than the monarchy, and much older than Parliament—which made this country. It is no surprise that both the Church and the country itself are in a bad way, divided, internally confused and badly led. The Church is riven by deep disputes over doctrine and governance, and is literally leaderless, with even the process of choosing the next Archbishop of Canterbury unclear, confused and contended. The country itself reflects that—unclear in its doctrines and its governance, profoundly precarious, chronically exposed to threats from without and within. It is at risk economically, culturally, socially and, I would say, morally.

Last month, in the space of three days in one infamous week, this House authorised the killing of unborn children—of nine-month-old babies—and it passed a Bill to allow the killing of the elderly and disabled. I describe those laws in those stark terms not to provoke further controversy, but because those are the facts. We gave our consent to the greatest crime: the killing of the weak and most defenceless human beings. It was a great sin. If, standing here, I have any power to repent on behalf of this House, I hereby repent of what we did.

In the reaction to these votes, and all around us in reaction to the state of the country and the world, something else is happening. There is a great hunger in society for a better way of living, and I want to use this opportunity to explain what that better way is and why we here in England have the means to follow it.



[*Danny Kruger*]

The Jewish and Christian God is a God of nations. He is interested in people as individuals, but also as groups—as communities not only of kinship but of common worship, with a common God. Uniquely among the nations of the world, this nation—England, from which the United Kingdom grew—was founded and created consciously on the basis of the Bible and the story of the Hebrew people. In that sense, England is the oldest Christian country and the prototype of nations across the west. The story of England is the story of Christianity operating on a people to make the institutions and culture that have been uniquely stable and successful.

The western model was forged and refined in England over a thousand years from the 9th to the 19th centuries. What is that model? It is simply this: that power should arrange itself for the benefit of all the people under it, and specifically for the poorest and weakest; that the law is there to protect the ordinary person against the abuse of power; and that every individual has equal dignity and freedom, including, crucially, the freedom of conscience, religion and belief, which makes space for other religions under the Christian shield—a secular space. Indeed, the idea of a secular space is a Christian concept that is meaningful only in a Christian world. These are ideas that only make sense if one accepts that we have some intrinsic value—a value that is given to us and is not of our own making or invention.

Throughout the long years from the time of Alfred to the time of Victoria, it was assumed that a nation was a community of common worship and that our community—this country—worshipped the Christian God. Then, in the 20th century, another idea arose: that it was possible for a country to be neutral about God; that the public square was empty of any metaphysics; and that the route to freedom lay through the desert of materialism and individual reason—“no hell below us, above us only sky”. That idea was wrong. The horrors of the 20th century attest to that, not least in the west, where we escaped totalitarianism but have suffered our own catastrophes of social breakdown, social injustice, loneliness and emptiness on a chronic scale.

Ugly and aggressive new threats are now arising, because we have found that in the absence of the Christian God, we do not have pluralism and tolerance, with everyone being nice to each other in a godless world. All politics is religious, and in abandoning one religion we simply create a space for others to move into.

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very moving and powerful speech. Our Head of State, who is also the head of the Church of England, represents the rights of all peoples to live in a free society and to worship freely. It is because our Head of State is also the head of our established Church that there are protections for all religions and denominations in our constitution. The cross is on the top of the crown that he wears, which demonstrates that the Christian faith is the basis of our constitution, our customs, our heritage and our British way of life. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Danny Kruger:** My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I do agree with him. He makes the point very well, and I absolutely acknowledge it. The paradox

of our constitution is that under a monarchy, we have a system with the most developed political freedom in the world, and that under an established Church, we have a tradition of freedom of conscience and belief in which all religions can be accommodated. It is because the cross is at the centre, and I notice that the cross is above your Chair too, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, in abandoning one religion we simply create a space for others to move into as the dominant faiths. There are two religions moving into the space from which Christianity has been ejected, and one is Islam. In a debate yesterday, I said how much I find myself in agreement with Muslim colleagues in Parliament on moral and social matters. But as I have been saying, this is a Christian country—if it is a country at all—and I cannot be indifferent to the extent of the growth of Islam in recent decades.

It is the other religion that worries me even more. This other religion is a hybrid of old and new ideas, and it does not have a proper name. I do not think that “woke” does justice to its seriousness. It is a combination of ancient paganism, Christian heresies and the cult of modernism, all mashed up into a deeply mistaken and deeply dangerous ideology of power that is hostile to the essential objects of our affections and our loyalties: families, communities and nations. It is explicitly and most passionately hostile to Christianity as the wellspring of the west. That religion, unlike Islam, must simply be destroyed, at least as a public doctrine. It must be banished from public life—from schools and universities, and from businesses and public services. It needs to be sent back to the fringes of eccentricity, like the modern druids who invest Stonehenge in my constituency with a theology that is seen as mad but harmless because its followers are so few and no one serious takes them seriously.

We can no longer pretend, as people did in the 20th century, that we can be neutral or indifferent to God or to the public square being a godless desert. The fact is that the strong gods are back, and we have to choose which god to worship. I suggest we worship the God who came in the weakest form, Jesus Christ. This God is a jealous god—it is him or nothing—and we have to own our Christian story, or repudiate it. Not to own it is to repudiate it, and to repudiate Christianity is not only to sever ourselves from our past, but to cut off the source of all the things we value now and that we need in the future, such as freedom, tolerance, individual dignity and human rights.

Without the Christian God, in whose teaching these things have their source, these are inventions—mere non-existent aspirations. To worship human rights is to worship fairies, but if we own our story and remember the real sources of our civilisation, we can have these things and make them real—real freedom and tolerance and dignity, a culture of love and, crucially, a culture of humanity. We are in the age of the machine, and a great choice confronts us: whether to make machines in the image of fallen man, bent on exploitation and domination with mankind in its sights, or to make them what they properly are, the servants of mankind able to help us make a better world.

To conclude, a wind is blowing, a storm is coming and when it hits we are going to learn if our house is built on rock or on sand, but we have been here before. The reformers of the 11th and the 16th centuries, the

Puritans in the 17th century, the Evangelicals in the 19th century all brought this country back from the edge—from idolatry, error or just plain indifference, and from all the social and political crises that indifference to Christianity brought about—and they each in their generation restored this country to itself.

A new restoration is needed now, with a revival of the faith, a recovery of a Christian politics and a re-founding of this nation on the teachings that Alfred made the basis of the common law of England all those centuries ago. This is a mission for the Church under its next leader, whoever that is; it is a mission for this place—the old chapel that became the wellspring of western democracy—and for us, its Members; and it is a mission for our whole country. It is the route to a prosperous modernity founded on respect for human dignity, responsibility for the created world and the worship of God.

4.7 pm

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** I thank the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) for securing this important debate on the future of the Church of England. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government.

The hon. Member has often spoken very powerfully about the importance of faith, its role in public life and the benefit it brings. Today, he has spoken eloquently on the positive role that Christianity plays in our wider society, which I believe is a sentiment shared across the House. Anyone involved in local life knows just how essential are Christian places of worship and the people who support them. They run schools and toddler groups, support food banks and reach out to those facing homelessness. They offer comfort and companionship to those who are isolated, grieving or just struggling to cope. The truth is simple: without them, much of our local life simply would not function. Their contribution is not just appreciated, but indispensable.

The Christian faith has played a central role in public life and it continues to do so. The hon. Member is but one of a number of examples of good public servants motivated by their Christian faith in the cause of the common good. Our society is enriched by those contributions. It is equally enriched by people from a wide range of backgrounds, heritage and, indeed, faiths and beliefs. Right across this House, I see members of the Protestant, Catholic—like myself—Jewish, Muslim and Sikh faith communities, and those of other faiths and indeed none, who are all motivated towards the betterment of the people we serve.

For the benefit of the House, I will briefly outline the constitutional arrangements between the established Church, Parliament and the Executive. These arrangements have deep roots and have evolved over many centuries. Much of our constitution is based on a combination of common law, statutes, conventions and principles. As the established Church, the Church of England has historically been subject to parliamentary legislation. However, since the enabling Act of 1919—the Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act 1919—much of its governance has been delegated to its own body, the General Synod. While the Synod manages its internal affairs, its Measures still require Parliament's approval and Royal Assent. As hon. Members will know, the

Lords Spiritual, bishops of the Church, sit in the House of Lords by right. The Government believe they offer a unique and valued spiritual perspective.

There are still many ways in which the Church and Parliament remain closely connected. The Government reflect that a great example is the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Act 2025, which was skilfully steered through the House last year by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare). The Act, requested by the Church of England, extends for five more years the arrangements allowing female bishops to sit in the House of Lords as Lords Spiritual. In fact, it recently enabled the Right Rev. Sophie Jelley, the new Bishop of Coventry, to take her seat in the other place. The Church also has a presence in this House through the Second Church Estates Commissioner. I am pleased that the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) does so much work in that regard, serving as a vital link between Parliament and the Church, and ensuring that the Church Commissioners remain accountable to the House.

The Executive, in particular the Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor, play a key role in appointing senior clergy. While bishops are formally appointed by the sovereign, that is done on the Prime Minister's advice, following recommendations from the Crown Nominations Commission. The sovereign, as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, remains central to those arrangements. In highlighting some of the ways the Church, Parliament and the Executive are intertwined, I hope to provide assurance to the hon. Member for East Wiltshire that, on the importance of the Church of England and the Christian faith more generally, Parliament and the Executive are by no means washing their hands.

The Church is streamlining its national governance, with plans approved by the Synod earlier this week. The proposals will soon come before Parliament. This marks another step in a process begun in 2020 to create better governance structures that better support the Church's mission and its work. Regarding the Church's future, its day-to-day operations are of course not a matter for the Government. However, the Government look forward to the Church continuing to evolve to meet the challenges of our time, and to play an active role in public debate on the most important issues we face as a nation.

**Andrew Rosindell:** My hon. Friend the Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) referred to the importance of the local parish. Across England, the parish is central to everything. The church and the local vicar are a part of our community. In fact, we are very lucky in Romford to have the Church of St Edward the Confessor. We have a new vicar, the Rev. Jordan Palmer, who has just joined our church. Does the Minister agree that the parish is vital? It is not just about the church community, the members of the church; it has a wider responsibility to all people of all religions and no religion, not just Church of England members. The Church of England should cherish the importance of the parish as a part of all our communities in the constituencies we represent.

**Jim McMahon:** I believe that very strongly, actually. Even Members who are not church attenders will take part in civic life at a local level that is closely linked to

[*Jim McMahon*]

their local parish church. I think about Remembrance Sunday and the role parish churches play in those reflections. I think about our own Mayoral Sunday, which is celebrated every year, where the mayor of the borough of Oldham is the honorary church warden in the parish church. Regardless of individual faith and belief, I think it is accepted and celebrated that parish churches are a significant part of local identity and a place for all people to come together. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's new church leader on that basis.

That is a reflection of the value that we as a Parliament place on the Church of England, which is why bringing the debate to the House today was so important. I thank the hon. Member for East Wiltshire for doing just that and I hope he appreciates the response on behalf of the Government.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.13 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 July 2025

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Freedom of Religion or Belief: UK Foreign Policy

1.30 pm

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of freedom of religion or belief in UK foreign policy.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and to all colleagues who have joined me to discuss this urgent, important and powerful subject. A great number of Members who have sponsored my debate are unable to attend because of pressing considerations, and I therefore give honourable mentions to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) and to the hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith)—as well as to the many Members who have showed up. This is a cross-cutting and cross-party issue, and I hope the debate can go ahead in that spirit.

Last week, I launched the Government's new freedom of religion or belief—FORB—strategy at the Foreign Office. It is a bold strategy that is good for Britain, and I will talk more about it in a moment, but I want to start with my own experience of championing FORB, which started long before the Prime Minister asked me to be the UK special envoy last December. Growing up, my parents were involved in supporting Christian Mission to the Communist World. That included, as glasnost took root in the late 1980s, boarding ships that had docked in Scotland from the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc so that my parents could meet the sailors and share their faith.

Those sailors had often never heard of Jesus Christ, or for that matter Mohammed, the Buddha or any other belief system except communism. Also, as a young boy, I met countless Christians who had been imprisoned, tortured and persecuted, especially those from behind the iron curtain, simply for what they believed. That made a huge impact on me—the fact that we can never take this freedom for granted in our world. Sadly, as we will hear today, we still cannot.

The new Government strategy is for people like those Soviet sailors—people who are trapped and punished by systems that deny them the freedom to choose what they do or do not believe. That is why FORB is and should be at the very heart of UK foreign policy. It is about our values as a country, and the right to believe and practise one's beliefs openly. It is something we can stand for in the world.

**Sir Jeremy Hunt** (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for the brilliant job he is doing as our religious freedom envoy, which has support across the House. Does he agree that for all sorts of reasons, including political correctness and a worry about being seen to be glorifying our imperial history, our foreign policy has not done enough on freedom of religion and belief, but that countries that start to erode religious freedoms soon erode other freedoms as well, which is why it is vital that we redouble our efforts?

**David Smith:** I thank the right hon. Member for that point, for his work as Foreign Secretary to bring about the role that I now inhabit, and for his focus on freedom of religion or belief. I agree—I will come on to say more about this—that we should be humble yet bold about what we can offer with our values and should not shy away from these issues because of perceived political correctness or whatever it may be.

It is easy to talk about principles such as freedom, human rights, respect, tolerance or justice, but it is far harder to live up to their meaning in our actions. The history of this country, however, is one in which we have worked hard to create a plural society based on those values. We do not always get it right, but I am proud that in the UK today, we are free to practise our religion or belief without fear of persecution. My constituency of North Northumberland is home to worshipping communities that stretch back to Saxon times. My constituents have precious freedoms—too precious not to share. That is what the strategy is about. The world needs FORB, and Britain is uniquely placed to champion it. Championing FORB will be good for Britain too.

Let me talk about the need and situation in the world at the moment. Most Members are well aware of the challenges we face, but some facts bear repeating. According to the Pew Research Centre, the number of countries with high or very high levels of Government restrictions on FORB is at its highest level since 2007. At the community level, social hostilities involving religion are also on the rise, further reducing respect for human rights in general and FORB in particular. For example, according to the charity Open Doors, 380 million Christians are persecuted worldwide because of their faith.

Persecution on the basis of religion or belief, whether by states or social groups, is taking place on every continent in the world. It involves social ostracism, police harassment, arbitrary detention, denial of citizenship, assault, destruction of sites of religious worship, torture and killings. In Pakistan, Ahmadiyya Muslims are not recognised as Muslims by the state, and their mosques have repeatedly been desecrated by extremist groups. In Iran, the Baha'i are acutely vulnerable to scapegoating, incitement and threats of violence from state authorities. In North Korea, those seeking to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief face surveillance and arbitrary detention, with Christians and others treated as political criminals if their faith is discovered.

Those are not niche issues. FORB is central to the problems of the world today. Horrific acts, such as the murder of worshippers in a church in Damascus last month, are not only attacks on people for what they believe in, but attempts to destabilise societies and spread division. FORB demonstrates the core principle that human rights are interdependent and mutually

[David Smith]

reinforcing. Those who have no freedom to worship have no freedom of assembly. Those who have no freedom of belief have no freedom of conscience. Those who have no freedom to share their faith have no freedom of speech. Those who have no freedom to practice their faith or belief are not equal in dignity and rights.

Those sound like obvious principles, but we must humbly remember that our own country took many centuries to discern them. For many long, sometimes shameful, periods of our own history we were better known as religious persecutors ourselves, oppressing those who did not believe in whichever strand of Christianity was ascendant at the time. We approach the rest of the world as a country that has erred and learned and that wants other nations to avoid our own mistakes. Countries that respect FORB and where all constituent communities can flourish are more stable, more secure and more prosperous.

So to the strategy. The Government have formally made a new commitment to the centrality of FORB in their foreign policy, and I am delighted to be a small part of that through my role as the envoy. FORB will play its own distinctive part in our foreign policy. There are two top-line aims of that approach. The first is simply to reduce the number of countries in which the right to FORB is significantly curtailed, and the second is to promote FORB internationally as essential to human flourishing.

There are five strands to the strategy. The first is engagement with multilateral institutions and forums to maintain collective support for FORB around the world. I am very proud that the UK has a history of championing FORB within the international rules-based order—something that seems to be under attack a lot of the time at the moment—not least as an original supporter of the universal declaration of human rights in 1948 and of the international covenant on civil and political rights in 1966.

We will continue to work with international partners to take country-specific action where appropriate, whether through the UN's universal periodic review process or by promoting FORB in multilateral resolutions. That strand underpinned, for example, my visit to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva just two weeks ago to give the UK Government statement on the right of Tibetan Buddhists, and not the Chinese Communist party, to determine the succession of the Dalai Lama. The second strand of our approach is bilateral engagement with countries where we feel we can make a difference.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for the brilliant, nuanced speech that he is making about our role and its importance. Does he agree with me and with Amnesty International that there are more than 1 million Muslim Uyghurs in prison camps in the Xinjiang region of China, and that we can work effectively by ensuring that products made in that region, for example cotton, do not find their way on to the high streets in this country?

**David Smith:** In my six months in this role as envoy, a repeated refrain has been that we must not forget the Uyghur Muslims of Xinjiang. I was very pleased to take part in an all-party parliamentary group meeting with human rights champions from Xinjiang in the last few

weeks. The hon. Member is right: we must ensure that our procurement as a country and our approach to international economics and business does not in any way buttress the oppression of the many Uyghurs in China.

The second point of the strategy is to build bilateral relationships, and I will say more on a moment on the countries I will focus on. The third strand is international coalitions of collective action, so that we can work together with the coalition of the willing. There are some countries that are more engaged in freedom of religion or belief than others, and we want to work with those who are passionate about this issue. We are proud to be, for example, members of the Article 18 Alliance and the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and we will continue to double down on those relationships.

The fourth of the five strands is about weaving support for FORB throughout the Government's human rights agenda and foreign policy, because FORB is an acid test for the health of other human rights. That means bolstering our efforts to increase awareness and understanding of FORB within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and across Government, as well as ensuring that tools, training and research are available to staff. I will report annually on that work, including at the highest levels of Government.

Finally, the fifth strand is about working with civil society and religious groups because, frankly, a lot of the time they know what is happening on the ground even better than our posts and diplomatic missions around the world do. We need to try and draw them in and rely on what they are telling us. From sharing information to fostering understanding and respect between different religious or belief communities on the ground, civil society and religious group engagement is central to the protection and promotion of FORB.

We will focus our bilateral engagement on 10 specific countries, chosen for their historical or geographical links that place the United Kingdom in a special position of influence; because we believe that there is a potential to make a difference now; and because of their place on the Pew Research Centre index, in terms of high levels of FORB persecution. Those countries are, in alphabetical order, Afghanistan, Algeria, China, India, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Ukraine and Vietnam.

This is an ambitious strategy. It places a high level of confidence in our country's ability to seek justice around the world. It requires buy-in from Government, from parliamentarians, from civil society and from religious groups. It will need resource allocation and, more importantly, it will need support. It will need this place to champion it at a time when sometimes voters are increasingly concerned with problems closer to home. It will require Government to own, centre and adequately resource it, and to know that the cost of failure is high. This strategy could lead not just to freedom for millions around the world, but to a flourishing here in the UK.

I believe that strong support for freedom of religion or belief around the world could be both a blessing to the world and a blessing to the United Kingdom. We use quite dry words such as "strategy", but in the end I think this is about a blessing.

I remember, in a previous life, marching years ago on the G8 at Gleneagles for international debt relief; it seemed an impossible dream at the time, but we got it.

I remember working in my first job, which was on peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and wondering whether the Good Friday/Belfast agreement would hold, but it held. I remember working more recently, housing homeless people who had spent years on the street, and wondering whether they could rebuild their lives, but they did.

Britain has a remarkable capacity to deliver good things. We have the wealth, the expertise and cultural generosity to turn bad into good, both locally and internationally. In other countries, that does not always happen. There are not many places where social conflict turns into lasting peace.

It would be a thankless waste of centuries of history and democracy to turn away from those abroad who desperately need us. In the contemporary climate, the temptation is to raise the drawbridge and focus our efforts only at home but, if we direct some of our generosity outwards, we will store up blessings not only in other countries, but for ourselves. There is something profoundly life-giving about sharing what we have with others. We need think only about Bosnia, Kosovo and Sierra Leone to recall some of the positive impact that this country has made in the past 20 years.

Promoting FORB revitalises our national story, challenges our darker impulses and creates a future to work towards. That is the role of FORB in Britain's foreign policy—not as a policy, but as a blessing for those who need and deserve freedom. The persecuted need us. We can help them, and in doing so we will positively shape Britain and the world's future for generations to come.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Carolyn Harris (in the Chair):** I remind Members that they need to bob if they wish to make a speech. When making speeches and interventions, Members should be aware that I will start the wind-ups at 2.28 pm. I call the Father of the House.

1.46 pm

**Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), for securing this important debate and for all his work. The Prime Minister obviously made an excellent choice.

Freedom of religion or belief should be the cornerstone of the United Kingdom's foreign policy to ensure the rights of minorities around the world, in compliance with our obligations under the United Nations declaration of human rights. As has been said, nations with high levels of religious liberty and tolerance are more stable than those that oppress people who wish only to worship in peace.

I wish to focus on an issue that I raised a few weeks ago in the main Chamber at Church Commissioners questions: the plight of the Christians in Taybeh in the west bank and the violence from extremist settlers who are seeking to remove them from their land. I dedicate my speech to Mike Huckabee, Mr Trump's choice as the United States ambassador to Israel, who is an evangelical pastor. He is also a strong supporter of these extremist settlers. The vast majority of our friends in Israel—the peaceful citizens of Israel—are totally opposed to the actions of these extremist settlers in the west bank.

Taybeh is an ancient village in the Holy Land, in the occupied west bank. In biblical times, it was known as Ephraim, which according to John's gospel is the village where Christ went before his passion. It is now the last and only Christian-majority town in the west bank. It is under attack as we speak. Cardinal Pizzaballa, who is the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, the Greek Orthodox patriarch and other heads of churches in Jerusalem visited Taybeh on Monday following the recent violence. I place on record my thanks to the British consul general in Jerusalem, who accompanied the clergy on their mission to highlight to the world the plight of Taybeh.

In the ruins of the church of St George, the assembled clergy issued a statement, saying that

“radical Israelis from nearby settlements intentionally set fire near the town's cemetery and the Church of Saint George”—

intentionally set fire to a church—

“which dates back to the 5th century. Taybeh is the last remaining all-Christian town in the West Bank. These actions are a direct and intentional threat to our local community first and foremost, but also to the historic and religious heritage of our ancestors and holy sites.”

Taybeh's Roman Catholic parish priest, Father Bashar Fawadleh, told the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need that following the latest violence the Israeli authorities were called twice for assistance, but no one came.

With others, I went to the west bank this year, and we saw that extremist settlers are acting with impunity and not being reined in or called in by Israeli authorities. As I say, the attackers were able to behave with impunity. Father Bashar's concerns were shared by the leaders of the churches, who called for greater accountability as they said:

“Even in times of war, sacred places must be protected. We call for an immediate and transparent investigation into why the Israeli police did not respond to emergency calls from the local community and why these abhorrent actions continue to go unpunished.”

As well as the violence that erupted, the intolerable situation is made all the worse by settlements continuing to encroach on Taybeh's land, with illegal grazing and land seizures affecting the livelihood of the local Christians. These extremist settlers have attacked homes, started fires and even created a billboard outside Taybeh that, translated into English, said, “There is no future for you here”. These are people who are only trying to live in peace. They have lived there for 2,000 years, yet they are told, “There is no future for you here”. It is absolutely outrageous and the whole world should be calling it out.

Father Bashar said that illegal cattle grazing in the olive groves risked the harvest's failing, creating poverty among the Christian community. The heads of churches in Jerusalem are clear:

“The attacks by the hands of settlers against our community, which is living in peace, must stop, both here in Taybeh and elsewhere throughout the West Bank. This is clearly part of the systematic attacks against Christians that we see unfolding throughout the region.”

There are of course similar acts of intimidation and violence against our Muslim brothers in town after town in the west bank. It is absolutely intolerable.

As part of the UK's diplomatic efforts, we must be willing to be firm with our friends and allies when they are behaving contrary to international law. Christians



[Sir Edward Leigh]

have been present in the Holy Land since the passion of our Lord, and they have the right to live in peace in the west bank. It is imperative that the UK Government make it clear to the Israeli authorities that this intimidation and violence must end. I would be grateful if the Minister could write to me about what discussions the UK Government have had with the Israeli authorities on this issue, and what steps are being taken to stress the need to protect all religious communities in the west bank.

The situation in Gaza is even more dire. Father Gabriel Romanelli is looking after 500 Christians gathered in and around the Holy Family church in Gaza City. Food is being rationed and other supplies are scarce. Death has become routine. There was an 11-week period when all outside aid was halted completely by the Israel Defence Forces. Aid has reached the Christians in Gaza only intermittently through the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and Aid to the Church in Need. Much of the Gaza strip has been flattened.

On Tuesday, I hosted the Channel 4 film on the suffering of medics in Gaza. What is going on in Gaza is absolutely appalling—it is the greatest humanitarian disaster and catastrophe in the world today. Israel seems to have no plan for the future that it is willing to reveal to anybody. No one disagrees that Hamas is an evil organisation that must be destroyed completely, but clearly innocent people are being made victims as well. It is the innocence of the victims of the atrocities committed by Hamas on 7 October 2023 that is so appalling. Why compound those atrocities by committing more in revenge? I hope that all people in the middle east can at last live in peace and prosperity.

1.53 pm

**Lizzi Collinge** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing this important debate. Religious persecution is not confined to any one group, belief or country. It is a global issue that threatens the fundamental right to freedom—the right to believe or not to believe as we choose, free from violence and repression.

I am lucky to represent Morecambe and Lunesdale, which is home to over 40 churches that stretch across our towns and villages from the north-east in Sedburgh right down to Heysham. Although I do not have any faith, I often find myself in churches talking to my constituents. Through countless conversations, I know that my constituents want people across the world to hold the same freedom that they do: to practise religion or to follow no faith at all; to believe as they choose; and to live without fear because of it. In one of those conversations, my constituent, a member of the Heysham Free Methodist church, brought to my attention the persecution of Christians in India, a topic that I have discussed in this Chamber before.

I want to look at the bigger picture and what happens when the state holds up one religion over another or turns a blind eye to faith or belief-based persecution. As a humanist, I am only too aware of the horrors of persecution based on faith or lack of faith, a threat that is made worse when it is state-sanctioned or state-permitted.

Persecution on the grounds of faith or belief is not isolated; it is systemic, systematic and global. Government restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are now at their highest level since 2007. From the Baha'i in Iran to the Uyghurs in China, people across the world are not free to express their closely held beliefs or to practise their faith or lack of faith freely.

Those systems of persecution exist on a scale. It is not the case that people are either totally free or not free at all—it is not binary. Blasphemy laws exist in 91 nations on this earth, including in Northern Ireland, and they affect 57% of the global population. In 12 countries, a person can still be given the death penalty for blasphemy, and in 60 others, they could end up in prison. State enforcement of religious beliefs, whether explicit or de facto, is an affront to human rights and our democratic ideals. If we are not free to believe or not believe, we are not equal in dignity and rights.

Human rights laws are there to protect people from discrimination, violence and harm, but they protect people, not ideas. Freedom of thought includes the right to question, to doubt and to disagree without the threat of punishment. State-enforced or state-backed religion suffocates freedom of expression or belief, and religious freedom is not just for the religious. Freedom of belief is the bedrock of any free society.

I want to call particular attention to the persecution of those who hold no faith, a reality that often, unfortunately, goes unrecognised. In 2022, the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was sentenced to 24 years in prison for a Facebook post that was deemed to be blasphemous. He was recently released after an extensive appeal and campaign, having served two years in detention, where he was denied legal counsel, medical care and contact with his family. I am very pleased to say that Mubarak is now safe in Germany, and I had the honour of meeting him earlier this year when he joined us remotely at the all-party parliamentary humanist group, which I chair.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am not sure whether the hon. Lady knows this—she probably does—but the deputation to Nigeria went through the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. We approached the Minister responsible and put forward a case for the release of Mubarak Bala, and I believe that we can take some credit for that intervention, along with many others, to ensure that his freedom was assured.

**Lizzi Collinge:** I thank the hon. Gentleman and all the other people involved; I believe that was part of Mubarak's release and I am very grateful for it, as I am sure are Mubarak and his family. His story reminds us that non-religious belief can be just as dangerous as religious belief in the eyes of a repressive state.

I want to pay special thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland for his work as the UK's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. The framework he introduced earlier this month sets out a really clear vision for the UK's global leadership on this issue. It rightly focuses diplomatic efforts on 10 priority countries and on work through international bodies to build the long-term partnerships we need to drive change. As a Labour Government, we champion human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, not only because it is in our national interest to support

an international rules-based order, but because it is simply the right thing to do. Those are not abstract ideals; they are the foundations of this Government's mission and of any free society.

The evidence backs that approach. Countries that protect the rule of law and fundamental freedoms tend to be more stable, prosperous and resilient. When we share and support those values abroad, we help to build stronger international partners, and that contributes to the UK's security, growth and development. We know that achieving that will be complex, and the plan recognises that we must work with other Governments, civil society and multilateral institutions to find common ground and deliver real change.

Producing real, on-the-ground change takes flexibility. In some cases, progress will come from bold commitments and public statements. In others, it will come through private discussions and quiet diplomacy. This is an approach guided by partnership and shared learning, working towards the shared goal of securing freedom of belief for everyone, everywhere.

1.59 pm

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for the role that he has taken on and the work ahead of him, which he has set out. The whole Chamber and the whole of Parliament will agree that the tone and manner with which he is approaching this complicated and difficult work will serve him and our country very well. As I suspect he would be happy to acknowledge, he is building on the legacy of his predecessor Fiona Bruce, the former Member for Congleton, who did so much to fill the role and build credibility for the United Kingdom across the globe.

The envoy is at the centre of a web of relationships with great people in this country who do so much to champion the input and the enthusiasms of our constituents across the United Kingdom and motivate us as MPs to raise these matters in the House of Commons. One of them is Merv Thomas, the president and founder of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, who said to me recently that he is always being told that religion is the cause of so many problems in the world. He said, "Well, I look at it this way: freedom of religious belief is perhaps one of the solutions." That gets to the heart of what the role is about.

I am grateful to the envoy for setting out how his work will fit with the different elements of the Government's foreign policy. That is critical. When we talk about matters such as national security and stability, trade and economic partnerships, the leadership role that we seek, the alliance building and the soft power that comes from being present in conversations about preventing humanitarian crises, we need to recognise that we gain a lot more credibility if we can be collaborative but principled and persistent in our willingness to engage on all those matters and able to have difficult conversations with countries with which we have relationships across those realms.

It is not a binary question; it is not that we cannot talk about what is happening with the Uyghur Muslims in China while recognising that China is an important economic actor in the world that needs to be respected. We need to find ways of interacting well together and

respecting, as far as we can, what common ground exists. It troubles me sometimes that when we have statements in the House, we revert to a binary: "It's all good or it's all the opposite." The hon. Member for North Northumberland grasps the right way to approach this.

Having said that, I want to put on the record some challenges that exist in a number of countries and some of the awful circumstances that people of minority religions in those countries endure. In North Korea, authorities are likely to round up the extended family of Christians and punish them, even if the family members themselves are not Christian. That is what Christians endure. Let us remind ourselves that according to Open Doors, another excellent organisation, there are 400,000 Christians in that country.

It is very sensible that the envoy has set out a priority list of 10 countries, because we want to be able to measure progress, make an impact and influence those relationships. In Pakistan, blasphemy is punishable by death. If Christians are subject to accusations of blasphemy, it can result in torture or death at the hands of violent mobs. Christian and Hindu girls remain particularly vulnerable to forced religious conversion, abduction, trafficking, child, early and forced marriage, domestic servitude and sexual violence. It is important that the envoy is able to work with his colleagues and Ministers in the Foreign Office, even if it is awkward or inconvenient. Sometimes, perhaps, officials on a certain desk will say, "We don't really need to be too explicit about the religious element." We do. That religious element is fundamental to the oppression that is happening.

Importantly, in his speech last week, the hon. Member said:

"The fourth strand of our approach is...ensuring that FORB considerations are mainstreamed throughout the FCDO's work and the need for a holistic human rights approach understood."

I totally recognise that there needs to be a holistic human rights approach, because of course not everyone has religious belief, but it is important not to lose clarity on the motivation behind some of the oppression that exists in some of these countries.

Finally, as a country and in our national Parliament, we need to think through how we treat our Christian faith. We should be more open about how it motivates and influences us. The more transparent we are about it, the more reasoned and reasonable we can be in dealing with the implications for how we approach public policy. I lament the way it can be weaponised. It should not be. The hon. Member is very open about his Christian faith, as I am about mine. It was wonderful to see an envoy giving a speech, reading from a press release, but quoting from Proverbs 31. I wish him well in his role, I thank him for what he has set out today, and I urge him to be bold and courageous in all that he does.

2.6 pm

**Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing this debate and for his work on this important issue. I would like to share two personal reflections that shape the way I view religious freedom and its place in our foreign policy.

The first reflection is on my lifelong faith. Between my mother's deep Christian belief and spiritualism and my Church of England education, it seems I never stood much chance of avoiding belief altogether. Truth

[Markus Campbell-Savours]

be told, I have never wanted to. I do not attend church nearly as often as I should, a failing I feel guilty about often, but I know without hesitation that when I need comfort or clarity, my faith—God, Jesus—is always there to support me.

The second reflection is on my heritage. I am half-Icelandic on my mother's side and was raised with an acute awareness of my Viking roots. Iceland is a small nation of under 400,000 people. Some families, mine included, can trace their lineage back for more than a millennium. One notable ancestor is Thorgeir of Lightwater, a pagan chieftain and lawspeaker who in the year 1000 was tasked with an impossibly difficult decision: which religion Iceland would adopt. He spent a day and a night under a fur blanket in silent reflection—something that I have found myself tempted to do after reading social media commentary—and when his deliberation ended he declared that Iceland would adopt Christianity. Remarkably, he also decreed that individuals could continue to worship privately however they chose. Although that fell short of what today we would call full religious liberty, it was extraordinarily liberal for its time, and it avoided a bloody civil war between pagan and Christian factions.

Thorgeir's story offers a sobering lesson: that belief is ultimately personal, that law cannot mandate conviction, and that practical compromise can safeguard peace. These are precisely the kinds of lesson that our foreign policy ought to embrace. Religious freedom is advanced when our diplomats, Ministers and civil servants understand the profound role that religion, religious practices and faith communities play in the societies we engage with abroad. In a UK political landscape that is largely secular, we must take care not to overlook the power of religion to drive development, mediate conflict and shape political identity.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that the UK's credibility on promoting religious freedom abroad is significantly undermined by the deep cuts to official development assistance, which have reduced our ability to fund vital human rights and civil society work in fragile states where freedom of religion or belief is most at risk?

**Markus Campbell-Savours:** I do agree, and that is a difficult one for me as a Labour Member. All I can say is that I will hold my Government's feet to the fire on ensuring that we return to levels of overseas development assistance, which I recognise is an important contribution that we make internationally.

More than 80% of the world's population affiliates with a religion. It is not, as some might cynically suggest, outdated or incompatible with democracy; it is a source of meaning, resilience and moral guidance to billions and, when understood and respected, a powerful partner in foreign policy. Faith-based organisations such as Christian Aid, World Vision, Muslim Aid and Tearfund play indispensable roles in delivering services, particularly to vulnerable communities. Those organisations are motivated by faith and supported by global communities who believe in their mission. Faith leaders have also played critical roles in human rights advocacy: from the South African Council of Churches opposing apartheid

to Catholic resistance against dictatorship in Latin America and eastern Europe, their moral leadership has often been decisive in confronting injustice.

While we advocate for religious freedom, we must also confront the painful realities of religious persecution across the world. Minorities are facing forced conversion, violence, economic marginalisation and, in extreme cases, genocide. We cannot afford to ignore that. Let us name the suffering: the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, Baha'i in Iran, Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Ahmadis and Hazara in Pakistan, Muslims in India, Yazidis in Syria, Christians in China, faith groups across North Korea, the Palestinians. These are not isolated incidents; they are affronts to our shared humanity.

If the UK is serious about advancing freedom of religious belief, we must integrate religious literacy into our diplomatic toolbox. We must build partnerships that respect faith identities, amplify marginalised voices and place human dignity at the core of our development, humanitarian and peacebuilding strategies. Let us reaffirm our role as global advocates for religious freedom, not just in principle, but in policy and practice. I add that I shall, of course, inform *Hansard* how to spell "Thorgeir".

2.12 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken, and I thank the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) for his personal story. I thank the Labour party and the Prime Minister in particular for appointing the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) to his position as special envoy, a role that Fiona Bruce played when she was in Parliament. The hon. Member knows this, because I said it to him on the day he was appointed: I believe wholeheartedly that our God has placed him in that position for a purpose, just as he did with Fiona Bruce.

I have some 74 churches in my constituency, of different denominations and with different religious affiliations. Every time we have a debate or a question in the Chamber on freedom of religion, I ensure that those 74 churches have a copy of *Hansard* to inform them, because they want to know what is happening. The same thing will happen after this debate. It is always an honour to rise in the House to speak not only about policy, but about principle. Today I rise to speak on a subject close to my heart and central to our shared humanity: the role of freedom of religion or belief in UK foreign policy.

It is a real pleasure to see the Minister in her place—not just because she is a good Minister, but because she gives us the answers. I very much look forward to what she will do. Yesterday, in the urgent question in the Chamber on Sudan, she was there to give encouragement to the Christians in Sudan who have been persecuted, massacred and butchered. It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), in his place; I look forward to his contribution too.

The United Kingdom has long prided itself on being a champion of human rights. Yet at the heart of every proud tradition lies a truth we must never forget: freedom of religion or belief—FORB—is not a luxury; it is a foundational liberty. Therefore, it is core to our very beliefs, what we as a society should be trying to promote and what the Minister and the Government need to put



in place. It is the right not just to worship freely, but to live without fear, coercion or discrimination on account of one's faith or conscience. That right transcends borders, politics and creeds, and our foreign policy must reflect that. I welcome the stage that this is at and the direction that it is going. I believe that it can point us in the necessary direction. I declare an interest as the chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, through which I have had the opportunity on many occasions to see at first hand the consequences when that freedom is denied.

I see Mervyn Thomas in the Public Gallery. Mervyn and I went to Egypt around 2012 or 2013. We had the chance to meet President el-Sisi, who promised us, as Mervyn will recall, the pluralistic society that we hoped would come about in Egypt. Obviously, we took him at his word—it was very impressive to meet the President in his palace—but we had the chance to go back there a short time ago, and that pluralistic society that President el-Sisi promised for Egypt is now taking place.

In Cairo we had the opportunity to meet the bishop, as well as Father Abraham, Father Paul and Youssef Samir of the evangelical church, which is attended by 1,800 on a Sunday morning. When was the last time that anyone here was in a church with more than 200 people? I just pose that question. There are 600 children who attend that church in the middle of Cairo. It is a Muslim country, but it has a pluralistic society. Is that the work of President el-Sisi? Yes, partially, but it is also the work of God, and we have to recognise where that is all coming from.

People have opportunities that they did not have before. They are building a new church. President el-Sisi, who is a Muslim, opened a mosque in Cairo; he asked, "When are you opening a Protestant church?" I say that we have lots of negative stories across the world, but we have to remember that God is working across the world, and his work is declaring positive news.

From the persecution of Christians in Nigeria and Pakistan to the systematic repression of Uyghur Muslims in China, the silencing of Baha'i in Iran and the marginalisation of atheists and humanists across the globe, the landscape of belief is under threat. Where religious freedom is suppressed, other human rights quickly follow. That is why the United Kingdom must embed FORB as a guiding thread through its diplomatic and development work, not just in words but in practice.

Through our embassies, aid and global partnerships, we have taken meaningful steps in the right direction. The establishment of the role of special envoy for freedom of religion or belief was a crucial milestone, and the special envoy is doing a tremendous job. I know that there is more to come. In 2022, the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London gathered leaders from all around the world to reaffirm their commitment to protecting this freedom.

As new threats emerge, either through authoritarian surveillance, digital repression or the misuse of anti-conversion laws, our response must be firm, proactive and principled. We must ensure that FORB is not siloed as a niche concern, but integrated across every foreign policy conversation, from trade negotiations to peace-building, education and humanitarian relief. The Bible reminds us in Zechariah 7:9-10:

"This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.'"

Every one of us in this place could learn a lot from that verse. That includes me, by the way; I am not excluding myself from that. All of us, including me, should consider that verse integral as we move forward. It calls us to protect freedom of religion and belief by standing up for the vulnerable and ensuring that justice and mercy guide our actions as a nation.

Let us speak boldly for those whose voices are silent. Let us be that voice for the voiceless. Let us partner with Governments, taking real steps to protect the right to choose our own beliefs and challenge those Governments that oppose that. I believe we need to understand that freedom of religion or belief is not optional; it is a crucial part of building lasting peace. It should inform our relationship with those nations in terms of reputation and trade deals.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I recently led a delegation as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq. We visited the Catholic archbishop of Erbil, Bashar Matti Warda, who told us about the safe haven that that region within Iraq offers for Christians and other religious communities. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the UK Government must do all that they can to strengthen places like that in difficult regions of the world as they try to foster freedom of religious belief and expression?

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief we had an opportunity to be in Iraq when Daesh was active. We were in Erbil and worshipped in the Roman Catholic Church at that time, because we felt it was important to stand alongside our brothers and sisters wherever they may be in the world. It is good to know that things have now progressed in a positive way and that Daesh is out. We hope to go back to Iraq sometime in the near future. Whenever things settle down in the middle east might be a better time to do that.

I conclude with these comments for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith. In defending FORB we do not favour one faith over another. We defend the dignity of every individual—Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, atheist or otherwise—to believe, to change belief or to have no belief at all. Our foreign policy must not merely protect our interests, but must reflect our identity. That identity is rooted in liberty, justice and the unshakeable conviction that every person is created equal and worthy of respect. Let us stand firm in that conviction for the sake of those who suffer, and for the sake of the world we seek to build.

2.21 pm

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing this debate. I was with him the day that his appointment was announced. It was after many weeks of us all wondering whether Downing Street would appoint an envoy. He kept it quiet until it was announced, but I was so pleased that it was my friend who was given that responsibility, because I cannot think of anybody better to take on that role.

[*Sam Rushworth*]

I thank everyone who has spoken today. Every speech has moved me in some way. It is a testament to the way that freedom of religion or belief goes to the heart of our British values that we sit in cross-party consensus on this. And it is a testament to our nation that we can have this level of civility in our debate. I can look across to Opposition Members and see people I hold in high regard, notwithstanding our different views on various aspects of policy.

I join the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) in his tribute to Fiona Bruce in the role that she played. I had the privilege of working with Fiona when she organised the FORB ministerial conference in 2022. The fact that I was a Labour candidate at the time and she a Conservative MP never came into it, because we were both absolutely unified in a sense of purpose.

I had the blessing of being able to work briefly for about a year and a half on freedom of religion or belief. My background is in conflict prevention and human rights. Despite a decade in that space, when a friend asked me whether I would be willing to come and support Government relations around FORB, I thought I was being asked to work for a US business magazine because I had not actually heard that phrase before, which shows that we have some work to do. But I soon came to grips with the brief and came to develop a deep appreciation of the importance of freedom of religion or belief within human rights work and the work that we do around the world to prevent identity-based violence.

As I entered this new world, however, I did so with a critical eye. I will just mention a few things that I have noted as a call to all of us who care about FORB. One is that we need to look outwards and not inwards. We need to avoid a competition over which group is the most persecuted, and instead recognise that establishing the universal principles of FORB is the best way to secure freedoms and rights for everybody. Secondly, FORB does not give a right to impose one's religion or beliefs on others. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) spoke so well about the importance of combating anti-blasphemy laws and the crucial right to be able to not believe in a deity.

Thirdly, those of us who do come from a background of faith need also to recognise that the price of the freedom to practise our religion is to do no harm and to take responsibility. I think we need to do more sometimes to reach out to the LGBT community and others who have been historically marginalised and excluded, and that includes internationally. In Uganda, near where I used to work, a community is suffering intense persecution. It is in the name, sadly, of the God I worship that that persecution is being meted out. People from Afghanistan regularly reach out to me and tell me that they are living in a state of hiding akin to Anne Frank and her family, for fear of being exposed.

We need to emphasise the belief aspect of freedom of religion or belief, which includes humanism—the right not to believe. The right to share one's faith must also entail the right to criticise that faith. I am a Latter-day Saint. I see that “The Book of Mormon” musical is on in the west end all the time. I am comfortable with that. I absolutely defend the right for people to criticise me or my faith, but there is a difference between criticising theological beliefs and stereotyping, or ascribing negative

traits without evidence to the holders of those beliefs. Likewise, there is a difference between mocking a religion in its abstract or organised form and discriminating against an individual who identifies with it.

I want to speak to the strategy for a moment. This is a small point, but I think it is a really consequential one. We tend to think about our commitment to freedom of religion or belief in terms of negative rights—of protecting people against interference and infringements of their freedoms of conscience, speech or assembly—but I would suggest that for the UK truly to lead the world with our values, we need to assume our positive duty to enable those who are marginalised and persecuted to live in accordance with their faith and belief. We recognise that in our humanitarian response to war and disaster. We recognise the need for food, water, medicine and shelter, but could we also recognise the need for dignity, and the emotional and psychological need to live one's faith? Could we not only allow people to live their religions, but actively assist them to do so?

I have seen great examples of that around the world, from the Muslim and Christian youth in the Central African Republic who work together to rebuild each other's mosques and churches, to the AMAR Foundation in Iraq helping Yazidi refugees, particularly women and girls, find healing and empowerment through traditional religious clothing that they had to leave behind in their flight from ISIS.

**John Slinger** *rose—*

**Sam Rushworth:** Apologies—I have almost finished. Members of my own church, the Latter-day Saints here in London, give out copies of the Quran to refugees. As we do this, let Britain continue to be a beacon for religious freedom around the world in an active sense.

2.28 pm

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing this important debate on the role of freedom of religion or belief in UK foreign policy, and for his work as special envoy.

The ability to express one's political and religious affiliations freely is a fundamental human right that must be preserved. That principle is enshrined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, and must remain central to UK foreign policy. The Liberal Democrats have long believed that human rights, democracy and the rule of law are not just aspirational values, but the foundation of a just and peaceful world. I am proud of our long-standing commitment to defending freedom of religion or belief, and I am deeply concerned by the growing threat to those rights internationally.

Religious minorities across the globe continue to face harassment, discrimination and persecution. In 2021, the Pew Research Centre found that Christians faced Government or societal harassment in 160 countries, with Muslims facing it in 141 and Jews in 91. We should reflect on what those numbers mean: in those countries, people live in fear, and face violence or even imprisonment simply for their beliefs. Unfortunately, the situation is either deteriorating or stagnating in many such countries.

**Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): Earlier this week, I spoke to Aid to the Church in Need, particularly about the situation for Christians in Syria. Hon. Members are obviously well aware of the recent suicide bombing of the St Elias Orthodox church in Damascus, and Christian communities are still facing persecution, including with destructive fires. Does the hon. Member agree that the situation is grave in many parts of the world, including Syria?

**Martin Wrigley:** Absolutely. The situation is very grave in many parts of the world. In fact, it is more than grave—it is intolerable. In our foreign policy, the UK must proactively seek to champion freedom of belief and religion. The hon. Member for North Northumberland, the special envoy, has identified 10 priority countries where freedom of religion or belief is under particular strain; I am concerned that diplomatic pressure in those countries remains inconsistent and at times ineffective.

Where religious legislation remains stagnant or regressive, I see little evidence that UK engagement has shifted the dial. I urge the Government to take a far more active and co-ordinated approach, not just to maintain relationships but to use them to drive real progress on rights and freedoms. It is not enough to make declarations; the Government must match words with action. That means ensuring that the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief—I understand why he uses the acronym FORB; it is much easier to say—is properly resourced, has a clear mandate and is empowered to influence policy across the FCDO. I also urge the Government to appoint an ambassador-level champion for freedom of religion or belief, with cross-departmental reach and the responsibility to ensure that religious freedom is not an afterthought in UK foreign policy, but a guiding principle.

The UK's approach must also recognise the intersections between religious persecution and other forms of oppression. Minority faith women and girls face heightened risks, including forced marriage, exclusion from education, and sexual violence. Their gender adds a further layer of marginalisation, and it is essential that UK policy reflects that reality.

We must also be alive to the modern tools of repression. In China, surveillance technology and biometric data are being used to monitor and intimidate religious groups. Technological repression is becoming increasingly sophisticated and the UK must be ready to challenge those abuses at the international level. To have the biggest impact, the UK must work through international bodies, including the United Nations and the Commonwealth, to press for reform, support democratic movements and uphold the right of all people to live with or without faith.

Persecution based on religion or belief should have no place in today's world. It is a bellwether for broader freedoms: where it is restricted, restrictions on other rights soon follow. We will continue to push for a foreign policy that defends the rights of all people, everywhere, to live without fear and in accordance with their consciences. The UK must not be a bystander. We must lead with conviction, courage, and a clear commitment to human rights at the heart of our foreign policy. I ask the Minister what concrete steps the Government will take this year to challenge countries where religious repression is entrenched, and to ensure that our foreign policy truly upholds the values we claim to defend.

2.33 pm

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris, not least as you have another role as trade envoy to New Zealand. I was very pleased to visit Christchurch, New Zealand, some years ago to see its magnificent cathedral. I then went again a few years later and saw that it had been destroyed. I pay tribute to our New Zealander friends because theirs is a Christian country, they uphold Christian values and they are part of our Commonwealth family.

Many New Zealand MP friends of mine would be fascinated by, and very supportive of, this wonderful and important debate. I commend the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing it and, more importantly, for continuing the work of our friend and former colleague Fiona Bruce, who was Member of Parliament for Congleton until last year. We can all agree that the hon. Gentleman is doing a splendid job as the special envoy on freedom of religion or belief, upholding the values shared by Members on both sides of the House. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for paying tribute to Fiona; she is a lovely person and we miss her. But we are delighted that the work she started is being continued by the hon. Member for North Northumberland.

The British nation has always stood resolutely for liberty, not just here at home but around the world. We are one of the few nations that have appointed a special envoy of this nature, and that is no small thing. But with that leadership comes immense responsibility. When millions across the globe face violence, imprisonment and discrimination simply because of what they believe, we cannot look the other way or pass by on the other side. We have a moral obligation to defend the fundamental freedoms that have shaped our history in these islands and defined our values. We must never retreat from upholding what is right. Indeed, it is precisely because we always stand firm in defence of such principles that the United Kingdom commands such deep respect around the world. Liberty generally, and freedom of religion or belief more broadly, must be at the heart of our foreign policy.

I commend all Members who spoke in this debate. I pay particular reference to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for highlighting the issue of what is happening in Taybeh, and how horrific the actions taken there are. It is very upsetting to hear, and I hope that our friends in Israel will be listening to this debate. As someone who is, and has always been, pro-Israel, I am very upset to hear what is going on. My heart goes out to the members of St George's church, the Christian community and all those being persecuted or losing their lives in that dreadful conflict.

At the start of his speech, the hon. Member for North Northumberland spoke about visiting the Soviet Union and seeing the persecution there. I remember that during my days in the Young Conservatives we supported freedom of religion in the Soviet Union; Bibles were being smuggled over there—a lot of work was going on in those days. Earlier this year, I visited Shkodër, in the north of Albania. I visited a prison where the most appalling torture had taken place under the vile Albanian communist regime. We all agree that



[*Andrew Rosindell*]

the world must move on from those atrocities and not go back. Sadly, there are parts of the world where these things continue. We must stand together, unified against such things.

I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury for making a clear statement: he said that we should be bold and courageous in proclaiming our Christian faith. And so we should. The entirety of the foundations, traditions, customs and heritage of our country are based on the Christian faith. The cross is on the top of the crown—when the King wears the crown, there is a cross on the top. That means that all religions and denominations are equal, but there has to be an understanding that there is a Christian foundation to our society.

I say to the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) that I was honoured to travel to Iceland a few years ago with Lord Campbell-Savours, the hon. Member's father. We had many discussions about all kinds of things. The hon. Member has a wonderful father, who serves in the other place, and I am delighted to see that he is continuing his father's work and talking about Iceland, a country with which we have a huge amount in common. There are many dear friends in that country. I also thank the hon. Members for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for speaking in this significant debate.

We learned last week, and this has been articulated this afternoon, that the FCDO has now announced a five-point strategy on freedom of religion or belief. That is a welcome step, but as ever it is not about the plan—it is about delivery. What matters now is whether this Government are matching the words with actions.

The first point that has been articulated is that of upholding international standards. The UK has long had influence in international forums, as a member of the UN Security Council and given that our capital, London, is home to the Commonwealth Secretariat, but are we really using that influence to lead the charge on religious freedom to the full? Are we naming those who trample on religious rights? Are we truly standing up to regimes that ignore international law and persecute people of faith? Or are we hesitating when that might come at a diplomatic cost? Maybe the Minister can answer those questions later.

Secondly, on bilateral engagement, Ministers regularly tell us that they raise these issues behind closed doors. When will we see the results? What outcomes have been achieved from our talks with long-standing members of the Commonwealth, such as, for instance, Pakistan, where blasphemy laws continue to be abused with devastating effect; or Nigeria, where only last year, 218 Christians were slaughtered by Islamic fundamentalists in the middle belt? Have we made clear to those Governments that this simply cannot go on and that there will be consequences if it does?

And what about China? The persecution of Uyghur Muslims, Christians and Falun Gong practitioners has long been systematic, brutal and well-documented. Governments, past and present, talk of engagement, but what does that mean in practice? Given that His Majesty's Government have gone back on their promise of a fully published China audit, will the Minister assure us all today that freedom of religion and belief will be front

and centre in any negotiations with the Chinese Communist party? Or are we still willing to trade human rights for economic deals and the allure of a super-embassy on prime real estate in London? Is that really something we should be supporting?

The third strand of the FCDO's policy strategy is building coalitions. In principle, of course I support that, but coalitions must be seen to be achieving things. Who are our partners? What practical steps have we taken with allies to defend freedom of religion and belief in the toughest regions, such as the Sahel, the middle east or central America? Have we formed joint initiatives or are we merely issuing polite statements?

**John Slinger:** A constituent of mine, Nicola, has raised concerns highlighted by the Open Doors charity about the case of Mehran Shamloui. He is a Christian who fled Iran to avoid being imprisoned for his faith and has apparently been detained after being deported back to Iran, and charged with propaganda against Islamic law and membership of groups opposing the state. He now faces an uncertain future. Does the hon. Member agree with me that cases relating to that particular country and regime must be a focus of our Government?

**Andrew Rosindell:** Of course; I could not possibly disagree. Now that point is on the record, I am sure the Minister will take note and take that case forward.

The fourth strand is about maintaining FORB across the FCDO. If done properly, that could be transformative. But, again, where is the detail? Are our ambassadors trained on FORB? Are they expected to report on it? Is religious freedom considered when we decide where aid goes or when arms are sold? Is FORB integrated in our dealings with Commonwealth partners, many of whom face significant challenges on these issues? Or is it still viewed as a specialist interest and a box simply to be ticked?

The final point is civil society. Those brave individuals on the ground are often the first line of defence for religious freedom. They speak out when Governments will not. They face threats, harassment and even death. How are we supporting them? Are we funding grassroots organisations? Are we giving them access to our embassies and high commissions, our diplomats and our protection, or are they being left to fend for themselves?

At the recent FCDO briefing on this subject, cases were presented regarding countries such as Nicaragua, Eritrea, Yemen and Afghanistan. The picture was bleak, with repressive laws, targeted killings and the crushing of dissent. This is seemingly part of a wider pattern. In Nicaragua, the Ortega regime is targeting the Catholic Church in a campaign of repression. In Eritrea, Christians are languishing in prison.

In Yemen, religious minorities are caught between war and persecution. In Syria and Iraq, ancient communities have been decimated. What exactly is the UK doing in each of those places? Where are the consequences for those who commit these crimes?

The Government recently announced the suspension of sanctions on the new Syrian Government. However, as recently as this week, we have witnessed the eruption of violence between the Druze minority and Islamists, with the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reporting dozens of deaths. In the light of those

developments, was the suspension of sanctions on Syria premature? I think it was. If FORB is central to our foreign policy, was the suspension of sanctions on Syria an indication that religious freedom has been restored in Syria? Are we monitoring the dangers faced by religious and ethnic minorities such as the Druze, who have long sought to remain neutral in Syria's civil conflict?

The sad truth is that freedom of religion and belief is deteriorating and violations are increasing. Perpetrators are becoming more brazen and the people who are suffering, be they Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Yazidis, Jewish people, Baha'is or others, too often have nowhere to turn. If the Government are prepared to back fine words with firm action, let us see it now. Will they publish regular updates on how the five-point strategy is being delivered? Will they bring transparent, accountable and measurable goals into the work published?

I believe that Britain has always stood for freedom. Let us not falter now. We have a voice through the previous Government's creation of the special envoy position. We have the tools now; what we need is the resolve to use them. I urge the Minister to ensure that all our talk of freedom of religion and belief is not merely honeyed words, but a real statement of intent from His Majesty's Government that we take this seriously and that those who violate the sacrosanct principles of religious freedom will suffer the consequences.

2.46 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing this debate and for his dedicated work, both before he entered this place and now as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. The strong views shared across the House today show just how important this issue is to so many of us. I welcome the chance to respond to the points raised and to restate the Government's commitment to defending freedom of religion or belief.

That commitment was reinforced just last week with the launch of the UK's approach to FORB, which puts this work at the very heart of our foreign policy. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we are taking a more targeted approach under the FORB strategy, focusing on 10 countries, but not to the exclusion of engagement on FORB issues across the world; we will remain responsive to other situations. As today's debate demonstrates, this is truly a global challenge.

Human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, the rule of law and good governance, are the foundations of this Government's mission. This is about not only doing what is right, but our national interest. We know that countries that uphold rights and the rule of law are more stable, prosperous and resilient. We also know that when freedom of religion or belief is under threat, the other rights are often at risk. That was poignantly demonstrated in the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Rugby (John Slinger) and for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), who talked about the LGBTQ community, which is sometimes oppressed by religious communities, and Yazidi refugees in connection with the element of respect and dignity in the strategy.

I take on board the challenge around training—perhaps not for our staff, but for Members and Ministers. I often find that it is the Ministers who get trained by the officials, but I will make sure that there is training on both sides. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland will look at training needs across the network, in case there is anything we have missed.

From the Uyghurs in China, who were mentioned by the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) and the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), and Ukrainians under Russian occupation to recent attacks on worshippers in Syria and the daily persecution of minority communities in Bangladesh, these are not isolated incidents. They are a call to action, and this Government will respond.

That is why Lord Collins, the Minister for human rights, recently wrote to all heads of mission underlining the importance of embedding our human rights priorities, including freedom of religion or belief, across the network. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, the strategy demands that we draw on the strength of our diplomatic network, so that freedom of religion or belief is genuinely embedded in the conversations that we are having anyway, working with human rights champions and grassroots networks, speaking up on the international stage, and of course landing our messages clearly in our bilateral engagements. In our bilateral work, often we speak out publicly, and more often we speak privately, and we will continue to do both.

We do not shy away from challenging countries that fall short of their obligations, but we also know that real progress comes through partnership, finding common ground and working together to deliver change. To take a few examples, freedom of religion or belief is a central part of our work in Pakistan. The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), discussed this topic with Government Ministers and religious leaders during his visit in November.

In Nigeria, the drivers of intercommunal violence are complex, but I was relieved to hear of the release of Mubarak Bala, whose case my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) raised. That was the result of a long-running campaign by Humanists International and the all-party parliamentary humanist group, which the Government were pleased to get behind. These campaigns are often so much more powerful when they do not come from Governments, but when Governments get behind them.

In October, I personally pressed the Vietnamese Government to respect people's rights to speak freely, to meet in groups and to practise their religion, just as they agreed to in their most recent United Nations human rights review. I followed up with Vice Foreign Minister Hang on 17 March, and I will keep working with the Vietnamese Government to make sure that these rights are protected. We are also in constant dialogue with the interim Government in Bangladesh, stressing the importance of upholding freedom of religion or belief and protecting all communities, even when they make up less than 5% of the population.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) spoke about Syria. We are deeply concerned about the recent violence in the south and welcome the announcement yesterday of a ceasefire. Perhaps the picture is changing. We have made it clear that the Government must ensure

[*Catherine West*]

the protection of all civilians, including Druze, hold to account those responsible for violence and make progress towards an inclusive political transition. The Foreign Secretary visited earlier this month and underlined those priorities.

Meanwhile, we continue to stand firm on human rights in China, raising our concerns at the highest level and as part of the audit the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) mentioned. I was able to meet with groups, including Rahima Mahmut from the Xinjiang group, as part of the audit, so the words of people in the Xinjiang region who have personally suffered bled into the China audit.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) mentioned the awful situation in Taybeh in the west bank. His words echo those of the Bishop of Southwark, who has condemned the situation in Taybeh and the pure impunity following the attacks in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We have also seen the Holy Family church in Gaza being struck. Earlier this week, our consul general visited Taybeh with church leaders and international partners to express solidarity with the local community following those awful attacks, which were so eloquently described by the Father of the House. We also reiterate our calls for the status quo arrangement at Jerusalem's holy sites to be upheld, to ensure the safety and the security of Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount and all who worship there.

At the multilateral level, we believe that real progress comes from working together. That is why we are using our international role alongside a wide range of countries to promote tolerance and respect. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland joined the UK-led Human Rights Council side event on Tibetan Buddhism, leading the international community on this important question in Geneva. We need to listen to the testimonies of the Tibetan Buddhist community, so that our Government can show that we believe that choosing the Dalai Lama's successor is a decision for Tibetan Buddhists alone.

We regularly take part in interactive dialogues with the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and other mandate holders. In June, we used the platform to call on the Taliban to reverse their inhumane restrictions on minorities, including the Hazara community, which of course particularly affect Hazara women. We also urged Eritrea to release people detained for political reasons or for their religion or belief. We often raise freedom of religion or belief concerns during the UN's universal periodic review. In particular, we pressed the Iraqi Government—the hon. Members for Rugby and for Strangford spoke about—regarding the Kurdish and Christian communities, who are both under severe pressure in that part of the world.

**John Slinger:** I had the great privilege of visiting the holiest temple of the Yazidi people, Lalish, and was warmly welcomed by them. They have endured horrific atrocities at the hands of ISIS Daesh, including genocide and mass displacement. Does my hon. Friend agree that the work of the Kurdistan Regional Government and President Nechirvan Barzani—particularly through initiatives such as the office for rescuing the abducted,

which has so far rescued 3,500 individuals—is to be commended? Can she see whether the Government can help in that endeavour?

**Catherine West:** I certainly will. My hon. Friend has now put that on record, so I am pleased that he was able to get that into this important debate. I am also pleased that we were able to lobby the Government of Laos to guarantee that everyone, including minorities, can exercise their rights without facing reprisals. We also work closely with the OSCE, which gives us a valuable platform to discuss freedom of religion or belief and related issues.

We are an active member of the Article 18 Alliance, on which my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland went into in much detail. Over the past year, the UK has proudly held the presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, and we led international efforts to promote Holocaust remembrance, tackle distortion, fight antisemitism, and ensure that future generations learn the lessons of the past.

I can announce today that the programme funding is safe—the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley), asked about that. The John Bunyan fund, which targets funding through our posts, is safe from any reductions. I am excited to see how that will be spent, in consultation with the envoy for freedom of religion or belief. On the question of the important case in Iran raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby, I am sure that the Minister, Lord Collins, will respond to him in detail.

I recognise the strength of feeling in this debate. It is a reminder of how deeply people care about the right to believe or not believe freely. That is why we are committed to working with others, and we will use every opportunity to stand up for freedom of religion or belief. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland will get me into big trouble if I do not.

**Carolyn Harris (in the Chair):** I call David Smith to quickly wind up.

2.57 pm

**David Smith:** Thank you, Mrs Harris—I am mindful of the time. I thank all Members for the spirit of the debate. I mentioned earlier that this is a cross-party issue, and that was evident here today. I thank the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) for his role in shaping this work. I also place on the record my thanks to Fiona Bruce, the former Member for Congleton, who created a great foundation for this work.

I also thank Members for the breadth of the debate. I did not think we would get into 1,000-year-old Icelandic features, but that was fantastic and a great surprise. The key thing the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), said was that this is an immense responsibility; I emphasise that it is an immense responsibility for all of us, whether across the world with all our partners or across this place. Once again, I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate and has stood—and will stand—for freedom of religion or belief.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the role of freedom of religion or belief in UK foreign policy.



## RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit

[*VALERIE VAZ in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of the RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit during the Second World War.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I begin by placing on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this debate, and for its flexibility in allowing me to move the debate from the previous date to accommodate my recent compassionate leave.

I am especially proud, as the daughter of a second world war veteran, to open this debate, and I am honoured to do so on the 80th anniversary of the end of that global conflict. As this is the second debate on the national monument for individuals who served in the RAF reconnaissance units during the second world war, I wish to use this opportunity to update the record on the progress that has been made on this campaign, and to highlight how the Minister might help to further bolster its incredible ambition.

Since 2019, the Spitfire AA810 project has sought to achieve recognition of the work carried out by members of the Royal Air Force more than 80 years ago. Indeed, it has taken the project more than six years to locate and access, where available, the official records to build a measured picture of exactly how important their work was. The unarmed reconnaissance units and squadrons were formed in 1939, and their work would play a vital part in every single theatre of allied operations in the second world war. Every invasion, every operation and every tactical decision taken by the allied supreme command substantially used the intelligence brought back by these young airmen, the fewest of Churchill's few. The secret war—a spies in the skies war—was carried out from just a handful of bases, their work largely unspoken. The photographic intelligence team supporting them—men and women from a variety of backgrounds—worked hidden away in requisitioned homes. Their work, too, is set to be recognised for the first time, and I shall cover that later in this speech.

By the end of the war, those young airmen had delivered some 26 million photographs—all compiled, categorised, analysed and reported on within 24 hours of the aircraft returning to the UK—intelligence from which would arrive not far from this place in the then Cabinet war rooms below the Treasury. With decades of hindsight, experts now recognise that aerial photography produced some 80% of the intelligence used for the strategic planning of the allied tactical campaign. Supported by Enigma decoding and the work of the Special Operations Executive in occupied enemy territory, the efforts of these men and women considerably shortened the war, saving hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of lives. Therefore, those of us who, like me, are direct descendants of second world war veterans owe a particular debt of thanks to the airmen of the photographic reconnaissance unit, because without their work, our fathers and grandfathers would literally have been advancing into the unknown.

With the war over, a new cold war era was coming. Intelligence developments would remain secret, the work pioneered by these individuals hushed up in a wider world of uncertainty. But who were these people and how do we recognise them, for there were not many?

In the early days of the campaign, it was found that the records of those who served had never been collated. By searching the orders of battle to identify the units tasked with that vital work, it was possible to access those individuals' public operations record books and begin the painstaking work of piecing together and cross-referencing the names of all who had served. From those pages grew a list of names, but they were names without a story. It has been a mammoth effort for nearly six years for the team to find out who those people were, where they had come from, and importantly, what happened to them. To date, 1,747 names have been identified as eligible for inclusion on the monument, but publicly accessible records have enabled the fate of only 1,408 of them to be confirmed. It is also worth noting that as research has continued over the years, the death rate percentage has fluctuated as more information has become available. Nonetheless, it has remained stubbornly in the mid-40% range for some time now.

**Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, at which many of us are here to support her. Two of the names on that list of 1,747 people are from my constituency of Ealing Southall, including Warrant Officer Mervyn Harris, who was reported missing in action in June 1945, just before the end of the war. His body was never found. Sergeant Frank Bastard, from Chandos Avenue in Northfields, survived the war and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal for flying after a pilot was injured. Warrant Officer Harris has a local memorial at the NatWest bank in Southhall, where he used to work. Does my hon. Friend agree that, although local monuments are a great thing, we need a national monument to properly recognise those people's sacrifice?

**Ms Minns**: I completely concur, and I am delighted that we are here today talking about just such a national monument.

Tragically, the project has been able to confirm that 629 of those men—representing 45% of those who could be found—were casualties. Of those who were killed, a third are still missing in action to this day. As they flew solo over great distances, with instruments such as radios having been removed to improve the aircraft's range, we simply do not know where they went down.

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. She has said that approximately one in two of those in the reconnaissance unit lost their lives. Of the two from the Bishop Auckland constituency, one did not survive: 20-year-old Flight Sergeant Peter Charles Wells from Whorlton village. He was shot down over Malta just two days before Christmas in 1941. His grave is inscribed with psalm 139:9:

"If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me".

My hon. Friend emphasises the loss that we have experienced, and the absolute need to honour those people. I hope that Peter Wells's family will have more than just a grave in Malta.

**Ms Minns**: I thank my hon. Friend for putting on record that touching and beautiful tribute to the servicemen from his constituency.

[Ms Minns]

One of those who never came home was Flight Sergeant Charles Ross from my own Carlisle constituency. His records show him as serving in the far east, but we do not know whether he lived beyond VJ Day to make it home to his family. Another airman from the Carlisle area, Flight Lieutenant Rae Armstrong, survived and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his work. However, two other local men did not return. Flying Officer Ivan Cooke would be killed aged 34 in operations from Malta, and Flying Officer William Johnston was killed returning from a reconnaissance operation in his Spitfire in December 1944. He was just 22 years old.

I know that many hon. Members here today, and those who are unable to join us, wish to pay tribute to the men who came from their constituencies. My right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) has asked that heroes such as Denis Herbert Vincent Smith, who remains missing after being shot down in 1942; Norman Stuart Cooper, who was killed in action in 1944; and Norman Charles Shirley, who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal for his wartime service, all of whom have a connection with Oxford East, be remembered too.

I also wish to recognise the work of the photographic intelligence teams who supported the aircrews, whose names will also be included on the memorial. These men and women were crucial to the entire process. Without them, we would have had the 26 million photographs, but we would not have gleaned the intelligence that we did from them. Those men and women used a little-known branch of science called stereoscopy to turn the photographs into 3D images, from which they could decipher and interpret the intelligence contained within, giving the allies a crucial intelligence advantage over the Nazis.

Among those who did that critical work were the legendary Constance Babington Smith, the actor Dirk Bogarde, and Sarah Churchill, the daughter of the then Prime Minister. Indeed, of the 630 photographic interpreters who will be included on the memorial, almost a third were women. That only serves to highlight how crucial the work of women was to the success of the entire operation.

The work of the photographic reconnaissance unit was truly international, and the campaign team have worked hard to identify nationals from across the world—from Argentina to Trinidad, from Malawi to Ukraine, and from many more countries—who answered the call of the common cause against tyranny, and who bravely came forward to serve, flying unarmed operations and helping to shorten the war.

How do we now look to recognise these efforts and sacrifices? Since the last Westminster Hall debate was held on this topic in 2021, the project has met and gained the formal support of former and current veterans Ministers, including my hon. Friend the Minister, who has engaged positively and wholeheartedly with this project and its supporters across Westminster. Across Parliament, the campaign has secured the support of more than 200 MPs from all parties, as well as 16 foreign embassies and high commissions. Formal Ministry of Defence support for the monument proposal was given by the then Defence Minister Baroness Goldie, and reaffirmed recently by Lord Coaker.

Earlier this year, with ministerial support from within the Cabinet Office, a successful meeting was held with the Royal Parks authority and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, during which verbal confirmation of support for the monument and its location was given. Because the intelligence gained from these operations was used by the war Cabinet to such great effect, there seemed no more suitable a location to honour this work than just yards from the wartime underground Cabinet war rooms, where that intelligence was originally received.

Following formal written support by the Ministry of Defence and Cabinet Office, along with confirmations of no objections received from the Treasury and the Government Property Agency, I am delighted to share that the project has now begun the formal planning stage. The monument is to be located in the grassed area outside the Treasury building, alongside the exit from the Cabinet war rooms. And what a monument it will be: traditional in appearance, yet utilising modern AI technology to bring to life the extensive resources collected by the project, this monument will engage visitors in a multi-language format to ensure that the individuals recognised are more than just a name on a wall—that their extreme sacrifice is known and that their work is never forgotten.

What started as the recovery of a reconnaissance Spitfire from a Norwegian mountain in 2018 has grown into a truly global project of recognition. Among veterans, too, it has been warmly welcomed, although sadly their numbers have dwindled over the years. While some five survivors were known at the start of the campaign, it is sad to put on the record the passing of the last known RAF reconnaissance airman, Warrant Officer William Williams, of 681 and 684 photographic reconnaissance squadrons, who died in April this year, just a few weeks short of his 104th birthday. Today, there remains just one photographic interpreter, identified only recently, with whom the project will shortly meet.

Because accuracy is key, the Spitfire AA810 project has gone to huge lengths to check and independently verify the identities of those who served. It is vital to the commemorative and educational aims of this campaign that all who served are recognised and nobody is left behind. Research into the service of the 635 photographic interpreters is ongoing. However, for the 399 mystery names from mostly lower ranks, publicly accessible records have been exhausted.

I therefore come to my ask of the Minister, and I am sure he will be relieved to know that it is not a financial one. The project team is reaching the end of what it can do with publicly available resources. To confirm the details of the servicemen and women who were involved, the project requests an opportunity to meet the Minister to discuss a working arrangement with civil servants and military personnel. The team are fully aware of the need to protect personal data, but they would like to access limited information in order to confirm the identities of those who are eligible for inclusion on the memorial and, more importantly, to identify the partial names that have been collated. The answers lie only within the records of the Ministry of Defence, and the project hopes to propose a simple working solution that enables it expediently to complete this important task with minimal impact on Government resources. I would be incredibly grateful for the Minister's consideration of that request.

Finally, I commend the work of everyone in the campaign for bringing these stories to light and, most of all, of the brave individuals who served in the RAF unarmed reconnaissance units with such distinction. With this monument, I hope that their service and sacrifice will always be remembered.

3.16 pm

**Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) on securing this debate and on the way she recounted such moving and powerful stories. Each story is unique, but they are all united by themes of selflessness, quiet heroism and unwavering commitment to our country.

I will pay particular attention to Tatton's own local photographic reconnaissance unit hero, Flight Sergeant William Douglas Stepford. William was born in Handforth, married his sweetheart Bessie, and joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve. He trained as a navigator and was posted to 540 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron. Sadly, in August 1944, while flying a reconnaissance mission over Munich, William's aircraft was shot down over Hallstatt. He was just 24 years old. That was alongside his pilot, Flight Lieutenant Desmond Laurence Matthewman, DFC.

For so many reconnaissance flights, the missions were carried out in exceptionally difficult circumstances—clandestine, unarmed and often solo flights over enemy territory, which put the individuals in unique danger. The death rate was nearly 50%, with one of the lowest survival rates in the war, but the unit captured 26 million photographs over the course of the war, taken by 1,746 reconnaissance pilots and navigators.

The efforts of the unit were essential, and nowhere more so than in the planning of D-day, also known as Operation Overlord, the most significant victory of the allies. That was the most comprehensive reconnaissance operation of the war. In the months before the invasion, low-level reconnaissance flights over Normandy provided critical intelligence about German beach defences and key infrastructure. Without that information, the comprehensive plans for Operation Overlord, and its ultimate success, would not have been possible.

Tatton played a unique role in the preparations. The quiet village of Lower Peover played host to many of the great Americans of history, from General George Patton to General Eisenhower—later President Eisenhower, of course. Peover Hall became the headquarters of the vast US third army. In the local pub, the Bells of Peover, Patton and Eisenhower met to discuss plans for the invasion. Today, still, in that pub, in the upstairs dining room—now, aptly, named The Patton—can be found a small pocket diary on display. Spread across the pages for 5 and 6 June 1944, an unknown serviceman wrote in block capitals:

“D-day tomorrow. Everybody quite excited. We land at Arromanches, clear three villages of Bayeux.”

Last year, on the 80th anniversary of D-day, I was pleased to unveil a blue plaque to mark the pub's place in history alongside the lord lieutenant of the county of Cheshire, Councillor Anthony Harrison, and the landlord of the pub, Phil Smith, and surrounded by the local community. The plaque serves as a reminder of the unique history of this beautiful village in Cheshire.

Surrounding villages also played their part. From the secret aviation fuel plant in Plumley to the home guard at Shakerley Wood and the parachute training school at

Tatton Park, each village, each unit and every individual had a role. Without those such as William Stepford putting themselves in the line of danger, the admiralty would not have had the intelligence it needed for operations like D-day. Without them, history would have taken a different course.

Alongside Members here today from across the House, I welcome plans for this memorial. I am delighted that planning has already begun, but on this occasion, can I just ask the Minister to give us the full timeframe and completion date for this memorial? It is high time that their legacy is honoured by all of us and the entire country.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** If everyone sticks to the informal time limit of four minutes, we should get everyone in.

3.20 pm

**Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing this important debate. We are here today to honour the men and women of the RAF photographic reconnaissance unit, whose intelligence gathering and same-day reports influenced critical wartime decisions. It has been a privilege today to hear about some of these men and women, two of whom came from my own constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale.

Like so many, their heroism was consistent and anonymous. The covert nature of the operations meant that the pilots worked without most forms of protection, and operations were often flown solo in unarmoured and unarmed craft. Consequently, this unit faced some of the deadliest odds in the entire war. Almost half would not survive, and the average life expectancy was barely two years.

The result of these dangerous and often fatal missions were millions of photographs of important strategic targets, giving allies vital and accurate information that would prove instrumental in the planning of some of the most pivotal operations, from D-day to the Dambusters raid. The information was analysed by 635 photographic interpreters, who sifted through nearly 26 million images of enemy operations, providing up-to-date intelligence.

One third of these interpreters were women who worked tirelessly to protect a nation at a time when they were not even allowed to open their own bank accounts. The unit of pilots was made up of people from 22 nations working together to advance the war effort. World war two is considered to be the golden age of British spirit, but the truth is that our greatest achievements have always come from unity across different peoples and places.

As I said, two members of the unit came from my area. John Boys-Stones was born in 1919 in Morecombe, and he joined the RAF to train as a pilot, before he was posted to the photographic reconnaissance squadron based in Malta. On 7 March 1941, he was tasked to photograph the damage inflicted on an enemy shipping convoy that had been attacked earlier that day. On his approach to land, his aircraft was shot down by an enemy fighter. He was killed instantly, and he was only 22.

Another John—John Just—was born in 1916 in Lancaster, and lived in Carnforth. He was a qualified plumber, and after marrying Maybel Jean Brown in 1939, he left for RAF service to train as a navigator.



[Lizzi Collinge]

Posted to the 140 photographic reconnaissance squadron, he survived a crash on take-off on Boxing day in 1944. John Just survived the war, and the couple eventually moved to Morecambe, and then to Essex, where they raised a family. They survived to 1994 and 2008 respectively, living long lives and able to enjoy the fruits of the peace they both worked towards.

I would hazard a guess that this is the first time that many of these names have been recognised officially. That is why this monument is so important, and I support the plans outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle. It is a small step to recognise their immense sacrifice and the debt that we owe them. This debate shows us once again that, in a world which so often assumes the worst, real history shows us the opposite. Ordinary citizens again and again choose courage—we could not even list all the people who contributed within the time constraints of this debate.

It is a privilege, as one of the millions of beneficiaries of these heroes, to stand today in a robust parliamentary democracy and speak of their bravery. In remembering them, we remind ourselves of who we can be at our best, when we come together in service of something greater than ourselves.

3.24 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz; I am really pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) on securing the debate and providing Members with the opportunity to recognise those from our constituencies. All of us in this Chamber and beyond recognise that the role of the RAF photographic reconnaissance unit, or the PRU, during world war two deserves far greater recognition. They were brave men and women who operated in the shadows, often alone, often unarmed and always under threat, to gather the vital intelligence that enabled our armed forces to plan and execute decisive decisions.

As we have heard, the reconnaissance unit played a critical role in some of the most famous and successful missions of the war, from the Dambusters raid to D-day and even the hunt for the Bismarck, but behind these national and international stories, there are people. There are people from communities such as mine in Aldridge-Brownhills. One such individual was Flying Officer Eugene Cotton, a local hero from Rushall, who I am proud to speak about today. I can see you smiling, Ms Vaz, as my neighbouring MP from the borough of Walsall; I think it does reflect on the joint history of the Walsall borough.

Eugene was just 25 when he flew Mosquito aircraft on dangerous reconnaissance missions over Japanese-held territory in the far east, and in December 1943, he flew over Rangoon in a mission, but sadly he never returned. His story, though tragic, is also deeply inspiring. Eugene's parents, Arthur and Ethel, were well known in the local community. His father served as an organist and choirmaster at St Michael and All Angels church in Pelsall, and his mother taught at Pelsall School. They were local people clearly grounded in service to their local community, and Eugene followed in their footsteps, offering the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

Eugene's courage, and that of the more than 2,300 others who served in the unit, deserves to be recognised in our national story. That is why I am fully behind the campaign for a memorial. I welcome the Government's recent support to move this project to the planning stage. I welcome the update we have received today, and I think it is incumbent on us all just to keep gently nudging the Minister—not that I believe he needs much nudging—to make sure it is delivered for our constituents and for our nation.

Let us remember that the PRU's legacy was not just in the air; it extended to the photographic interpreters, many of whom were women, whose skill in analysing the 26 million images captured during the war was nothing short of remarkable. Their work saved lives, won battles and helped to bring an end to the war. Today, I add my voice in support of this memorial not just as a Member of Parliament, but as someone who knows just how much this means to our local communities and to our nation. If we are to honour the memories of heroes such as Eugene Cotton, we must ensure that their contributions, as well as the contributions of all who served in the RAF photographic reconnaissance unit, are fully recognised. The unit's work was vital. It was often unseen, but it changed the course of history, and it is time we gave them the place that they deserve in our national story.

3.28 pm

**Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing this important debate.

Last November, I visited war memorials across the Cities of London and Westminster. From Paddington and Marylebone stations to St Paul's cathedral, we honoured all those who fought and made such great sacrifices during both world wars. I am honoured to meet veterans regularly in my constituency and to talk with them about their service.

Now is a good time to reflect on the importance of memorials. I am a descendant of two second world war veterans. One of my grandfathers fought in the artillery in Burma and the other was part of the Italian army. They fought, made huge physical, mental and emotional sacrifices, and suffered for our freedom. This debate is an opportunity to think about those who put themselves in a different kind of danger—those in the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. Others have spoken eloquently this afternoon about the huge risks that they took in their expeditions.

I want to pay particular tribute to Flight Officer James Downie, born on St George Street in Mayfair, who died on a mission to the Romagne region of France and is commemorated there with a memorial constructed by local residents; Sergeant James Jacobs, who was killed in a propeller accident at just 21 years old; Flight Lieutenant Basil Allen, from Hanover Square; Wing Commander Denis Bennett, born near Hanover Square; Flight Lieutenant Frederick Effort; Flight Officer Noel Henkel; Flight Lieutenant Anthony Oldworth; Squadron Leader John Saffery; Flight Lieutenant Denis Speares; Flight Lieutenant David Wycliffe; Sergeant Robin Vigiers; Flight Sergeant Malcolm Westcott; and Flight Lieutenant Ian Barraclough, all of whom served in the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit.

I am really proud to represent so many people who have such an important connection to the unit. I am proud to support the memorial by St James's Park and I am grateful that it has the Government's support.

3.31 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for affording us all the opportunity to recognise a wonderful part of this nation's history. It is a real pleasure to see the Minister in his place. He is held in high esteem by all hon. Members—not to put any pressure on the answers that he will give shortly. I say that in jest.

It is a great pleasure to speak about the extraordinary role of the RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit during the second world war—a unit whose daring missions and critical intelligence gathering were pivotal to the allied victory. The PRU's pilots, who flew unarmed planes into enemy skies, showed a bravery that reminds us of the men of the merchant navy, who manned unarmed ships through dangerous waters.

In 1940, the RAF PRU rose from Sidney Cotton's civilian Heston Flight, officially becoming the No. 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit in November 1940. It was tasked with capturing high-resolution aerial photos of enemy territory. We have to consider what that means—it means it operated with little or no protection. The PRU became our eyes in the sky.

The pilots would fly modified, unarmed aircraft, such as Spitfires and Mosquitoes, at incredible speeds and altitudes of 44,000 feet, evading enemy detection to gather intelligence. The images meticulously analysed by the RAF Medmenham's allied central interpretation unit revealed German secrets from rocket programmes to fortified defences. In 1943, the PRU's reconnaissance over Peenemünde revealed Germany's V1 and V2 rocket development, prompting Operation Hydra, a bombing raid that delayed the use of those weapons by months, potentially saving countless lives.

For D-day in 1944, the PRU's 85,000 daily images mapped the Atlantic wall, enabling precision planning for the Normandy invasion. It is impossible to overstate the courage demanded for these missions. Just like the merchant navy, whose crews worked mostly on unarmed ships, braving U-boat-infested waters to deliver vital supplies, the PRU pilots flew unarmed planes in skies heavy with Luftwaffe fighters.

Tragically, the PRU suffered the highest casualty rate of any RAF unit. Pilots such as Wing Commander Adrian Warburton, a daring pilot who on 11 November 1940 flew a recon mission over a huge flight of Italian battleships in Taranto harbour, not far from Malta—flying so low he could almost reach out and touch the vessels, and was very aware of their painted names. He was shot down in April 1944. His remains were not discovered until 2002 in a field in Bavaria, around 30 miles west of Munich, still strapped in his plane's cockpit.

The PRU's strength was supported by pilots and bases around the Commonwealth and beyond. I am very proud to say that Northern Ireland had a role to play in that, with a vital RAF hub supporting the PRU at airfields in Aldergrove and Limavady, which were key locations for Coastal Command operations until 1942.

The Commonwealth's role in the PRU was significant thanks to the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand airmen, and of course the invaluable contributions of the Polish airmen whose feats are the stuff of legend. No. 318 Polish Fighter-Reconnaissance Squadron supported reconnaissance efforts as well, and their flights over Peenemünde were critical. Polish intelligence from the Home Army provided ground-level reports that complemented PRU imagery, especially after rocket testing shifted to Blizna in Poland.

The PRU's innovations saw techniques such as “dicing”, where pilots skimmed treetops under fire—my goodness, that makes your head spin. Night photography using the Edgerton D-2 flash system and infrared film by 1945 enabled the PRU to break enemy camouflage in darkness. Who thinks all these up? I know I could not, but those people did. Those developments, teamed with cameras like the F24 and F52, delivered precise intelligence, paving the way for today's modern reconnaissance. They set the examples for the rest of us.

The PRU's legacy remains firm and indisputable in the National Collection of Aerial Photography, while those brave, precious lives lost are commemorated by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission with memorials around the UK, such as at Runnymede, and also in France, Malta, Sicily, Tunisia and Singapore. That demonstrates how far their reach extended.

In conclusion—I am conscious of your time limit, Ms Vaz, which is why I am speaking at 100 mph—to those brave pilots, our eyes in the sky, especially those who lost their lives flying high-risk spying missions to secure our liberation, we owe our profound, lasting admiration, respect and gratitude. Their legacy compels us to be the keepers and guardians of their history.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** As the hon. Members who have spoken so far have been so good with their time, other Members have a bit more time.

3.36 pm

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. It is also a privilege to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate, which I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for bringing forward. As another granddaughter of a world war two veteran, I am ashamed to say that before meeting David Robertson from the Spitfire project, I had not known about the bravery, skill and determination of those pilots and the contribution that they made. I did not know about the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, and I am sure I am not alone.

After the war, the PRU's stories were buried and long forgotten, as most reconnaissance units were, but it has a unique story. Flying in essentially a gutted plane with no more than a camera deep into enemy territory, unarmed and unprotected, pilots gathered vital intelligence to help the allies win the war. Those planes were literally designed to carry as much fuel as possible at the expense of protecting the pilots—such bravery; such a sacrifice.

I want to pay particular tribute to one of my own constituents, Coalville's James Hares, who was among the brave few to serve in that extraordinary unit. Despite flying in a role that carried a death rate of one in two—one of the highest in the entire war—he survived the war but tragically passed away on the journey home

[Amanda Hack]

having suffered a cardiac arrest after an allergic reaction. He was buried at sea off the coast of Sri Lanka, never making it home to his family.

This is the second time I have had the opportunity to share my constituent's story. I will say his name and tell his story again as he deserves to be remembered. We have written to our local paper to find out more about James. Sadly, we have drawn a blank, so I call on the Minister, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle, to do what he can to open up the data so we can find out more about those brave men and women.

I am pleased the Spitfire project has gained parliamentary support for a monument. I want to pay tribute to its hard work and the work that it has put into the campaign. Beyond the memorial, the Spitfire project is also looking to the future. Its science, technology, engineering and mathematics-focused education programme is inspiring a new generation and encouraging school-aged children to pursue careers in aerospace, aviation and motorsport. In that way the legacy of the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit is not just preserved, but made a living and dynamic memory continuing to serve the nation into a new century and inspiring a generation.

I am sure that the opportunity for the public to see a Spitfire as James would have piloted it will bring to everyone's attention just how brave the pilots were. It is fantastic to see so many MPs today honouring their constituents. I look forward to working closely with the Spitfire project and I look forward to the monument. May we honour and remember the contribution that the people in the PRU made to our nation during world war two.

3.39 pm

**Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing this fantastic debate.

It is a great honour to rise to pay tribute to one of the most remarkable and least widely recognised units that contributed to the allied victory in the second world war: the RAF's PRU. Formed on 24 September 1939, the PRU carried out some of the most daring and vital operations of the entire war. PRU airmen flew unarmed and unarmoured aircraft deep into enemy territory, often alone. Over the course of six years, the missions captured more than 26 million images that would shape allied strategy and save countless lives. Intelligence gathered by PRU flyers informed decisions in the Cabinet war rooms, supported the success of the Dambusters raid, and provided the data and insight needed for the D-day landings—enabling the precision planning that helped to turn the tide of the war in Europe.

We are used to hearing of daring feats by heroic fighter pilots and dogged bomber crews, but the PRU operated under uniquely harrowing conditions. Flying alone with no weapons to defend themselves and no escorts to offer assistance, their only defences were altitude, speed and luck. They took to the skies with nothing more than a camera and a sense of duty. Indeed, the death rate in the PRU was among the highest of any allied aerial unit: life expectancy was on average two and a half months, and more than 500 men died serving in the PRU.

That sacrifice was felt across the length and breadth of this country, including in my Reigate constituency. Among the many who served in the PRU was Flight Lieutenant Douglas Adcock, who lived in Redhill. Douglas joined the RAF alongside his older brother, Reginald, and quickly qualified to fly the legendary Mosquito aircraft—a plane almost tailor-made for the PRU's daring missions. He flew out of RAF Benson with 544 Squadron, conducting dangerous reconnaissance operations in support of the allied advance into occupied Europe, including missions ahead of the D-day landings. On 11 August 1944, his Mosquito failed to return from one of those missions. Some days later, his body washed up on the shore in Belgium, where he is buried today.

For all the sacrifice of brave men like Douglas, there is no national memorial to the PRU—no permanent site to honour their legacy and acknowledge their vital contribution to our victory. I strongly support the excellent work of the Spitfire AA810 project, which has campaigned tirelessly to establish a fitting memorial to the PRU. The recent announcement from the Minister that we will be getting such a memorial is much welcomed.

The way that history is remembered is shaped in large part by choices made in rooms such as this Chamber. Who do we raise memorials to? What do we teach our children about the past? Which major historical events do we commemorate each year? Our answers to these questions give shape to our national history, and thus far the history that we have made has not done justice to the PRU. We rightly commemorate the fighter pilots, bomber crews, sailors, submariners and soldiers of the second world war. We remember codebreakers, spies, scientists and even politicians. It is entirely correct that we will now find a place, too, for the quiet heroism of the PRU: the men who flew alone, unarmed and without fanfare, to gather the intelligence that made victory possible.

I reiterate my thanks to the Spitfire AA810 project. I urge that we move as quickly as possible to complete the national memorial that these men deserve. We owe them our thanks, we owe them our remembrance and we owe them a place in our national story. Let us make sure they get it.

3.43 pm

**Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing the debate and highlighting the role of the RAF unarmed Photographic Reconnaissance Unit during the second world war. The unit made a contribution that deserves to be remembered. As mentioned, it captured more than 26 million images of enemy operations and installations during the war. Without that vital information, the success of operations and, ultimately, the outcome of the second world war could have been very different.

Beyond its strategic impact, the unit also deserves to be commemorated for the extraordinary level of sacrifice made by its members. Records show that the survival rate of unit personnel was proportionally the lowest of the allied aerial units throughout the war. So many lost their lives flying for the unit. Because of the solitary and secretive nature of its missions, some 144 of those lost have no known graves—perhaps making a memorial all the more important.



In my Glasgow North constituency, there were two known pilots from the unit. The first was Wing Commander Lawrence Hugh Strain. Lawrence was born at 14 Berkeley Terrace Lane in Glasgow on 12 November 1876. Little is known of his early life, but by 1913 he was resident in Edinburgh, travelling to London to gain his pilot's licence at Brooklands, which was issued in May 1913. With the declaration of the first world war, Strain joined the Royal Naval Air Service and served as a seaplane pilot on HMS Ark Royal between 1914 and 1918, seeing service in the Dardanelles, Gallipoli and Salonika. After the first world war, he married Ellen Margaret Howard in 1921 in Sussex. Research into his second world war service is still ongoing, as little information is available, but his name appears in the operational records of the early reconnaissance work carried out by the RAF in the second world war. He passed away after the war, in 1952, in Maybole, Ayrshire.

The second was Flight Lieutenant Alastair Gibb. Alastair was born in 1918 in the Hillhead area of Glasgow, the son of Alexander and Margaret Gibb. Little is known of his early life except that, after joining the RAF, he trained as a pilot and after converting to Spitfires he joined 16 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron, based in liberated Belgium. On 18 September 1944 he was scheduled to fly a reconnaissance sortie, but his Spitfire crashed, for reasons unknown, almost immediately after take-off and 25-year-old Alastair was killed instantly.

Both pilots are examples of the many who worked tirelessly and often alone, risking everything to gather the intelligence that shaped allied strategy and saved countless lives. That is why the planned memorial to the unit is so important. It will serve not just as a memorial to those who gave their lives, but as a lasting tribute to the often-overlooked contributions of those who worked behind the scenes—or, in this case, high above the battlefield. We owe it to them to remember their names, tell their stories and ensure their legacy lives on for generations to come.

3.46 pm

**James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing this debate. I also put on record my thanks to the Spitfire AA810 project for the work it has done to highlight the work of the Photographic Reconnaissance Units, and to get them a proper memorial. For many, the PRU will be an unknown group. Indeed, I was unaware of the unit until the project approached me. People will, of course, have seen the photographs many times in books, in museums and in films, but we rarely think about how those photographs were gathered, or the person behind the camera. As we have heard, over 26 million pictures were taken.

Preparing for this debate, I could think of only one portrayal of a reconnaissance pilot in popular fiction: the role played by Alec Guinness in the film "Malta Story". An accurate portrayal, it showed his character undertaking missions alone, with only his camera as defence. As we know, many of the PRU missions were undertaken without ammunition, and only the pilot's skill and training to get them out of trouble. In the film—this speech contains spoilers, but the film is over 70 years old, so I hope that will not cause issues—Alec Guinness's character is killed on a mission. That is, of

course, poignant, as so many of these men lost their lives in that way. In discussions about the campaign, I am aware that six reconnaissance pilots were from West Ham. I wish to put their names on the record and say a few remarks about them.

Flying Officer George Borrett was born in June 1920. He was a clerk in a shipping agent when he joined up in 1939. We know little of his RAF career, but we know that he survived the war and died in Epsom in 2007. Sadly, all we know about Flight Lieutenant Ronald Kemp-Lewis is that he was born in West Ham and served in the PRU. Flight Sergeant Alan McLaren, the son of Ernest and Lily McLaren, trained as a Spitfire pilot and served in 683 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron in the Mediterranean. On 18 August 1944, he failed to return from a mission to photograph Udine in Italy. His remains are missing and he is one of the 144 with no known grave. He was 23 years old.

Aircraftman First Class John Phipps served in 541 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron at RAF Benson, Oxfordshire. Sadly, he was badly troubled by the ongoing stress of the war, and took his own life on the base on 16 June 1943, aged 39. Flight Lieutenant Arnold Rumsey was shot down on a mission to photograph the Scheldt estuary, where the Dutch royal naval shipyards are located. The pilot of the plane drowned, but Arnold and the rest of the crew were taken prisoner. He spent the rest of the conflict as a prisoner of war, and survived. Warrant Officer Anthony Sams was born in West Ham in January 1923; he joined up in December 1941. We know very little, other than he served in the PRU and survived the war, dying in Hornchurch in December 2001, aged 78.

I hope that, by putting their names on the record, I have allowed those men something of a memorial to their service and sacrifice. Perhaps, by putting them on the record, I may encourage people who knew or remember them—or, indeed, unleash that amateur army of genealogists that we are so good at producing in this country—to come forward with more details, so that we can properly record their names and service.

I very much support the work to create a permanent memorial in recognition of all the incredible, dedicated reconnaissance pilots who served our country between 1939 and 1945. I also commit that I will work to create a local memorial in Newham, so we can honour those six men from West Ham and any others who served from the wider borough, to remember both nationally and locally the service and sacrifice of this incredible unit.

3.50 pm

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing this very important debate. I am honoured to speak today in support of the long-overdue recognition for one of the most courageous and least understood elements of our second world war effort—the RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. Formed on 24 September 1939, the PRU operated in the shadows, yet it was utterly central to the allied war effort. Its pilots flew unarmed, alone and at extreme risk, capturing more than 26 million images across all theatres of war.

Those same-day photographs provided around 80% of the intelligence used in allied strategic planning—used in the Cabinet war rooms, for the Dambusters raid and

[Helen Maguire]

for D-day. Although Enigma cracked the codes, it took days to decipher them; the PRU got intelligence in front of commanders by nightfall. It was, in the words of many, the most efficient intelligence-gathering operation of the war, but it came at a heavy price. Their aircraft—modified Spitfires and Mosquitoes—carried no armour, guns or even radios, and of the 1,747 known aircrew, 628 were killed. Nearly a third of those are still missing today. The average age of those brave pilots was just 24.

Among them were two heroes from my Epsom and Ewell constituency. Squadron Leader Frank Gerald “Jerry” Fray, educated at the City of London Freeman’s School in Ashted, brought back the iconic photographs of the Dambusters raid. He completed two operational tours and later commanded RAF squadrons in India and Germany. Flight Lieutenant William George Poulter, born in Leatherhead in 1914, trained to fly Spitfires in the RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit and by the end of the war he was serving in the middle east. He later went on to become a civilian pilot, and his quiet contribution deserves our loudest thanks.

Despite their sacrifice, there is still no national memorial to the men and women of the PRU. That is why I back the efforts of the Spitfire AA810 project, which has campaigned tirelessly since 2018 for a national monument near to the Churchill War Rooms, where their work shaped the course of history. The planned memorial will also honour the 635 photographic interpreters, including 195 women, who turned the aerial images into actionable intelligence. Without them, we would have had 26 million photos but no intelligence to act upon.

It was an international effort, with personnel from more than 24 nations, from the USA to Fiji and from Brazil to Poland. With such widespread representation, the PRU is one of the best examples of international collaborative work against fascism. Ministers have indicated support and welcomed public fundraising for the memorial, and I welcome that the Government are now helping to bring it to fruition. These brave individuals deserve to be remembered; let us ensure their story is no longer hidden in the shadows, but carved permanently into the stone of our national memory.

3.53 pm

**David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz, and to speak on behalf of His Majesty’s loyal Opposition on the important subject of the contribution of the Royal Air Force Photographic Reconnaissance Unit during the second world war. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing today’s debate. This is a timely and fitting discussion as we mark 80 years since VE Day and VJ Day, and an opportunity to reflect on the immense contribution of a group whose role has not had the recognition it rightfully deserves, but was absolutely vital to the allied war effort.

The missions flown by the PRU were among the most dangerous of the war. What lingers most in my mind is the nature of that risk and the quiet, unseen, uncelebrated courage it demanded. These young pilots flew solo into enemy airspace, unarmed and in unmarked aircraft, without recognition or fanfare. Their missions were secret, and many did not return.

We rightly honour those who fought on the frontline, those whose bravery was visible, shared and publicly recognised. As a former Royal Marine who served in conflict zones, I know at first hand the reassurance that comes from seeing the whites of a colleague’s eyes in the thick of danger—the unspoken bond that comes from facing fear side by side. But the pilots of the PRU did not have that comfort. Their missions were long, silent and solitary. They flew alone, deep into enemy territory, without escort, unarmed and exposed. I cannot begin to imagine the isolation they must have felt, or the courage it took to take off knowing that the odds were often against them coming home.

It is through speaking about that kind of service, and attempting to put ourselves in their place, that we begin to appreciate the full scale of their sacrifice. Members across this House have done a sterling job in raising constituents’ names and experiences, and in keeping their memory alive. The hon. Member for Carlisle—the daughter of a world war two veteran and someone who was close to the experiences of her parents—did a fantastic job of outlining some of the big things that the PRU did.

Twenty-six million photographs is a staggering amount; 80% of the intelligence helping out the war effort came from the PRU. They saved hundreds of thousands of lives. It is truly impressive—but it came at a significant cost to their own lives, and they were willing to go out and take that risk and make that sacrifice for the wider mission. I thank the hon. Member for Carlisle for giving us an update on the memorial. I am happy to hear that it will be just a stone’s throw away from this place, outside the war rooms.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) mentioned the important figure that the death rate in the PRU was 50%. As a former soldier, going into a unit and knowing that your chances of coming home were one in two would have been absolutely fear inducing. The hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) noted that someone actually committed suicide on base because of that fear.

The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) made the point that members of the PRU had a life expectancy of two years. Understanding that when they joined the unit must have been harrowing. She raised an important point about the international effort behind this unit, with 22 nations involved, and told the powerful story of John Boys-Stones, who died at the age of 22. This is the first time that some of their names have been spoken publicly; it is important to do it today, and I am glad to be involved in this debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) raised the wider point that, with some of the RAF missions that we have all heard about—the dam busters, the hunt for the Bismarck, D-day—the PRU played an important role in ensuring those famous missions were able to go ahead successfully. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake) also made the point that it was not just about pilots; the death toll affected ranks from sergeant up to wing commander, on the ground prepping aircraft, and while they were coming back.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a strong and powerful voice for defence in this House, and a powerful advocate for Northern Ireland’s history. I always enjoy listening to him to hear the different sides

of the story from all corners of our United Kingdom. He said a line that will stick with me: we are the keepers and guardians of the PRU's history, and we must honour that and carry it forward. The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) talked about her constituent James, who died in an unrelated accident—a heart attack on the way back—but played a vital part in the PRU's mission. His name should be included.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) spoke about the need for altitude, speed and luck in those missions. The PRU pilots were going out unarmed and unescorted, unlike many other pilots who flew during world war two. She talked about the family service—two brothers who served together in the RAF. From a parent's perspective, it must have been horrifying to have two children go off on secret missions and not be able to talk about their service—not to know what they were doing, but to know that they were part of a very dangerous unit.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) talked about the sheer number in unknown graves. It is not good enough. By bringing this subject to the House, we will start the process of remembering them in the proper and fitting way.

I found myself in the shoes of the hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) this time last year. Although I knew that this type of operation went ahead and that this type of intelligence was produced, I did not know much about the PRU. Over the past year, I have really enjoyed getting to understand the unit's efforts and hearing about the personal stories and sacrifice of those involved.

Like others, I want to take a moment to honour those who served in the PRU and had ties to my home, East Devon, to ensure that their stories are told and their names remembered. One of the most remarkable stories is that of Flight Lieutenant Peter Dakeyne, who was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1917 and later settled in Budleigh Salterton, near where I live now. He was fortunate and survived the war, but he did very daring things over France and in Belgium. The stories of others ended far too soon. I want to raise the names of Flight Lieutenant Robert Donaldson, Lyndon Gordon-White, Pilot Officer Charles Ousley and Flight Lieutenant William Scafe, who did not return home. To each of them, and to the families they left behind, I offer my sincere and enduring gratitude.

Eighty years on from the end of the war, we find ourselves asking, "How do we keep these stories alive?" That was a theme that came out in almost every speech today. Fewer and fewer people hold living memory of the second world war. This may be one of the final times that veterans can come together in person and tell the stories of their experiences in world war two to the younger generations. That makes our responsibility all the greater to not just commemorate but teach, and pass on the history and, vitally, the meaning behind it. The stories we have heard today are extraordinary. They are the kinds of stories that we should be telling our children. They leave young people with a sense of pride in our country and those who protect it.

We all know that the world is not becoming a safer place. We face new and growing threats. That raises the question of how we inspire the next generation to step up and serve. We cannot simply talk about the need for recruitment; we must foster a culture that respects and

values service and speaks to young people today. Yet what do we see? The RAF banned from careers fairs at university, defence firms prevented from promoting legitimate roles to students and a college at Cambridge, one of our most prestigious universities, voting to sever financial ties with the defence industry altogether.

Just imagine telling the young men and women who flew and worked for the PRU—who risked everything for our freedom—that, 80 years later, the very institutions they fought to protect would in turn be hostile to them. That is why we must keep telling these stories. We must ensure that their legacy is preserved, not distorted, and passed on honestly and with the respect it deserves.

While we honour those who served in generations past, we must also stand up for those who have served more recently. Just days ago, 30 veterans who served in Northern Ireland sat in the Public Gallery during a Westminster Hall debate about the Government's proposal to use a remedial order to reverse parts of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. That change could see veterans prosecuted for actions taken during Operation Banner, often in extreme circumstances and decades ago. The cross-party support expressed in today's debate is encouraging and speaks to the strength of feeling across the House about commemorating those who serve. But tribute alone is not enough. It is not acceptable to stand in this Chamber and honour veterans one day, only to abandon them the next. If we are serious about valuing service, we must honour all of it and all those who gave it to us. I urge the Government to change course on that issue.

I understand that more than 200 Members from eight parties have now lent their support to a formal memorial recognising those who served in the PRU. I place on record my full backing for that proposal. It is overdue. I look forward to visiting the memorial once it is formally unveiled. I also join the hon. Member for Carlisle in calling for the Ministry of Defence to offer departmental assistance to those working to finalise the list of names. I understand that all publicly available sources have been exhausted, and it would be a real disservice if any names were missed. We must ensure that the memorial is complete and accurate for all those who served.

I thank the hon. Member once again for bringing forward this debate. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.5 pm

**The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns):** Thank you, Ms Vaz, for your chairship. I welcome this fantastic debate on the role of the RAF photographic reconnaissance unit in world war two. I will not detract from the debate, which aims to recognise those individuals, by trying to score political points. We will talk about those brave men, and indeed women, who fought to protect the very freedoms we enjoy.

One of the key messages from this debate is that, if we step back and look at the current geopolitical situation, it is very fragile. Across the nation, our connection with defence is, in some cases, limited or getting less and less as the generations go on. It is really important that the stories of the PRU and other units are amplified and used as a mechanism to reconnect people in an interesting and valiant way.

If we move forward five to 10 years, and are called upon to serve nationally, it is really important that we understand where our freedoms came from, and how



[*Al Carns*]

this great place has been collectively protected by the brave young men and women of this nation. I will make one correction to what the hon. and gallant Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed) said: there were 31 veterans present in this room who served in Northern Ireland. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman did, but I did, and I would like the record to state 31 veterans, not 30.

Returning to the importance of this debate, the era of modern warfare—where satellites and drones can scrutinise enemy positions and provide intelligence, insight and understanding—reinforces the achievement of the RAF's PRUs for the simple reason that what they did was absolutely remarkable. Back then, gathering critical evidence of enemy targets could hardly be more perilous. The men of the photographic reconnaissance units, whose job it was to fly the planes armed with nothing more than lethal cameras, suffered the second highest attrition rate of any airborne unit during the conflict.

Without the extraordinary courage of those men, we could not have traced and sunk the twin battleships, Bismarck and Tirpitz, which were the national pride of the German fleet. We could not have protected convoys of ships in the north Atlantic that were bringing critical supplies from the United States, essential to the war effort. We could not have disabled the experimental rocket works, greatly delaying the development of the V2; who knows where that would have gone, if the PRU had not provided the intelligence and allowed subsequent strikes to degrade it?

We could not have conducted the fantastic Dambusters raid, which not only held strategic value but was a huge morale boost back here in the UK. Most of all, we could not have planned D-day as successfully as we did without collecting precise photographs of German positions across the whole of the French coast. It is not only about nationally significant moments like those but the day in, day out flights on which those pilots conducted consistent regular operations over enemy-held territory. Those are just a few examples of how British airborne reconnaissance units played a fundamental role in actually winning the war. Those pilots flew mostly alone in single-engine planes, without guns to defend themselves—just heavy fuel tanks to carry them over exceptionally long distances.

Let us take ourselves out of this place today and imagine a pilot sitting on a misty airfield somewhere in middle England. With the mist coming in, they go and get in their aircraft. Prior to boarding, they have been briefed that they will go over a certain area to take photographs, but they were not told why in any way, shape or form, because if they are captured, that information would be exceptionally important to the adversary. The pilot jumps in their plane and flies over enemy territory, but there is not a wingman on their left or right, and there is a minimal escape and evasion plan should they be shot down. The pilot is on their own for hours on end, through all weathers, and often attacked by flak and other aircraft. What they did is truly brave and remarkable.

Many of them, unfortunately, did not return. In November 1942, an Air Ministry report found that PRU pilots flying single-engine planes had a 31% chance of surviving their first tour of operations. That is

300 hours. Think about having a 31% chance of surviving that. The overall PRU death rate was nearly 50%, yet those men successfully brought back more than 20 million images—transforming British intelligence gathering—whether they were operating over the Norwegian fjords or the Burmese jungle, or providing equally crucial imagery after Allied attacks to assess the accuracy and extent of bomb damage.

These pilots often flew deception operations that were tactically irrelevant but could be strategically important by diverting enemy resources and confusing enemy plans. It is also important to remember that, while that was the front end, behind them sat a huge number of interpreters and analysts, many of them women, who were employed to analyse the images brought back from those lines and interpret them for the senior command to work out what exactly they meant. Their part in the history of the PRU was an integral part of the war effort.

However, compared with many other units in our wartime armed forces, the units remain relatively unrecognised. They are commemorated as part of other main memorials, such as the RAF memorial on the Victoria Embankment, the RAF Bomber Command memorial in Green Park and the RAF Coastal Command memorial in Westminster Abbey. They are also included in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's marked graves, but a dedicated national memorial would be a fitting way to recognise the scale of their vital contribution to defeating the Nazis.

I know this is something my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) is passionate about, and I thank her for securing a debate that helps to acknowledge the wider requirement for defence to connect with society and for society to connect with defence and recognise why it is so important. More widely, her voice is also important in raising the profile of this memorial campaign. It is one small step but, collectively with lots of other stuff that is going on, it is a really important narrative that I am sure both sides of the House support and champion.

I particularly congratulate the hard work and perseverance of the Spitfire AA810 Project in progressing the memorial campaign. The group carries that name for a good reason—Spitfire AA810 was a specially modified reconnaissance aircraft used by the PRU, completing 14 long-range operational sorties during six months of service during the war. When we consider that those sorties might have been five hours long, predominantly over highly-guarded enemy territory, Spitfire AA810 had a significantly longer career than many other planes in the fleet—and fortunately so.

However, on 5 March 1942, on its way to catch sight of the Tirpitz, Spitfire AA810 was attacked by two Messerschmitts and crashed into the Norwegian mountains. Pilot Alastair 'Sandy' Gunn, who was mentioned earlier, managed to eject himself before impact, but he was badly burned. He was forced to hand himself in to the Germans, who sent him to the infamous Stalag Luft III, where he was part of the breakout immortalised in the film "The Great Escape". The PRU is actually recognised in almost all such films. The imagery, intelligence and operations that took place were all underpinned by the PRU.

Sandy was eventually caught after that great escape. He was interrogated by the Gestapo and, tragically, shot. However, that was not the end of the aircraft's

story. Spitfire AA810 was recovered in 2018 from the Norwegian site where it had lain for 76 years. Fortunately, much of that aircraft had been preserved by peat and snow, so it presented a unique opportunity for restoration and rebuild back to an airworthy state. That has been taking shape over recent years.

Let me address some of the questions that right hon. and hon. Members have raised, and in particular, respond to the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle on the campaign for a national memorial. I wish the project every success; it has my full support. With a prominent and fitting location chosen outside the Churchill War Rooms here in Westminster, it will be an exemplary addition to London's memorials.

For the record, I have to state that the funding of such memorials remains a preserve of public subscriptions, driven by individuals and organisations. In line with the long-standing policy position of successive Governments, Ministers cannot support them in an official capacity, but in a personal one, I absolutely support it. I have written to the chief executive of the Royal Parks charity and Tony Hoskins of the Spitfire AA810 Project to express my hope that the plans for a Westminster memorial are successful. My hon. Friend can rely on me personally for that. I can only re-emphasise that conviction here today, and assure her that we welcome the efforts of all those who are working to get the memorial built.

Regarding the names from the PRU, I support a meeting with MOD officials to see what we can do. The National Archives is the main route, but if we have exhausted those records, I would be really interested to look at where else records are, or whether the MOD can help. It will be riddled with GDPR issues, I am sure, but we can talk through it and see whether we can find a solution or come up with some innovative way to make that information available.

Let me also address the question of how long it will take to get the memorial. Interestingly, this is a Department for Culture, Media and Sport issue, so I will write to ensure that my support is registered. I know that it is a private issue, but I also know that the Department is tracking and moving this forward, so I will make sure that I give it a nudge. I will write to the Department personally, if I can, to make sure we support it.

I am not going to devalue this debate. It is about the PRU. Given that it is just a matter of weeks since we commemorated the 80th anniversary of VE Day, it is time that the PRU's contribution to victory in the second world war and to almost every battle is fully recognised, and that a national memorial ensures that we always remember not just the heroes in the stories but why we have a defence capability in the first place. It is an absolutely fantastic initiative, which gets my full support. It helps us to understand the men and women who helped to serve our country and who sacrificed so much, and importantly, what was required to protect our democracy and the great freedoms we enjoy in this nation today.

4.16 pm

**Ms Minns:** It has been a genuine privilege to hear so many tributes and stories about those who served in the RAF unarmed reconnaissance units from so many constituencies. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), West Ham

and Beckton (James Asser), North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes), and particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) and Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for their comments.

I am really grateful to Opposition Members for their extremely thoughtful and kind comments about the people who came from their constituencies to serve our country so bravely. I pay tribute to the comments made by the right hon. Members for Tatton (Esther McVey) and Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his wonderful contributions to all our debates. I also thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), for sharing stories from her constituents.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. and gallant Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed), for his contribution, which brought to life the stories of the people who came from his constituency. I do think it is a little regrettable that, sadly, this debate, which was introduced to pay tribute to those who served in the photographic reconnaissance unit and to thank those who have for six years driven the AA810 campaign, was momentarily and unnecessarily diverted to score a cheap political point.

I would like to return to the purpose of this debate, which is to pay tribute to those who served so gallantly, so bravely and so selflessly all those years ago. I cannot begin to imagine the absolute terror, which the hon. and gallant Minister spoke about, in that moment before take-off, knowing that they might not return home that evening. We can never thank enough those who did return and those who paid that ultimate sacrifice. We should also place on the record our thanks to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for the work that it does throughout the year to ensure that we have a permanent remembrance for all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Let me pause momentarily to thank two individuals from the campaign, Tony Hoskins and David Robertson, for all they have done in Parliament. We have heard this afternoon just how much it has meant to all of us that your contribution has been able to bring to life what happened in our constituencies over 80 years ago, and I thank you for that.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** The Chair does too.

**Ms Minns:** I very much welcome the Minister's comments. I am sure that, with the right will, those riddles of GDPR can be successfully negotiated and we can finally have the full stories of the remaining people who served so gallantly in the PRU. On that note, I pay my respects once again to all the airmen and to all those who served in one shape or another in the PRU. They served their country with such distinction, and we remember the sacrifices that they made—lest we forget.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** Thank you to all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the role of the RAF Photographic Reconnaissance Unit during the Second World War.

4.21 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

Thursday 17 July 2025

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### Assimilated Law Report

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** Today the Secretary of State has laid a report before Parliament pursuant to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 and published it on gov.uk. This report updates the House, in line with the obligations under section 17 of the REUL Act, which requires a report to be published and laid before Parliament every six months, detailing all revocations and reforms of assimilated law. This is the fourth report being laid before the House.

The report today summarises the data on the assimilated law dashboard, providing the public with information about the amount of assimilated law there is and where it sits across Departments. The dashboard reflects the position as of 23 June 2025, showing a total of 6,911 instruments of REUL/assimilated law concentrated over approximately 400 unique policy areas on the dashboard. Since the previous update to the dashboard, 137 assimilated law instruments have either been revoked or reformed, meaning that 2,532 have now been revoked or reformed in total.

The report gives details of a further 41 statutory instruments using powers under the REUL Act and other domestic legislation that amend assimilated law, and that the Government have laid before the House since the previous report in order to deliver on their priorities. They include, for example, the Airports Slot Allocation (Alleviation of Usage Requirements etc.) Regulations 2025, which were made under the REUL Act and amend the number of slots an airline can hold to be categorised as a new entrant, aligning the UK with worldwide airport slot guidelines, and the Human Medicines (Amendment) (Modular Manufacture and Point of Care) Regulations 2025, which were made under the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021 and are intended to pioneer access to innovative treatments through a tailored regulatory framework for new ways of manufacturing medicines closer to the patient.

The Government remain committed to reforming assimilated law, where desirable, to foster a pro-business environment through a streamlined regulatory framework that drives growth and supports innovation. The reform of assimilated law will also support the delivery of key strategies while maintaining consumer and environmental protections. These strategies include the UK's modern industrial strategy, the trade strategy, the 10-year infrastructure strategy, and a strategy for small and medium-sized enterprises.

[HCWS838]

### Unpaid Internships: Call for Evidence

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** The Government plan to make work pay is a core part of our mission to grow the

economy, raise living standards across the country, and create opportunities for all. This will help tackle low pay, poor working conditions, and poor job security, all of which have been holding our economy back.

In our plan, we committed to banning unpaid internships, unless they are part of a formal educational or training course. This Government believe that a fair day's work deserves a fair day's pay and employers must pay their workers the pay they are entitled to.

Today, we are launching a 12-week call for evidence on unpaid internships.

The call for evidence relates to internships which are unpaid or paid below the national minimum wage, work trials, voluntary workers, volunteers, and work shadowing.

While voluntary workers, volunteers, and individuals who are work shadowing are not entitled to the national minimum wage, some employers are engaging individuals, particularly young people, under these terms incorrectly to avoid paying them.

This Government are committed to striking a balance between giving individuals a choice in the type of work they do, and how they do it, while not allowing employers to be tempted to take advantage of individuals, especially our young people, by making them work for free.

The call for evidence seeks views from employers, individuals, and interested stakeholders on unpaid internships and internships paid below the national minimum wage, and other similar categories of people who may be conflated with interns.

This Government are committed to tackling practices where workers who are entitled to at least the national minimum wage are not paid or are underpaid. The responses to this call for evidence will help shape future policy on these issues.

[HCWS839]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Special Advisers: 2025 Annual Report

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare):** Special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers, while reinforcing the impartiality of the permanent civil service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support.

Special advisers are temporary civil servants, and their costs are met by the Government Department in which they are based. Each year, the Cabinet Office publishes a report on the total cost and number of special advisers across Government. Today, the Cabinet Office will be publishing its report for the previous financial year, April 2024 to March 2025.

Departments also routinely publish data quarterly on special advisers' gifts, hospitality and meetings with senior media figures. Alongside the 2025 report, we will be laying in Parliament the 2024 report, which has been available on gov.uk since November 2024.

[HCWS853]

## TREASURY

### Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing

#### **The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds):**

The integrity and resilience of the UK's financial system are fundamental to our country's prosperity and security. A strong financial system supports jobs, businesses and families up and down the country, and helps to make Britain a safer and more prosperous place to live and work. However, the same openness that makes the UK attractive for trade and investment can be exploited by criminals and terrorists who try to move and hide their illicit money through our financial system. These activities are not victimless crimes; they fund serious criminal activity, undermine trust in our economy, and threaten the safety and wellbeing of our communities.

Today the Government are publishing two key documents that lay out our approach to identifying and managing these risks to UK citizens and their interests. The UK's fourth national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing, published jointly between His Majesty's Treasury and the Home Office<sup>[1]</sup> and HM Treasury's response to the consultation on improving the effectiveness of the money laundering regulations<sup>[2]</sup> together represent a robust, risk-based approach where regulation is underpinned by a comprehensive assessment of current and emerging threats. Our aim is clear: to keep criminals' money out of our economy, strengthen the defences of our financial system, and ensure the UK remains a secure and attractive place to do business.

The NRA takes account of the latest developments and information since the previous publication in 2020. The report has been laid before Parliament.

The key findings from this assessment are as follows:

The UK continues to be exposed to a high level of money laundering risk. Since 2020, the wider context has shifted due to increasing global insecurity, which has altered the risk landscape and the methodologies used by criminals

Money laundering increasingly overlaps with kleptocracy and sanctions evasion, as sanctioned actors use established laundering networks to hide funds.

The increasing adoption of new technologies are enabling novel methods for laundering and terrorist financing.

Cash-based money laundering remains a significant threat, including cash smuggling, use of cash-intensive businesses, money mules and misuse of legitimate channels including post offices to introduce criminal proceeds into the financial system.

Terrorist financing in the UK typically involves small sums for basic needs or overseas transfers, using both illicit and legitimate routes.

The NRA highlights both a strengthening of the UK's defences and the evolving nature of the risks we face. Since the previous assessment, significant steps, including under the economic crime plan 2023-26, have enhanced the UK's response. These steps, including expansion of public-private partnership working and legislative reforms, support the UK's alignment with international standards, including those set by the Financial Action Task Force.

The findings of the NRA will directly inform policy, regulation and operational priorities for Government, law enforcement, supervisors and regulated businesses. By equipping these partners with up-to-date risk intelligence,

we are ensuring that everyone involved can respond proportionately to the threats we face, protecting the UK's reputation and making it a safer place to live, work and invest.

Alongside the NRA, the Government are publishing their response to a recent consultation on the money laundering regulations, which attracted over 200 responses from industry, law enforcement, supervisors and civil society. The Government will introduce targeted changes to the MLRs reflecting an evidence-led, risk-based approach, ensuring that regulation is focused on the highest risk activities and threats to the UK system, while closing loopholes such as those related to the registration of certain trusts.

The amendments include changes to requirements for enhanced due diligence for complex transactions and high-risk countries; clearer customer due diligence requirements for pooled client accounts and non-financial firms; closing a key loophole on registration of trusts owning UK land or property on the trust registration service; improved onboarding in bank insolvency scenarios; better information sharing between supervisors; and updated rules for crypto asset service providers and the sale of "off-the-shelf" companies. Other issues will be addressed through guidance, working closely with supervisors to ensure that regulated firms are taking a consistent and risk-based approach.

These reforms, together with the updated NRA, will further strengthen the UK's defences against illicit finance, while supporting responsible businesses and protecting people's savings and livelihoods. We remain committed to ongoing engagement with stakeholders and will keep the MLRs under review to respond to emerging risks.

These publications mark an important milestone in our plan for change, supporting economic growth while ensuring that our financial system works for people and businesses, and denies criminals and terrorists the resources they need to do harm.

[1] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-risk-assessment-of-money-laundering-and-terrorist-financing-2025>

[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-the-effectiveness-of-the-money-laundering-regulations>

[HCWS847]

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Civil Society Covenant

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** I am proud to launch today the civil society covenant, a new chapter in the relationship between this Government and the remarkable civil society organisations that form the backbone of our communities, paving the way for a future where we can truly achieve our national ambitions together.

Through the covenant, I want to build a new trusted partnership between Government and civil society that harnesses the strengths of each to tackle shared challenges, deliver our plan for change and drive long-term economic growth across the United Kingdom. This Government believe that civil society has a powerful voice that must be heard in the rooms where decisions are made and that it is only by working together that this Government will build a self-confident nation where everybody's

contribution is seen and valued, and all people have the chance to live the richer, larger and dignified lives that they deserve.

In the spirit of partnership, the covenant has been co-produced through extensive engagement with civil society and Government to develop a guiding set of principles that form a framework for this future relationship:

*Recognition and value* that builds solid relationships of mutual respect and value;

*Partnership and collaboration* to inform decision-making and service design to deliver better solutions for all;

*Participation and inclusion* in greater opportunities for people to be involved in decisions and activities affecting their lives; and

*Transparency and data* championing more open sharing of information and data and evidence-based solutions.

This framework of principles is intended to be relevant to and guide relationships between the full diversity of civil society organisations and public bodies and Government at every level. A copy of the civil society covenant will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Making the covenant's principles a lived reality will require sustained action and commitment across both sectors and the Prime Minister, and I expect every Government Department to publicly support and drive implementation of the covenant in order to become a better partner for civil society. To drive momentum and provide leadership, I am establishing a new co-chaired "joint civil society covenant council", which will bring Government and civil society together to spearhead implementation of the covenant.

My Department will also be developing a local covenant partnerships programme to support civil society organisations to work collaboratively and in innovative ways with local authorities and public service providers. This will deliver services that tackle local policy priorities more effectively and better meet the needs of local communities.

As a sign of this Government's commitment to a new relationship with civil society, the covenant is today being launched as part of a major summit, bringing together key representatives from Government, civil society and the impact economy, to celebrate and explore how we can deliver better together, collaborating for a better future for our country.

[HCWS835]

## DEFENCE

### Historical Abuse Redress Scheme: MOD Contribution

**The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns):** Queen Victoria school is a co-educational, non-denominational, non-selective boarding school in Dunblane, Perthshire, owned and operated by the Ministry of Defence. Following investigations carried out by the Scottish child abuse inquiry, covering the years 1951 to 2021, and as result of the brave actions of former pupils and teachers in coming forward with their testimony, it is clear that lives were blighted by appalling abuse which took place at the school. I wish to pay tribute to those victims and survivors of this abuse, to thank them for their courage in coming forward, and to apologise to them for the abuse that they suffered while in our school.

In addition to the support that MOD personnel and staff at QVS have given to the inquiry, I also want to inform the House that the MOD has joined the Scottish Government redress scheme, which exists to make redress payments to people who were abused while in care as children before 1 December 2004, and some next of kin. The MOD has joined other organisations in committing to making a fair and meaningful contribution towards funding redress payments as part of overall efforts to recognise the harm suffered by individuals in our care and our failure to safeguard them.

In addition to making this statement, we have provided a letter of acknowledgment of harm which will be published on the website of the redress scheme. Details of the MOD'S financial contributions such as are appropriate in terms of protecting anonymity of claimants will be included in annual reporting by the Scottish Government.

[HCWS841]

## EDUCATION

### Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** On 14 April 2025, the Department announced changes to the management criteria of the adoption and special guardianship support fund.

As with all policy decisions, my officials carefully considered the impact of these changes on vulnerable children and families.

In the interests of transparency, the Department is making the equalities impact assessment available to view, and I will place a copy of the EIA in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS837]

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### Solid Wall Insulation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** On 23 January, I informed the House of the discovery of widespread non-compliance with industry standards specifically in relation to the installation of solid wall insulation under the energy company obligation 4 scheme and the great British insulation scheme. At that time, I confirmed that the Government had request Ofgem to oversee an expanded programme of checks, and committed to updating the House once further information on the scale and scope of the issue became available.

Since January, my Department has been working with Ofgem, TrustMark, certification bodies, and others within the oversight regime to understand the scale of these issues. The statistically representative audit programme is due to complete later in the summer, and results will be published in the autumn. However, the preliminary evidence from these audits suggests that a majority of properties that have had solid wall insulation measures under these schemes have not had these installed to the appropriate standard. Some instances of poor-quality work, including inadequate ventilation or roof-line



extensions, could, over time, lead to issues like damp and mould. This scale of non-compliance is unacceptable, and consumers will understandably be concerned.

Auditors have experienced some difficulty in obtaining consent to access people's homes to check the quality of their installation. The Government are keen to encourage everyone who is contacted for the purposes of scheduling an audit to strongly consider taking part in these checks, even if they do not think there is anything wrong with their installation. I will be writing to Members, asking them to pass on this information.

Our priority remains ensuring that poor installations are identified and remediated as quickly as possible, with no cost to the consumer. Since January, Ofgem has contacted all 60,000 consumers who have had solid wall insulation under both schemes. Thousands of households have already had on-site checks conducted, and where issues have been identified, installers have been asked to remediate these. To date, 90% of the poor-quality installations that were identified in the initial audits conducted by TrustMark have been remediated. However, there is significant work to do to provide remediation for all households that are potentially impacted. We expect all installers to continue to demonstrate their commitment to ensuring households receive timely and high-quality remediation of any non-compliance identified. Where the responsible installer has gone out of business, we encourage consumers to reach out to their guarantee provider.

Should consumers have concerns about the solid wall insulation installed in their property under ECO4 and the Great British insulation scheme, or the process for seeking remediation, they can contact the Ofgem dedicated contact centre for advice and support by email at [ECOhelp@ofgem.gov.uk](mailto:ECOhelp@ofgem.gov.uk), or by freephone on 0808 169 444, Mondays to Fridays (excluding bank holidays) from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm.

TrustMark and certification bodies will continue to carry out spot checks on other measures and schemes as part of their wider audit activity, although internal and external wall insulation have been prioritised. The current evidence is that compliance levels are higher in other measure types under ECO4 and GBIS.

We have reviewed, at pace, measures undertaken on homes under the local authority delivery, social housing decarbonisation fund and the home upgrade grant schemes. Current data suggests there is not a widespread issue in those schemes, and where non-compliant installations have been identified, the majority of these have been resolved through swift action by the supply chain. We will continue to monitor these schemes as ongoing work continues.

The potential scale of non-compliant solid wall insulation installed under ECO4 and GBIS points to a systemic failure with these schemes. We have taken immediate action to improve the oversight of installations while we bring forward root-and-branch reforms to the wider consumer protection system. Actions to date include:

- Energy suppliers carrying out enhanced desk-based and on-site checks, and increased oversight of subcontractors;

- Suspension of installers, and a rigorous process for reinstatement, following remediation of all issues in identified properties;

- Greater oversight of TrustMark's operations through a memorandum of understanding, and the appointment of a departmental board observer;

An updated standard, PAS 2035/2030:2023, which came into force on 30 March 2025, has introduced a requirement for retrofit co-ordinators to conduct site visits, and raised the qualification standards for retrofit designers.

Agreement from certification bodies that installers should hold only one PAS 2030 certification per measure type, to improve accountability.

However, we are clear that we will need to go much further. We will be engaging with energy suppliers, certification bodies and installers over the coming weeks to put in place further steps to minimise the risk of further poor-quality installs, and to accelerate the ongoing remediation process, ensuring that installers meet their responsibilities to remediate any non-compliant work.

Finally, it is clear that an overhaul of the retrofit system and the consumer protection landscape is urgently required. This is being brought forward as part of the Government warm homes plan in autumn. Reforms will consider how we certify the competence of installers working to upgrade homes and provide a clear system of oversight, redress and guarantees for when work goes wrong. This will support higher quality installations and greater consumer confidence in retrofit measures.

To ensure we get this right, I am convening an expert panel to advise the Government as we develop and implement these reforms. This panel will have expertise from across consumer groups and the construction sector.

I am committed to delivering a system that is robust, transparent, and delivers high-quality outcomes for consumers. I will continue to keep the House informed as this important work progresses.

[HCWS851]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### National Security Investment

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** I am today confirming that the Government will proceed with the construction of a new, state-of-the-art health security campus—including new high containment laboratory facilities—in Harlow, Essex. This site will replace the UK Health Security Agency's (UKHSA) existing facilities in Colindale and Porton Down and will form part of the Government's network of national biosecurity centres as announced in the national security strategy. This decision reflects the hard work and extensive campaigning by the hon. Member for Harlow and is a vote of confidence in Harlow's potential.

This facility represents the most significant investment of its kind in a generation. The programme is a multi-billion-pound investment, with £250 million to be spent over this Parliament to kickstart delivery of the new facility. It will consolidate, into a single purpose-built site, the critical high-containment laboratory functions as well as the existing research and diagnostic functions of our existing facilities in one location and will also serve as UKHSA's corporate headquarters.

The new Harlow site will strengthen the UK's pandemic preparedness, reinforce national security, and provide world-leading capability to detect, assess and respond to health hazards.

In addition to the public health benefits, this development will support economic growth and create an estimated 1,600 additional high-skilled jobs. It will enable closer collaboration between leading scientists and the life sciences sector. The Harlow site offers strategic opportunities for new partnerships and scientific innovation and will further enhance the Oxford–Cambridge corridor as a major engine of national prosperity.

UKHSA will finalise the design of the Harlow site before construction begins, with phased occupation of the facility starting in the mid-2030s. The site will be fully operational by 2038. A period of dual running with existing sites will ensure a safe and effective transition of operations. UKHSA will maintain operations at Colindale and Porton Down until Harlow is fully validated and operational.

This decision will affect approximately 1,650 UKHSA staff across the Colindale and Porton Down sites and staff at its headquarters in Canary Wharf. UKHSA will work closely with affected staff throughout the transition period, recognising the unique and vital expertise of its workforce.

The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) site at Porton Down is not affected by this decision and will remain in operation on its existing site.

[HCWS843]

### Vaccination Coding in General Practice

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** I would like to update the House of an important issue affecting the NHS's provision of vaccinations.

An issue has been identified in the use of Accurx batch messaging, a system that allows GP practices to send the same message to a group of patients, via email, NHS app or SMS. In some cases, when invitations have been sent to patients inviting them to receive a vaccination, the code for a completed vaccination was selected on the system, rather than the code for an invitation. This did not affect patients being invited to receive a vaccination, but their record on the GP practice system was updated to say, incorrectly, that they had received a vaccination.

This has affected around 57,000 records across 337 GP practices. Our investigation suggests that this has primarily affected records in relation to vaccinations for the respiratory syncytial virus vaccination—a maximum of 2% of vaccines administered—but also some other vaccinations. For anyone to miss the opportunity to be invited to receive a necessary vaccination is extremely regrettable, and we are taking steps to resolve this. There is currently no evidence that anyone has been harmed as a result. Not everyone whose record has been affected will have missed out on a vaccination, as an initial vaccination invitation will have been sent out and a direct invitation is not the only route to securing a vaccination. We would strongly encourage anyone eligible to come forward for their vaccinations when invited, to get vital protection.

Accurx has amended its clinical coding to prevent this happening again. GP practices affected will review patient records, to make sure that anyone due a vaccination who has not received one is offered one as soon as possible, and that records are accurate and up to date. On average, an affected GP practice will have to review less than 200 cases and NHS England and integrated

care boards will support them in this process. A detailed root cause analysis will be carried out to ensure that we learn from this and avoid similar issues in the future.

[HCWS850]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Devolution Priority Programme

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** In February this year the Government launched the devolution priority programme, taking forward proposals to create mayoral strategic authorities in the great counties and communities of Cumbria, Cheshire and Warrington, Greater Essex, Hampshire and the Solent, Norfolk and Suffolk, and Sussex and Brighton.

This programme—one of the largest ever single packages of mayoral devolution in England—delivers on the Government's commitment to widen devolution, with areas given sweeping new powers, putting them on the fast track to deliver growth, opportunities, transport and housing for local communities.

Following the announcement, public consultations were undertaken in each area. I am grateful for the responses received from local people, councils, businesses and wider stakeholders, which we have now carefully assessed. It is clear that, like us, communities care deeply about the future of their area and the benefits that devolution can bring. Today, the Government are also publishing summaries of these responses.

Following an assessment, I am pleased to confirm that the relevant statutory tests to establish mayoral strategic authorities in all six areas have been met. Subject to the constituent councils' consent, legislation will be brought before Parliament in order to establish each of the six institutions early in 2026, devolving further powers to local leaders and those with local knowledge, to drive economic growth and empower communities with investment to support their work.

These ambitious next steps in our devolution revolution represent one of the greatest transfers of power from Westminster in a generation, bringing another 8.8 million people under mayoral devolution, which will now cover close to 80% of the country.

Four inaugural mayoral elections will take place in Greater Essex, Hampshire and the Solent, Norfolk and Suffolk, and Sussex and Brighton, and will be held in May 2026. Following a request from the local authority leaders in Cumbria, and Cheshire and Warrington, the Government have agreed to align inaugural mayoral elections with the vast majority of local elections in May 2027, simplifying the elections for voters and saving taxpayers' money.

The confirmation on the timing of these elections will not affect the speed of establishment of the combined authorities in these areas, with legislation to create the new authorities being laid alongside all others in the devolution priority programme, providing for strong foundations and positive partnership working, as well as early delivery of key local investment ahead of mayoral elections.

Mayoral elections held in 2026 will take place under the first-past-the-post voting system, as is currently the law. The recently tabled English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill would move future mayoral elections—and police and crime commissioner elections—to the supplementary vote system, which was in place prior to 2023. Subject to parliamentary approval, this would be relevant for the proposed 2027 mayoral elections onwards.

We will continue to work with councils over the summer, including to confirm funding for these new strategic authorities and to secure their consent to the establishment of secondary legislation.

We understand that these mayoral strategic authorities will also need funding certainty to be able to plan for the long-term and get maximum impact from their spending. As stated in the “English Devolution White Paper”, the 30-year investment funds will remain a core part of the offer to devolution priority programme areas, which will receive this funding on their creation. We are standardising funding for new institutions to increase transparency and fairness.

As devolution progresses, we value and expect the engagement of local Members of Parliament, local council leaders, police and crime commissioners, and other local stakeholders, with the constituent authorities.

Subject to Parliament, these areas will also benefit from the changes included in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, which was introduced to Parliament last week. With access to the devolution framework, all six areas will have the powers they need to deliver more jobs, easier commutes and new homes for local people.

With power rebalanced from Whitehall, local leaders will finally have the tools they need to power up our regions, rebuild local government and empower communities.

[HCWS848]

### Local Government Best Value

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** As I have said in previous updates to the House, this Government are committed to resetting the relationship with local and regional government, and taking the action necessary to fix the foundations of local government. Today, I am updating the House on the steps we are taking in partnership to support four councils to recover and reform: the London borough of Croydon, Thurrock council, Dudley metropolitan borough council and Liverpool city council.

*London borough of Croydon*

On 12 June, I informed the House that I was satisfied, having considered the latest report from the improvement and assurance panel and other information, that the London borough of Croydon is failing to comply with its best value duty. I proposed an intervention package to secure the council's compliance with that duty and asked the council and others to provide representations by 25 June.

I received 35 representations, which I considered carefully. I am satisfied that the council is failing to comply with its best value duty in relation to continuous improvement, leadership and use of resources. I have concluded that it is both necessary and expedient for me to exercise powers in the Local Government Act 1999 as I proposed, with minor amendments.

Croydon remains one of the most financially distressed councils in the country. Failing to change course would condemn Croydon's residents to a worsening position without a recovery strategy. I am satisfied that the scale of the financial difficulties facing Croydon, the failure of the council to adequately respond to these difficulties and the assurance required means that a short and sharp reset, with fast action, is required to shift the dial on the council's recovery. I believe this is best achieved by escalating the statutory intervention to a commissioner-led model to ensure the council can achieve sustained change at the pace needed.

Today I issued directions under section 15(5) and 15(6) of the 1999 Act to implement the proposed intervention package. The intervention package—to be in place until 20 July 2027—comprises specific actions the council is required to take alongside the appointment of three commissioners appointed to exercise specific council functions and a political commissioner. I am confident that this package will address the issues identified and is necessary for the council to secure compliance with its best value duty.

I have appointed Gerard Curran, Debra Warren, Jackie Belton and Councillor Abi Brown OBE as commissioners. I am confident that their extensive knowledge and experience will help to deliver the necessary improvements for Croydon.

I have issued directions which, in summary, require the council to:

Continue to develop and implement the London borough of Croydon stabilisation plan and transformation programme to the satisfaction of commissioners.

Fully co-operate with the commissioners and take any reasonable action within the authority's functions to prevent further failure, as reasonably determined by the commissioners.

I expect the council to drive its own improvement with the support, challenge, and advice from the commissioners. To safeguard the process, some commissioners will have powers to exercise certain functions to ensure compliance with the best value duty:

To ensure the council has the leadership, structures and systems in place to drive and sustain improvement, including governance and scrutiny of strategic decision making, oversight of strategic financial management and decision making, and the appointment, dismissal and performance management of senior and statutory officer positions.

To support financial sustainability and enable transformation of the authority's operating model and services to deliver value for money and long-term financial resilience.

The commissioners' appointments and directions take effect from today. The commissioners will provide their first report in six months, with a second report before summer 2026 and further reports every six months or as agreed with the commissioners. I will review the directions and commissioners' roles after 12 months to ensure that Croydon has the support required to accelerate recovery and protect the public purse. Subject to clear and sustained evidence of improvement, certain functions may be returned to the council ahead of the expiration of the directions.

As with other statutory interventions led by my Department, the council will meet the costs of the commissioners, and provide reasonable amenities, services and administrative support. The fees paid to individuals are published in appointment letters on gov.uk. I am assured this provides value for money given the expertise being brought and the scale of the challenge.



Finally, I would like to place on record my thanks to Tony McArdle OBE and all of the improvement and assurance panel members for their work in supporting the council on its reform and recovery.

#### *Thurrock council*

On 19 June, I informed the House that I was satisfied that Thurrock council is not yet complying with its best value duty. I proposed to issue new directions to Thurrock council to extend the statutory intervention until 30 April 2028, and asked the council and others to provide representations by 2 July 2025.

I received three representations, which I considered carefully. I am satisfied that the council is not yet complying with its best value duty. I have concluded that it is both necessary and expedient for me to exercise powers in the 1999 Act as I proposed, with minor amendments.

I have today issued directions to the council under section 15(5) and 15(6) of the 1999 Act to implement the proposed intervention package. These come into effect immediately and will remain in force up to and including 30 April 2028. The directions issued on 2 September 2022—updated on 16 March 2023—are revoked with immediate effect. This package, to be in place until 30 April 2028, comprises specific actions the council is required to take alongside the appointment of three commissioners with powers to exercise functions. I am confident that this package will address the issues identified and is necessary for the council to secure compliance with its best value duty.

The success of Thurrock is important both for its own benefit and that of the region, with its critical role in local government reorganisation and devolution across Essex, which offers significant opportunities to drive growth, improve transport connectivity and build new homes, as well as raise living standards for its population.

I have today appointed Gavin Jones CBE, Denise Murray and Dr Dave Smith as commissioners.

I have issued directions which, in summary, require the council to:

- Continue to implement and report on plans for the authority's improvement and recovery, to the satisfaction of the commissioners.

- Develop and maintain a revised corporate plan that includes the necessary work to ensure the authority's compliance with the best value duty.

- Ensure that the authority has personnel with sufficient capability and capacity, including access to appropriate specialist expertise where required; works with commissioners on the work with other councils in the Greater Essex area for unitary local government and the devolution priority programme on implementing any such proposals later agreed upon; and fully co-operates with the commissioners and takes any reasonable action within the authority's functions to prevent further failure, as reasonably determined by the commissioners.

Commissioners will be able to exercise functions:

- Associated with the governance, scrutiny and transparency of strategic decision making by the authority.

- Associated with financial sustainability and delivering financial governance and scrutiny of strategic financial decision making by the authority.

- Associated with the authority's operating model and redesign of services to achieve value for money and financial sustainability; and those that ensure the council has the right skills, capacity, capabilities and structures to make improvements.

I intend to review the proposed arrangements by summer 2026, when I expect there to be further clarity on broader plans for devolution and local government reorganisation across Greater Essex.

As with other statutory interventions led by my Department, the council will be required to cover the costs associated with the commissioners and provide reasonable amenities and services and administrative support. The commissioners' fees are published on gov.uk. I am assured this provides value for money given the expertise that is being brought and the scale of the challenge.

#### *Dudley metropolitan borough council*

I am also updating the House on steps we are taking in relation to Dudley metropolitan borough council.

After carefully considering the relevant evidence, my Department has today issued the council with a best value notice. This is not a statutory intervention but a formal notification of the Department's concerns. We found no evidence of current best value failure at the council, but recent progress must be sustained and embedded to ensure that the council meets its best value duty.

The council is expected to continue driving its own recovery and is asked to engage regularly with the Department for assurance of improvement. Progress against the notice will be reviewed after 12 months. I am pleased that the council already has the support of an independent improvement board and the Local Government Association, and am hopeful that it will continue to make good progress. I urge the council to make full use of its board's expertise, and the Department will seek updates from it.

#### *Liverpool city council*

The statutory intervention in Liverpool city council concluded in June 2024 when the council established its own improvement and assurance board. I have welcomed the council's engagement with me and the Department, and the progress reports from the council and board chair. We have been pleased to provide ongoing support.

The board has now concluded its successful work with the council, and I am pleased to hear that the council can now lead its own recovery, continue to drive continuous improvement and respond to future challenges. I do not underestimate the work it has taken to reach this point, and give my thanks to the council's leadership, staff, and the improvement and assurance board for their efforts.

I welcome the council establishing an ongoing improvement committee in place of the board, and I encourage the council to seek some independent, external strategic support. I am now ending the departmental support provided since last June but have asked to stay close to developments, with periodic engagement with the Department continuing. I thank Councillor Liam Robinson for the leadership he has shown together with Members, officers and colleagues within Liverpool, and thank the improvement and assurance board for its dedication to ensuring the best possible services for the people of Liverpool. I look forward to seeing Liverpool's journey continue.

As a council that has been through the best value process, it has insights and experience that the Department and wider sector would take value from.

### Conclusion

I am committed to working in partnership with these councils to provide the necessary support to ensure their compliance with the best value duty and the high standards of governance that local residents expect, ensuring they are fit, legal and decent, with a Government in active support of recovery and improvement.

I will deposit in the Library copies of the documents referred to, which are being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS845]

### Modern and Secure Elections

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** I am delighted to announce the publication of the Government new strategy for modern and secure elections. This marks a significant step forward to strengthening our democracy and upholding the integrity of our electoral system. It sets out a clear vision for modern, secure and inclusive elections, underpinned by transparency, resilience and fairness.

Our democracy is central to who we are as a country. We can take pride in its evolution and how it has inspired people around the world. We have a responsibility to protect and strengthen that democracy. In each generation there must be a national conversation about how to protect our democratic system and culture, so that we build on our advances and leave a democracy more robust and relevant to the next generation. We must build upon the foundations laid by those who came before us, and leave it better than we found it.

This bold new strategy reflects the ambition of this Government to ensure that every eligible citizen can participate confidently and safely in a democracy protected against evolving threats and challenges. It looks ahead, building on what works well while making the changes we need to face a changing and challenging world.

We will bring forward a Bill during this Parliament, which will include extending the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds and work to create a system of automated voter registration. We will bring forward new safeguards on digital campaigning and pave the way for digital voter identification, rebuild our firewall against foreign interference and protect those who put their name forward to stand in elections against harassment and intimidation.

These are changes designed to protect our democracy.

The strategy has been developed by working across Government, through close engagement with key partners from across the electoral community, with young people and with civil society organisations. It outlines a programme of work that will support innovation, improve accessibility, strengthen oversight, safeguard against known and emerging threats, and ensure that only those with a legitimate interest in the UK get to decide its future.

We are grateful to all those who contributed to this strategy and look forward to continuing to work across Government and the devolved nations, with our partners in the electoral community and with the wider public to ensure its successful implementation into law.

The strategy is available on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS842]

### Remediation Acceleration Plan

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** On 2 December 2024, this Government published our remediation acceleration plan, setting out our approach to accelerating the remediation of residential buildings with unsafe cladding in England and improving the experience of affected residents.

Today we are publishing an update to that plan, setting out key progress and introducing new measures to achieve the plan's three objectives:

fix buildings faster—so that those buildings already known to us can be made safe at pace;

identify all 11 metres plus residential buildings with unsafe cladding—so that every building at risk is found and fixed; and

support residents—so that people affected by unsafe cladding are treated fairly and compassionately throughout the process.

Through this work we will overcome the barriers of cladding remediation so that residents can be safe, and feel safe, in their homes.

The plan is an essential part of this Government's ambition to deliver a safe, sustainable built environment that meets residents' needs. It complements our broader housing goals, including the delivery of 1.5 million high-quality homes over this Parliament. The recent spending review laid the foundations for the largest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation. However, tackling legacy safety issues in our existing stock remains a vital priority. This update ensures that those challenges remain front and centre.

#### *Fixing buildings faster*

The plan's first objective is to accelerate the pace of cladding remediation for those buildings already known to be affected. Since December we have made considerable progress in strengthening enforcement, streamlining delivery and working with the sector to meet stretch targets. To build on this momentum, we are introducing a range of further measures.

Working in partnership with the social sector, we have published a new joint plan between the Government, social landlords and regulators, enshrining 22 commitments that, alongside new funding, will shave years off remediation timelines. At least 110 social landlords have already signed up to the joint plan. Those signatories collectively account for over 75% of buildings known to require remediation. There is no time to waste, and we will implement our equal access policy with immediate effect. We have today changed the rules of the cladding safety scheme to give social landlords the same access to Government remediation funding as private landlords, underpinned by this Government's new investment of over £1 billion.

We will also bring forward a Remediation Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows, which will focus on accelerating the remediation of historical unsafe cladding and protecting leaseholders in the process. That includes creating certainty about which buildings need remediation and who is responsible for remediating them and making obligations for assessing and completing remediation clearer through the legal duty to remediate, with severe consequences for non-compliance. We intend to introduce a backstop for the Government to bring an end to the

building safety crisis; and giving residents greater control in situations of acute harm where landlords have neglected their responsibilities.

We have also been working collaboratively with mayoral strategic authorities who are developing and delivering local remediation acceleration plans. We have provided over £5 million to support these plans in 2025-26.

To support the join-up of our remediation work, we are also establishing a national remediation system—a single dataset covering information on all relevant residential buildings over 11 metres. The system will improve efficiency by allowing information sharing among regulators, delivery partners and local authorities.

*Identifying all 11 metres plus residential buildings with unsafe cladding*

To fix all 11 metres plus residential buildings with unsafe cladding, we must first ensure that every building at risk has been identified and reviewed. In December, we estimated that between 4,000 and 7,000 buildings requiring remediation had not yet been identified. Through improved data, we have now narrowed this estimate to between 500 and 3,400 buildings with unsafe cladding left to bring into a remediation programme.

We are on track to identify the vast majority of buildings requiring remediation by the end of this year, thanks to the continued development of our national remediation system, regional investigations and proactive support from delivery partners. Where buildings require further investigation because external, visual indicators are insufficient to determine if remediation is required, we are approaching landlords to review fire risk assessments and provide support, ensuring that these buildings are either remediated or ruled out.

*Supporting residents*

Leaseholders should not bear the burden of remediating fire safety cladding defects that they did not cause. Our approach is guided by a commitment to fairness, transparency and compassion.

To ensure that cladding remediation funding is driven by risk, rather than an arbitrary height requirement, we will provide funding in those exceptional cases where multi-occupied residential buildings under 11 metres have life-critical fire safety risks from cladding and do not have an alternative route to funding.

One of the most difficult situations that a resident can find themselves in is a decant—where a residential building is deemed unfit for occupation and residents must leave their homes until they are made safe. We will put in place legislation to ensure that the vast majority of decants are avoided through prompt intervention or, where decants are necessary, residents can return to their homes as quickly and safely as possible.

We will deliver a long-term, sustainable approach to the waking watch replacement fund, with new funding committed to install alarm systems and help keep residents safely in their homes while their buildings await remediation, and to protect leaseholders from unnecessary costs.

We will outline the information that residents should receive during remediation. This will draw on existing guidance from the Health and Safety Executive to support residents in understanding their rights, what to expect and how to raise concerns if they believe something is unsafe. Strengthening accountability and improving delivery standards will ensure that residents are placed at the heart of building safety.

This update reflects a co-ordinated national effort, led by the Department and delivered in partnership with metro mayors, national and local regulators, and industry. Our goal is clear: to remove all barriers to remediation in order to get buildings fixed faster and allow residents to feel safe in their homes.

[HCWS849]

## JUSTICE

### SW v. UK Judgment: Remedial Order

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman):** My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede) has today made the following statement:

I would like to inform the House that I am laying a draft proposal for a remedial order to amend section 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 to allow an award of damages in a new set of circumstances. This is to implement the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in *SW v. UK*—application no. 87/18.

The applicant in this case, SW, was a social worker who was called as a professional witness in childcare proceedings in the family court. The family court judge made adverse findings about SW in his judgment and directed that his statements be sent to SW's employer, as well as to other local authorities where she had worked and relevant professional bodies, without giving SW an opportunity to respond. SW was dismissed and suffered various health issues as a result.

On appeal, the Court of Appeal set aside the relevant findings on the basis that, if left standing, they would breach SW's rights under article 8—right to respect for private and family life—of the European convention on human rights. SW was advised she would be unable to obtain compensation under the HRA due to section 9(3) of the Act, which prevents the award of damages in respect of judicial acts done in good faith except in very limited circumstances, which do not include a breach of article 8 ECHR. The ECtHR subsequently ruled that article 13 of the ECHR—right to an effective remedy—read together with article 8, had been violated because SW did not have access to an effective remedy at the national level capable of addressing the substance of her article 8 complaint and by which she could obtain appropriate relief. The ECtHR also held that the applicant's article 8 rights had been violated. The ECtHR awarded a sum in damages, which has been paid.

The UK is obliged under article 46 of the ECHR to implement this judgment, which includes resolving the circumstances that led to the violation. In order to address the violation of article 13 of the ECHR, legislative change is required as the violation was the result of the statutory bar on the award of damages under section 9(3) of the HRA.

Subject to approval by both Houses, the order would make a targeted amendment to the HRA which would have the effect that:

in proceedings in respect of a judicial act done in good faith; where the judicial act is incompatible with article 8 on the grounds, or on grounds including the ground, that it was done in such a procedurally defective way as to amount to a breach of the requirements of procedural fairness under that article;

a financial remedy could be awarded to the person to compensate for the breach of article 8. We are satisfied that damages would be available to individuals in situations similar to that of SW and would therefore satisfy the requirements of the judgment.

The Government consider that there are compelling reasons to amend the HRA via remedial order. We consider that the nature of the article 13 breach, and our obligation to implement the SW judgment, contribute to there being compelling reasons for making the necessary legislative change without further delay via remedial order. The alternative approach to a remedial order would be to make the amendment by way of primary legislation. However, we consider that there is little prospect of finding suitable primary legislation to make an amendment in the near future.



This draft proposal for a remedial order is being laid under the non-urgent procedure. It will be laid for a period of 60 days during which time representations may be made. The Joint Committee on Human Rights will scrutinise the remedial order and report on it to the House. Following that, the draft order, with any revisions the Government wish to make, will be laid for a further 60 days before being considered and voted on by both Houses.

[HCWS846]

### **Imprisonment for Public Protection Sentences: 2024-25 Annual Report**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin):** My noble Friend the Minister of State for Justice (Lord Timpson) has today made the following statement:

“Today, I am laying before Parliament the HMPPS annual report on the IPP Sentence 2024/25, pursuant to Section 67 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.

This report sets out the activity taken across HMPPS for the financial year of 2024/25 to support those serving the IPP sentence in prison to work towards a safe release, and those in the community, towards the termination of their licence. The revised action plan sets out where we intend to go further, including increasing access to release on temporary licence, expanding the approved premises pilot to improve resettlement support, and enabling swift re-release following recall through risk assessed recall review when it is safe and appropriate to do so.

The latest published statistics show that as at 31 March 2025, there were 1,012 unreleased and 1,532 recalled IPP prisoners, compared to 1,180 unreleased and 1,616 recalled IPP prisoners on the corresponding date in 2024. As at 31 December 2024, there were 1,376 offenders serving IPP sentences in the community and 233 prisoners in hospital for treatment under the Mental Health Act 1983, compared to 3,018 offenders in the community and 241 prisoners in hospital on the corresponding date in 2023. In 2024, 602 recalled IPP prisoners were released, the highest number in a single year. A revised action plan is included as part of this annual report, which sets out planned HMPPS activity for 2025/26, including for the first time actions with measurable targets. The Government are determined to make further progress towards a safe and sustainable release for all those serving the IPP sentence and an eventual end to their sentence, but only in such a way that does not put the public and victims at risk.”

[HCWS844]

## **TRANSPORT**

### **High Speed 2**

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):** Today I am publishing this Government’s second update to Parliament on the progress of High Speed 2 (HS2).

#### *Overview*

In my previous report, I set out the difficult position that we inherited. HS2 has suffered from repeated cost increases and delays for too long. Although there have been external factors outside of the programme’s control, it has also been mismanaged. It is now clear that cost estimates were overly optimistic, and the programme moved to construction too quickly when designs were still immature. Delivery of the programme has not been sufficiently controlled, with a poorly performing supply chain that was insufficiently incentivised. There have been repeated changes in policy, scope and funding, and excessive costs incurred in achieving environmental and planning compliance. This means delayed benefits, and cost

increases incurred on HS2 have diverted billions of pounds from other vital transport priorities. This is unacceptable; the cycle of cost increases and delays must be broken, and I am determined to achieve this.

The project is now under new leadership, and I have tasked HS2 Ltd’s new chief executive officer, Mark Wild, with leading a comprehensive reset of the programme. He is making progress but this is a huge task, and we need to ensure he has a robust plan for delivering the programme to completion in a controlled way and at the lowest reasonable cost. To this end, the Department will work with him and HS2 Ltd over the coming months to advise me on the decisions needed to reset HS2, with the aim of providing an updated delivery baseline and funding envelope in 2026. Until this work is completed, this Government are not in a position to say with confidence how much HS2 will cost or when it will be delivered. That is a deeply unsatisfactory position, but it is necessary to complete the hard work we have embarked upon.

Effective ministerial oversight will be at the heart of this reset. The Rail Minister and I meet regularly with Mark Wild to assess progress, and in March I chaired a meeting of the ministerial task force with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, focusing on completing the programme in a controlled way. In June, I appointed Mike Brown as the new chair of the HS2 Ltd board to help us drive effective oversight and accountability on the programme. Both Mark Wild and Mike Brown have experience in major project recovery from Crossrail, which will be invaluable to this task. Mike’s immediate priorities will include supporting Mark and strengthening the challenge that the board provides to HS2 Ltd, to complement ministerial oversight.

The reset needs to be guided by the lessons learned from HS2’s delivery to date. In June, I published the “Major Transport Projects Governance and Assurance Review”, led by James Stewart. This report set out recommendations and actions that we are taking to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, helping to bring HS2 under control and to improve the delivery of future infrastructure projects.

The Government’s determination to now see this programme delivered as efficiently as possible is underpinned by the allocation of £25.3 billion (nominal prices) of funding over four years in the spending review, as set out in the financial annex.

Despite the evident challenges, HS2 Ltd, its suppliers and over 33,000 workers have maintained steady progress on construction, achieving major delivery milestones since my last report.

HS2 will foster economic growth in support of this Government’s mission. Research commissioned by HS2 Ltd has found that the prospective arrival of HS2 is already leading to redevelopment around new HS2 stations, demonstrating the early potential of this scheme to act as a catalyst for investment in businesses, new jobs and homes. The research estimates that the programme will deliver economic uplifts of £10 billion in the west midlands and £10 billion around Old Oak Common station in west London over the next 10 years.

Delivering a HS2 station at Euston remains a priority to realise the programme’s benefits. Following our commitment to funding the tunnelling required to bring HS2 to central London, we continue to work with key partners to develop affordable, integrated plans for the Euston station campus alongside significant levels of

local development including for housing and life sciences institutions. In parallel, we recently announced that a Euston delivery company will be established to oversee the development of the whole Euston campus, which will comprise the new HS2 station, an upgraded Network Rail station and enhancements to the London Underground station and local transport facilities, along with a significant level of development. We welcome the joint venture that the Crown Estate has announced with Lendlease, our development partner at Euston. As set out in the 10-year infrastructure strategy, we are exploring the use of private capital to design, build, finance and maintain the HS2 station.

Finally, beyond individual rail schemes, the rail network must be viewed as a whole. HS2 will play a key part in our ambition to improve rail for passengers, with its services and benefits extending far beyond London and Birmingham, including the capacity it releases for other regional and London services.

#### *Delivery update schedule and cost*

As I set out in the House of Commons on 18 June, based on Mark Wild's initial advice, I see no route by which trains can be running by 2033 as previously planned. Mark has committed to establishing and delivering to a new baseline in 2026. Once this work is complete, we will have an agreed estimate of how much the project will cost and when it will be delivered.

While the reset is ongoing, the Department is managing HS2 Ltd through strengthened in-year controls including challenging targets and metrics to deliver within annual budgets. To drive in-year delivery performance, an enhanced level of governance and assurance has also been implemented, reflecting the recommendations of James Stewart's review.

This year, HS2 Ltd has rescheduled some work to ensure it operates within its annual financial settlement.

#### *Expenditure*

To the end of April 2025, £40.5 billion (nominal prices) had been spent on the HS2 programme. This is provided in more detail in the financial annex, based on data provided by HS2 Ltd.

Spend to date information covers the period up to the end of April 2025. Unless stated otherwise, all figures are presented in nominal prices.

Following the recent conclusion of the spending review, the Department has reached a settlement with HM Treasury to fund the delivery of HS2, with £25.3 billion (nominal prices) covering financial years 2026-27 to 2029-30.

This funding will enable the reset of the HS2 programme under the leadership of Mark Wild, addressing long-standing delivery challenges. It will enable HS2 to move forward with a more secure delivery plan and will support progress at the lowest reasonable cost.

This settlement will support the continued delivery of phase 1, providing funding for works from Old Oak Common to Birmingham Curzon Street, and Handsacre Junction, Euston tunnels and approaches, and Euston station enabling works.

The HS2 programme is currently in a period of high spend, with much of it in active construction. The Department expects HS2 Ltd's expenditure to become noticeably lower over the next spending review period as delivery of the programme progresses.

The Department has updated its reporting of historic programme expenditure from 2019 prices to nominal prices. Once the programme reset is complete and a new baseline agreed, HS2 Ltd will also uplift the price base for programme reporting and for the revised cost estimate. The Department will consider how often the price base should be uplifted until the end of the programme.

#### *Construction progress*

Over 70% of HS2's 32 miles of bored and mined tunnels between London and Birmingham have now been completed.

Construction is progressing across the route, with active works under way on 44 viaducts, 126 bridges, 75 embankments, and 60 cuttings.

The Northolt tunnels, which will link Old Oak Common station to West Ruislip, were recently completed. Constructed in two phases—east and west—the tunnels were excavated using four tunnel boring machines (TBMs). TBMs Sushila and Caroline completed mining the western section in April 2025, while mining on the eastern section, led by TBMs Emily and Anne, was completed at the end of June 2025.

In May, the first Bromford tunnel broke through, connecting Warwickshire to Birmingham, marking the completion of the first section of the 3.5-mile tunnel.

In April, a 14,500-tonne box structure that will carry the high-speed line was successfully installed under the A46. The installation utilised innovative civil and structural engineering techniques, which involved constructing the box on land before pushing it across a guiding raft over 64 metres into place.

Over eight and a half million cubic metres of soil have been excavated, representing 73% of the total planned earthworks.

In February, the first viaduct in the Delta junction in north Warwickshire was completed, marking both a significant milestone in the construction of HS2 in the region, and the first use of an innovative giant cantilever system in the UK.

At Interchange station in Solihull, enabling works have commenced on site, including surveys and ground investigations to inform the detailed design.

The "systems and service" tender was launched in February 2025 for the automated people mover (APM) which will provide connectivity between Interchange station, the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham International station and Birmingham airport.

At Curzon Street station in central Birmingham, piling works continue to progress with only the western section remaining. For this financial year, the focus will be on completing the design before construction starts next year. The updated schedule 17 planning consents for the revised station designs were approved by Birmingham city council on 8 May 2025. Schedule 17 of the High Speed Rail (London—West Midlands) Act 2017 establishes a process for the approval of matters related to the design and construction of the railway. It requires HS2 Ltd to seek approval from the appropriate planning authority, in this case Birmingham city council. This approval shall allow HS2 Ltd to construct the station with improvements to the visuals of the station and refinements to the long-term maintenance requirements.

At Old Oak Common station in west London, the tunnel boring machines are being assembled with preparations currently under way to enable their launch towards Euston in spring 2026.

In November 2024, we reached a key milestone with the award of the rail systems contracts worth around £3 billion in current prices. The contracts commenced in February 2025, but work on site will not start until main works civils are largely complete. Procurement of the Washwood Heath Depot and the National Integrated Control Centre continues.

Lessons from the contracting failures of HS2's main works programme have been firmly embedded in the systems contracts. The design of rail systems is more advanced at this stage than it was for main works civils, giving better cost certainty. HS2 Ltd has established an alliance with stronger incentives to ensure suppliers share risk, allowing us to manage cost better and drive performance. The contracts require fewer consents to be granted as well.

Mobilisation on the rail systems contract has started and timelines are being developed in line with the wider programme challenges noted elsewhere in this report. There will be a formal review at the end of the design stage to make sure all parties are ready to start work on site, again learning from main works civils.

#### *Euston*

The Department continues to work with key partners to develop affordable, integrated plans for the Euston station campus. In parallel, enabling works are continuing to ready the HS2 station site for the main construction programme.

In terms of the delivery model, the Government announced in their 10-year infrastructure strategy that a Euston delivery company will be established to oversee the development of the whole Euston campus. The new delivery model will involve a changed role for HS2 Ltd but will go much broader than that to address historical challenges at the site. HS2 Ltd will remain a key partner, continuing to carry out important work at Euston.

The Department also continues work with partners to examine available delivery and private finance options that will realise the great regeneration potential of the Euston area alongside the improvement of transport links.

Specifically, the Department is exploring options for various elements of the programme to be funded through a combination of private finance, development receipts, and potential local contributions such as tax increment financing, with a degree of residual public funding. The Department has been engaging closely with HM Treasury and the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority as it continues to develop its plans, and has appointed specialist advisers to ensure it has access to expert support.

As we progress our plans to reinstate delivery, we are embedding the recommendations of James Stewart's review through the new delivery model and working closely with partners to manage risks sensibly and collectively. We will continue to work with key partners with the aim of restarting design later this year. No final decisions have been made regarding the preferred mechanisms to secure funding and finance, including private finance options; further details will be shared in due course.

#### *Legal and planning challenges*

The delivery of HS2 has continued during this period to be the subject of both legal and planning challenges, which have added significant cost, uncertainty, and potential for delay. It is right that there are checks and balances embedded in our legal and planning systems to ensure local interests are considered when national projects are implemented. There is, however, the risk that these rights are used to frustrate the delivery of consented projects, with legal challenges and planning powers used in a way that drives up costs to both local and national taxpayers, rather than protecting local interests.

The HS2 planning and environmental regime set out in the High Speed Rail (London—West Midlands) Act 2017 has been subject to multiple attempts at legal challenge from other public bodies, most recently in relation to the extension of the Bromford tunnel in north Warwickshire—with a judgment delivered in the project's favour. Since Royal Assent for the Act, there have been nine legal challenges brought by other public bodies. In almost all these cases, the courts have ultimately found in the project's favour, but not in time to avoid significant uncertainty, costly delays, or additional legal costs for both parties—the majority of which has unfortunately had to be borne by local taxpayers.

In the same time period, there have also been 25 costly and time-consuming appeals relating to the HS2 planning regime. Almost all these appeals have ultimately been determined in HS2's favour. The Government continue to monitor this issue closely, and will consider further interventions where appropriate, alongside their wider work on planning reform.

#### *Fraud investigation*

We are aware of the claims made in relation to a labour supplier on part of the route. The allegations concern inflated invoices and improper PAYE charges, potentially defrauding taxpayers. HS2 Ltd treats all whistleblower allegations seriously and an investigation was launched earlier this year into these allegations. Furthermore, HS2 Ltd has formally reported the allegations to HMRC, and HS2 Ltd's contractor Balfour Beatty VINCI has implemented additional monitoring and controls.

#### *Benefits housing*

Despite all the challenges, HS2 represents a significant plank of the Government's plan for change, our growth and housing missions, and our ambition to deliver infrastructure that works for the whole country.

HS2 provides an unparalleled opportunity to build new homes, create jobs and attract investment. The redevelopment of land around the new HS2 stations will enable the ideal conditions for business, new jobs and homes and will act as a catalyst for further investment and wider growth.

In the west midlands, HS2 is estimated to support directly 4,000 new homes around Curzon Street station and 3,000 new homes around Interchange station as part of the Arden Cross development in Solihull. Additionally, research from a February 2024 report suggests that HS2 will add £10 billion to the west midlands economy over the next 10 years and help generate over 41,000 additional homes.

In west London, local partners estimate that HS2 will, in the long term, support the delivery of up to 25,500 new homes around Old Oak Common station, including 9,000 new homes as part of the first phase of



development at Old Oak West. Separate research from March 2025 estimates that HS2 will add £10 billion to the west London economy over the next 10 years and support 22,000 additional homes. Around Euston in central London, HS2 will support the delivery of thousands of new homes and the development of a new “knowledge quarter”.

There could also be new housing opportunities along the west coast main line between London and the west midlands, at places that gain improved local services as a result of network capacity released by HS2. Decisions have not yet been made by the Government on where these additional services will run.

#### *Jobs and skills*

In addition to long-term ambitions, HS2 is contributing to economic growth now. The programme is currently supporting over 33,000 jobs and over 3,400 UK businesses in the supply chain across the country, including over 2,500 small and medium-sized enterprises.

HS2 is also helping to break down barriers to opportunity and training a skilled workforce for the UK’s wider rail and construction industries. The programme is attracting new and diverse people to the industry. Having created over 1,800 apprenticeships and supported over 5,000 previously unemployed people back into work on the project since 2017, the programme is helping to bridge the skills gap and tackle unemployment along the HS2 construction corridor. By drawing on and developing world-class skills, HS2 will leave a positive skills legacy that will develop and strengthen the country’s construction workforce for the years to come.

#### *Environment*

Updated designs for ecological mitigation over the past six months have seen further progress made on the target to achieve no net loss to biodiversity by the end of the construction programme. At the end of 2024-25, the position for area-based habitats has improved while designs for hedgerows and watercourse habitats remained on track to deliver a net gain in biodiversity.

HS2 Ltd is also seeking to reduce the whole-life carbon emissions associated with construction of HS2 by 50%, aiming to maximise productivity and cost-saving measures to achieve this goal. At the end of 2024-25, the programme had so far achieved a 33.8% reduction in carbon against that 50% target.

#### *Community impacts, land and property: appointment of a new independent commissioner*

I am pleased to announce the appointment of Robert Herga as the Independent High Speed Rail Residents’ and Construction Commissioner, following an open competition.

The commissioner is responsible for holding HS2 Ltd and the Government accountable to their commitments to treat those people directly affected by the HS2 scheme with sensitivity and respect. The commissioner also makes themselves available to intervene in unresolved land and property disputes, as an objective and independent voice, focusing on timely settlement to save costs on both sides. This new role combines the previous roles of HS2 Construction Commissioner and HS2 Residents’ Commissioner.

#### *Community engagement performance*

HS2 Ltd received 1,209 complaints during 2024-25, an increase of 102 when compared to the previous year. At this stage of the programme, the vast majority of

complaints are construction-related, with over half about traffic and transport impacts and about a third related to noise and vibration impacts. Where communities have complaints, HS2 Ltd seeks to resolve issues quickly. Over the last financial year, HS2 Ltd resolved 100% of urgent complaints within two working days and resolved 96% of all other complaints within 20 working days or less.

#### *Local funds*

The HS2 project is mitigating some of the impacts of construction on local places through the community and environment fund and the business and local economy fund.

As at June 2025, over £19 million has been channelled through these funds towards 353 local community projects, helping to ensure a positive legacy for communities most affected by construction.

#### *Land and property on the former phase 2b eastern leg*

I am today formally lifting the safeguarding directions for the former phase 2b eastern leg (between the west midlands and Leeds), removing the uncertainty that has affected many people along the former route. Safeguarding along the former phase 2b western leg (between Crewe and Manchester) is not being changed as part of this, and an update on future plans for safeguarding on this section will be provided in due course alongside broader plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail.

One small area to the south of the existing station in central Leeds, previously required for the new HS2 station, will remain safeguarded to allow for potential enhancements to the existing station, including for onward travel.

I have also today closed the rural support zone, express purchase, rent back, and the need to sell property schemes along the former phase 2b eastern leg. Existing applications will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Removing safeguarding along the majority of the former HS2 phase 2b eastern leg means we are now able to initiate a programme to dispose of over 550 properties on the former eastern leg that are no longer required. We expect disposals on the open market to begin in 2026. Before then, former owners whose property was acquired under statutory blight will have the opportunity to reacquire their former property at the current market value.

We will dispose of land and property in a sensible and sensitive way, ensuring value for money for the taxpayer and avoiding disruption to local property markets.

I have deposited the safeguarding directions and relevant documents in the Libraries of both Houses.

#### *Programme governance programme reset*

Following Mark Wild’s arrival as new HS2 Ltd CEO in December 2024, I commissioned him to set out a plan to deliver the remaining HS2 infrastructure in a safe, controlled and efficient manner and bring the new railway into operational use, for the lowest reasonable cost to the taxpayer. Mark gave me his initial diagnosis at the end of March, and I expect him to advise me further over the coming months.

His initial assessment summarises the currently uncontrolled state of the programme and the significant challenge of achieving a programme reset that minimises delays and stops further cost increases. He also confirmed his view that based on the current scope and delivery

strategy, it is not possible to deliver HS2's opening stage between Old Oak Common and Birmingham Curzon Street within the stated range of 2029-2033, and that the funding envelope set by the previous Government will not be sufficient. If interventions are not enacted, costs will rise and delivery will be further delayed. As such, it is now the work of Mark and his team to put in place measures to bring the railway into service as quickly and cost-effectively as possible, with Government support and constructive challenge. As part of his work, Mark will advise me on updated estimates to give the Government and taxpayers certainty over HS2's costs and schedule—breaking the cycle of cost increases and overruns.

The HS2 reset will involve:

- Setting a new realistic cost and schedule baseline within which we can complete the programme;

- Resetting the commercial relationship with HS2's principal civil works suppliers to drive increased productivity and control cost;

- Making sure HS2 Ltd has the right skills and capabilities to deliver the remaining work, including improvements to setup, operating model, leadership, culture, effectiveness and capabilities; and

- Improving how the Department and wider Government sponsors the delivery of HS2, drawing on the findings and recommendations from James Stewart's independent review and the Department's own work on lessons.

The scale and complexity of resetting the programme is a major challenge. Mark Wild carried out a similar process as the CEO of Crossrail, putting the project back on track and delivering a successful opening of the Elizabeth line in 2022. It is important we take this opportunity to get it right, which is why the reset will take time and involve close working between HS2 Ltd, DfT and the rest of the Government. The ambition is for an updated and assured full baseline to measure performance in 2026.

In parallel, the Department plans to publish an updated programme business case in 2026, once agreed cost and schedule estimates are available.

#### *Oversight*

On 18 March 2025, I chaired a meeting of the reconvened ministerial task force for HS2. I was joined by the Rail Minister, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Mark Wild and other senior leaders from HS2 Ltd and across the Government to scrutinise initial plans on resetting the programme and delivering HS2 at the lowest reasonable cost.

On 31 March 2025, Sir Jon Thompson stepped down as HS2 Ltd chair. On 18 June, I was pleased to announce Mike Brown as the new chair of HS2 Ltd. Mike Brown brings decades of experience in delivering major transport projects as former TfL Commissioner, and member of the team that turned Crossrail into the Elizabeth line. He will lead the board and work with Mark Wild on the urgent priority to reset the project.

It is clear from Mark Wild's assessment that HS2 Ltd currently falls far short of having the capability and culture needed to deliver the programme effectively. Mike Brown has been tasked with strengthening the HS2 Ltd board to more effectively support and challenge Mark Wild in conducting the reset of HS2 and the safe delivery of phase 1 at the lowest reasonable cost. To support strengthened board oversight, a recruitment exercise has been launched to appoint new non-executive directors to bolster board capability and capacity.

I would like to thank Elaine Holt for leading the board in her capacity as deputy chair over the period from 1 April to 13 July.

We have also enacted temporary arrangements which establish additional control measures and monitoring to ensure the programme is managed properly. This will bridge the period leading to the formal reset of the programme.

#### *Capturing, applying and sharing lessons*

Following my last report, the major transport projects governance and assurance review, led by James Stewart, has concluded. It has provided important lessons that can be applied to HS2, the Department's other capital projects and infrastructure schemes across the Government.

Most major programmes experience difficulties in their delivery. However, the failures seen on HS2 are extreme with costs increasing continuously over many years and very rapidly since the start of construction. There is no single explanation for these failings—they span across its lifecycle from conception through to delivery and from governmental sponsorship, through planning and consenting, to how the Government have orchestrated their delivery between HS2 Ltd and the construction supply chain.

We have worked closely with HM Treasury and the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) to identify lessons from the HS2 programme.

The Department is applying the lessons from James Stewart's and other reviews, including embedding the lessons into the HS2 programme reset plan and in developing and delivering other transport and wider infrastructure projects.

#### *High ambition at inception*

Early decisions resulted in an exceptionally high-specification and high-speed railway, which drove higher costs and meant that tried and tested approaches could not be relied upon. In future programmes, opportunities for reducing cost based on the minimum acceptable design should be explored and use of bespoke or cutting-edge specifications should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

#### *Scope changes*

Since HS2's inception, the scope of the programme has been progressively reduced. Scope reductions have been in part a result of cost increases but have added to delivery challenges and left the residual scheme overspecified in relation to the benefits it will deliver.

To address both these lessons, the Department has contributed to the Office for Value for Money's study into the governance and budgeting arrangements for "mega projects" to make sure that lessons from HS2 are applied to the wider Government's approach to infrastructure delivery.

#### *Governance*

Governance has evolved through the lifetime of the project and in the light of pressures; however, it has not been sufficiently effective in identifying and managing the scale of challenges, including in relation to cost management and capability. We have implemented a series of changes in the governance of the programme to respond to James Stewart's recommendations. We held the first shareholder board on 28 May, which provided strategic-level oversight of the programme

from the permanent secretary, Mark Wild, HS2 Ltd special directors, the senior responsible officer, interim HS2 Ltd chair and senior DfT and HMT officials. A renewed programme and performance board now meets monthly to focus on the effective delivery of phase 1 (including Euston) against agreed schedule, cost and scope.

#### *Cost estimation*

Since the inception of the project, internal and external experts have comprehensively scrutinised cost estimates. However, despite this, estimates have consistently proven to be wrong.

Last year, HS2 Ltd and departmental officials jointly concluded a comprehensive external review of the current approach to cost estimation and programme control. HS2 Ltd has been implementing an action plan to strengthen these vital areas of project control. A priority of the HS2 reset is setting a new, realistic and assured baseline of cost and schedule within which we can complete the programme. In addition, our progress to date means that evidence based on past experience, rather than forecast estimates, can be utilised to inform current and future delivery of the programme, including ongoing progress on civils delivery and the recent letting of the systems contracts.

To validate this new estimate there is also work under way to verify the civils work delivered to date, and its cost. This will allow the programme to validate true delivery costs against the original estimates. This information, combined with continued investment in collating benchmarking data from international comparators, will give us a more reliable “should cost” model for the remainder of the programme. This “should cost” model will enable a more accurate assessment of the reasonableness of assumptions in the cost estimate.

We have learnt that realistic ranges, rather than single target costs, should be set at the early stage of projects. Ranges should only narrow when there is sufficient certainty from external data such as contract prices. We will adopt an approach that uses robustly verified or benchmarked cost data, with ranges and sensitivity analysis, when taking future programme investment decisions. HS2 will lead the way in ensuring that cost analysis is rigorously incorporated into the design of later procurements and decisions. In parallel, the Government have made significant improvements in the analysis of investment benefits in recent years.

#### *Challenges of building large-scale infrastructure*

Meeting environmental standards and planning requirements has presented a significant challenge to the delivery of the project and has added to cost. It is now clear that the early stages of HS2 scheme development underestimated the planning and regulatory challenges of designing and building a new high-speed railway while meeting the expectations of local planning and highway authorities, and complying with the latest safety, security and environmental standards. The granting of consents has been subject to routine challenge, and the need for expensive mitigations to meet legal obligations (such as the bat mitigation structure at Sheephouse Wood in Buckinghamshire) have increased the cost of delivering the railway.

The Government have already implementing far-reaching reforms to ensure economic infrastructure can be delivered more efficiently. To strike a better balance between

avoiding costs and delays on agreed schemes while allowing local scrutiny, Ministers will be able to intervene more actively in the process within the existing planning framework, utilising the reforms in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill once enacted, as well as considering whether further alterations to the HS2 planning framework could bring benefits for efficient infrastructure delivery, and to taxpayers more generally.

#### *Capability challenges*

Costs have increased in part due to insufficient capability in HS2 Ltd and the supply chain in delivering a project of this scale. There has been insufficient focus on the client relationship, too many of HS2's resources were allocated to the wrong place and contract management and project control were not effective. This led to uncontrolled costs and extremely poor productivity and performance from the supply chain. We will be working with Mark Wild and the board of HS2 Ltd to address the areas where challenges have been identified, such as the need for Mark Wild to put in place a high-calibre and enduring leadership team and to reshape the organisation to deliver efficiently. This will be a priority in the programme reset.

#### *Ineffective incentives*

HS2 Ltd's current commercial contracting strategy has not proved effective at controlling costs and fairly attributing responsibility for risks. The contract incentives have focused on providing positive incentives against target costs; however, as costs escalated and changes arose, the incentivised cost targets were exceeded, leading to no positive incentive to deliver at lower cost. Some risks which should have been borne by suppliers have also been transferred to taxpayers. In the future we need incentives and risk allocation that deliver for taxpayers as well as supplier shareholders. This work is being embedded through our engagement across the Government, to ensure major infrastructure projects are based on effective commercial contracts and incentives going forward.

#### *Financial annex*

The information on HS2's overall spend to date and budget is now being provided in nominal (cash) terms following a commitment made by the Department to the Public Accounts Committee to express the costs of the programme in a more up-to-date price base and better capture the inflation incurred since 2019. The Government will provide further details on the 2025-to-2026 position in cash terms as part of the standard main estimates report to Parliament.

#### *Historic and forecast expenditure [1] [2] [3]*

*Nominal prices, including land and property.*

| Phase                     | Overall spend to date (£ billion) | 2025 to 2026 budget (£ billion) | 2025 to 2026 forecast (£ billion) | 2025 to 2026 variance (£ billion) |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Phase 1 total             | 37.9                              | 7.1                             | 7.1                               | 0.0                               |
| Civils                    | 26.4                              | 5.4                             | 5.4                               | 0.0                               |
| Stations                  | 2.3                               | 0.6                             | 0.6                               | 0.0                               |
| Systems                   | 2.0                               | 0.3                             | 0.3                               | 0.0                               |
| Phase 1 indirects         | 3.5                               | 0.4                             | 0.4                               | 0.0                               |
| Land and property phase 1 | 3.6                               | 0.3                             | 0.3                               | 0.0                               |



|                |      |     |     |     |
|----------------|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Former phase 2 | 2.6  | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Overall total  | 40.5 | 7.2 | 7.2 | 0.0 |

Notes for the table:

- [1] The figures set out in the table have been rounded to aid legibility. Due to this, they do not always tally.
- [2] Spend to date for phase 1 includes a £0.6 billion liability (provision) representing the Department’s obligation to purchase land and property.
- [3] To enable comparison with the figures presented in the December 2024 parliamentary report which were in 2019 prices, the equivalent total overall spends to date on phase 1 and on former phase 2 in 2019 prices are £33.11 billion and £2.5 billion respectively, and the 2025 to 2026 budgets for phase 1 and for former phase 2 in 2019 prices are £5.4 billion and £0.1 billion respectively.

*HS2 spending review settlement*  
*Nominal prices*

| Total spending review period (2026 to 2030) (£ billion) |      |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Settlement                                              | 25.3 |

[HCWS852]

**Thames Gateway Bridge: Safeguarding Direction**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** Today I am informing the House of my decision to lift the safeguarding direction for the Thames gateway bridge. This reflects the Government’s commitment to ensuring that our transport and infrastructure supports housing delivery and drives growth as part of the plan for change.

Safeguarding is an important planning tool used to protect land for future transport schemes from conflicting development. In this case, the safeguarding direction for the Thames gateway bridge dates back to 1940, when the area’s transport needs were very different. It was intended to protect land for a road crossing that has not been delivered. Since then, London’s transport priorities have evolved, and over the decades, we have seen major investments in London’s river crossings—most notably the Dartford crossing and, recently, the Silvertown tunnel. The safeguarding directions therefore no longer align with the direction of transport policy or the evolving needs of this part of London.

The continued safeguarding of this land has been an obstacle to much-needed development, and I am therefore lifting these directions. The Government are keen to deliver new homes and unlock economic opportunity, and we are taking steps to remove unnecessary barriers to progress.

[HCWS836]

**c2c Train Services: Public Ownership**

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):** I can confirm to the House that this Sunday, 20 July, the Government will take another step towards a unified railway overseen by Great British Railways, as c2c’s services become the second to transfer into public ownership under new legislation. From Sunday, operations will be run by a new public sector operator: c2c Railway Ltd, a subsidiary of the public corporation, DfT Operator Ltd.

This means that from this Sunday, there will be six public sector operators running services which were previously franchised. Greater Anglia’s services will be next to transfer on 12 October 2025.

This weekend therefore marks another significant step in our plans to meet our manifesto commitment to tackle the current fragmented network and create a more efficient, reliable railway with passengers at its heart. Over the next two and a half years, we will be transferring all passenger services currently delivered under contract with the Department into public ownership. This is a vital step that will allow us to consolidate Network Rail, DfTO and 14 train operators into one organisation, GBR.

The Public Ownership Act, passed last year, has been the first step in our plans to reform the railways. I expect to introduce the railways Bill this parliamentary Session. The Bill will enable the establishment of GBR as a new directing mind for the railways, unifying track and train under a single public body to deliver better services for passengers and freight customers, and better value for money for taxpayers.

Instead of having to navigate 14 separate train operators, passengers will once again simply be able to use “the railway”. They will travel on GBR trains, running on GBR tracks, and working to a GBR timetable. That will mean fewer delays, a better overall experience, and a timetable that better serves their needs.

[HCWS854]

**WORK AND PENSIONS**

**Office for Nuclear Regulation:  
2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western):** Later today I will lay before this House the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) annual report and accounts 2024-25. This document will also be published on the ONR website.

I can confirm, in accordance with schedule 7, section 25(3) of the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published document on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS840]

# Petitions

*Thursday 17 July 2025*

## OBSERVATIONS

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

#### Fire engine in Nuneaton fire station

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Nuneaton,*

Declares that Nuneaton fire station retains two engines and crews.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that Nuneaton fire station retains two engines and crews.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Jodie Gosling, Official Report, 1 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 3P.*]

[P003088]

*Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):*

While the Government are committed to ensuring that fire and rescue services have the resources they need to carry out their important work, individual fire and rescue authorities and their fire and rescue services are responsible for decisions concerning the deployment of resources in accordance with local needs and community risk management plans.

It is also the responsibility of each fire and rescue authority and their fire and rescue service to determine appropriate targets for local response times based on their analysis of risk and local circumstances.

This is a local operational issue and a matter for Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service and Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority.

#### Harrogate spring water money for Harrogate

*The petition of residents of Harrogate,*

Declares that the Harrogate Springs Water Levy of 0.5% of profits should be returned for the benefit of the people of Harrogate through the newly created Harrogate Town Council.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons calls on North Yorkshire Council to return the money for the use of the citizens of Harrogate as was always intended.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Tom Gordon, Official Report, 7 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 767.*]

[P003089]

*Observations from The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):*

As you will appreciate, local authorities are independent of central Government. Ministers and central Government do not have a remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities, except where specific provision has been made in an Act of Parliament. As this is a local matter, it would not be appropriate for central Government to intervene.

I hope that you can have a constructive dialogue with North Yorkshire council, and more broadly with the York and North Yorkshire Mayor, David Skaith, in respect of the support and investment into Harrogate, including the newly established Harrogate town council.







# ORAL ANSWERS

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