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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 1 September 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 772

TWENTY FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 1 September 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Unemployment Trends

1. **Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): What assessment she has made of trends in the level of unemployment. [905391]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): The unemployment rate is 4.7%—well below the historic high of 11.9% in 1984—but no one should ever be complacent about unemployment, especially considering the significant jump in economic inactivity under the Tories. That is why I am pleased to tell the House that employment is up by 725,000, to 75.3%, since July 2024 and inactivity is down by more than the rise in unemployment—a reduction of 400,000.

Alison Griffiths: On the House of Commons dashboard, the data for my constituency shows that universal credit claims increased dramatically by 20% in just one month. Claimants increased by over 2,000—from 10,344 to 12,415—from May to June this year. Given this recent increase in economic inactivity, what evidence does the Minister have that the Government's employment support programmes are successfully moving people from out-of-work benefits into sustained employment?

Alison McGovern: The Conservative Government unified in-work and out-of-work benefits, so universal credit is also an in-work benefit. As I mentioned some moments ago, the legacy of the Tories on economic inactivity is now seeing a welcome reversal, with economic inactivity down by 400,000.

Poverty Reduction

5. **Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce the number of children in poverty in Congleton constituency. [905395]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): As my hon. Friend knows well, improved employment is at the heart of our approach to child poverty, and that is why reductions in economic inactivity and improvements in employment will be part of our child poverty strategy that is to be published very soon.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does the Minister accept that the Government's increase in national insurance contributions has had a negative impact on employment in communities such as ours? Cumbria Tourism assesses that 37% of its businesses have cut staff as a consequence and 33% are freezing recruitment. Is it possible that the Government will get less from this tax rise than they expect, and that in doing this they are doing grave harm to the Cumbrian tourism economy and many other parts of our economy?

Alison McGovern: I speak to many businesses, and since coming into office, the Secretary of State and I have totally changed our approach with employers. That new approach includes a partnership with UK Hospitality, providing specific employment support to get into hospitality, and a hospitality passport so that people can evidence their qualifications, which we and UK Hospitality believe can help those people who really need a chance in life to get a good start in the hospitality sector.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): After visiting businesses in Newport East this summer, I know that there is a high demand for companies—including Thames Valley Construction, which I visited—to train more

construction workers locally, and I was pleased to see the Government make the announcement in the summer on training 40,000 more people. Can Ministers tell me what conversations they are having with the Welsh Government on working together to do this?

Alison McGovern: We will not build the much-needed 1.5 million homes without bringing people into the construction sector. That is why, as part of our new approach for employers, we have partnered with the construction sector and set up specific schemes with them. We are also talking directly across Whitehall with other Government Departments and with the sector about moving people into great jobs in construction.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is good to see you back after the summer recess.

The hon. Lady can fling around the stats all she likes, but the facts are clear and bleak. Under her watch, youth unemployment has gone up; nearly a million young people, and rising, are not in work or education, including over 40,000 more young women. A generation of brilliant young people are going on to benefits, rather than into work. The Government's jobs tax and their unemployment rights Bill were guaranteed to reduce opportunities for young people. We have had the winter fuel U-turn and the welfare U-turn; why not a U-turn to help young people?

Alison McGovern: The damage was done to the coming generation under the Tories. We failed the pandemic generation, who put a shift in—they stayed at home and gave up their social lives to save older loved ones. I could talk at length about our youth guarantee, our trailblazers and the work we are doing to expand youth hubs, but actually, it sticks in my craw to hear the Conservatives, who failed this generation, harp on about it from that Dispatch Box.

Supporting Young People into Training: Hexham

2. **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support young people into training in Hexham constituency. [905392]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): This Labour Government believe that every young person should be able to fulfil their potential. Unlike Conservative Members, we will not stand by while almost 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training. Our Get Britain Working trailblazer in the north-east is already helping young and neurodivergent people with supported work and training placements, including in Hexham. The local jobcentre is also working with Newcastle United Foundation to help young people build their confidence and develop their skills so that they and our country can look forward to a brighter future.

Joe Morris: For too long, previous Governments did not take into account the realities of life in communities across my constituency, which is incredibly sparsely populated and quite rural. The youth guarantee can and will make a considerable difference in communities

all across it, from the Tyne Valley all the way out to the north Tyne and into Callerton and Throckley, too. Will the Secretary of State work with me to ensure that we continue to support young people in all those different, disparate communities to access the skills and opportunities they deserve?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is right that people have different needs in different parts of the country. We need to tailor employment support to the needs of individuals, so alongside measures like our youth guarantee, we are overhauling our jobcentres to provide that more personalised support and introducing measures such as mobile jobcentres to provide better help in rural areas.

NEETs: Barrow and Furness

3. **Michelle Scrogg** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in Barrow and Furness constituency. [905393]

Alison McGovern: Given the significant investment, the DWP has partnered with BAE and the nuclear sector to promote a variety of career pathways, including roles across its supply chains. We are also working within BAE's new "The Bridge" hub in Barrow—a collaborative space offering employment advice and support from BAE Systems and a range of local employers and organisations to connect talent with locally based jobs. Further, in Barrow, our youth hub is run in partnership with Brathay Trust and Project John, supporting young people holistically to meet employers and develop their talents.

Michelle Scrogg: I have been impressed by the work being done in Drop Zone in my constituency. It runs a variety of projects for young people, including specialised education for those with additional needs, mental health support, and support for the transition back into education, employment and training. But young people in Barrow and Furness still face difficult challenges from a long legacy of underfunding. The youth trailblazer scheme is already making a difference in some constituencies after just a few months. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can tailor the scheme to specifically target young people in Barrow and Furness?

Alison McGovern: Barrow has unique circumstances, challenges and opportunities, and it is important that all parts of the Government address those unique opportunities and challenges in Barrow. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to further discuss what we are already doing and what more we can go on to do to ensure that young people in Barrow have the best possible chance in life.

Health and Disability Benefits: Spending Estimate

4. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What estimate she has made of the level of spending on health and disability benefits by 2030. [905394]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast in March that incapacity and disability benefits

spending would be £90.7 billion in 2029-30. That figure will be updated at the Budget. Better employment support and removing perverse work incentives in universal credit are the key to getting more people into work.

John Lamont: Just two months ago, the Secretary of State was left humiliated after being forced to significantly water down her botched welfare Bill. If the Government had pressed ahead with the Bill as originally drafted, how much less would taxpayers be spending on benefits by 2030?

Sir Stephen Timms: As I have said, the OBR will update its forecast at the time of the Budget. We inherited a terrible situation, with record numbers of economically inactive people. Economic inactivity is down since the election, and employment is up. Those developments have been encouraging, but our reforms will go much further. The £3.8 billion that we are investing in employment support for people out of work on health and disability grounds—the biggest package ever—will be key.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that we must invest in community mental health services if we are to reduce spending on mental health disability?

Sir Stephen Timms: I very much welcome the NHS 10-year plan published by our right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, which gives a new priority and commitment to mental health support. I agree with my hon. Friend that that is an important part of tackling the problems that we need to resolve.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is good to see the Minister back after the break, but I am sorry to hear that there are still no plans to reduce spending on personal independence payments. He has said that he is collaborating with people who would not be working with him on his review if there were to be any reductions in the levels of benefit or eligibility. Given that veto on cuts to PIP, I implore him again to consider the benefits to which PIP is a gateway, such as Motability, disability premiums, council tax discounts and blue badges. Will he promise at least that those entitlements could come down?

Sir Stephen Timms: We have made it clear that we will co-produce our review of the PIP assessment with disabled people and representatives of disability organisations. The review will cover the assessment for the mobility component, which leads on to the Motability scheme, and other entitlements to which PIP is a gateway.

Danny Kruger: But with no possibility of any of those entitlements coming down or any of the spending being reduced? We have 1.25 million foreign nationals claiming universal credit, most of whom are not in employment. I hope that the Minister does not plan to co-produce his plans with foreign nationals—although, knowing Labour lawyers, I expect they will say that the European convention on human rights demands that they do just that. Does he think that subsidising more and more foreign nationals is what the British social security system is for? If not, will he restrict sickness benefits to British nationals only, as we have argued for?

Sir Stephen Timms: It is crucial that we have a fair system. We are reviewing universal credit at the moment, considering problems such as the five-week wait that was inserted when universal credit was introduced and changes to ensure that universal credit effectively tackles poverty and does the job that we need it to do. Fairness will be at the heart of the system.

NEETs: Croydon East

6. **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in Croydon East constituency. [905396]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): In Croydon East, young people aged 18 to 21 will be helped by the youth guarantee trailblazer being delivered by the Greater London Authority. It will strengthen early identification and outreach to engage young Londoners who are not, or risk not being, in employment, education or training, by linking them to enhanced support, employment and education opportunities and the essential services that they need. I am glad that the DWP will continue to support communities in Croydon East by hosting an information stall at my hon. Friend's upcoming advice fair in New Addington.

Natasha Irons: Croydon is London's youngest borough. Given that 6.6% of people aged 16 to 24 in my Croydon East constituency claim out-of-work benefits, supporting young people into work, and breaking down barriers to opportunity, is vital. Will the Minister give a little more detail about the additional funding for the London youth guarantee trailblazers, and will she outline how that will help Croydon's young people into work? I look forward to having the DWP with us in New Addington.

Alison McGovern: I will pass on my hon. Friend's comments to my colleagues in Croydon, who are keen to work with her and the other MPs there. In the summer, the Secretary of State announced further funding of £45 million for our eight youth guarantee trailblazers. That will ensure that in London, as in the rest of the country, our young people get the choices and chances that they deserve.

Welfare Fraud

7. **John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What steps she is taking to help tackle fraud in the welfare system. [905397]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The Government have committed to significant measures to counter welfare fraud, error and debt. This is the biggest package of such measures in recent history, and the Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that it will deliver an additional £9.6 billion of savings over the next five years. The package is underpinned by our Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which contains a range of new powers to enable us to keep pace with offenders who exploit the social security system.

John Cooper: I think we can all agree that fraud strikes at the heart of the system, kicking away its underpinnings. I hope that the Government will undertake a zero-tolerance approach, unlike in Scotland, where we

recently heard that £36 million of benefit money paid out in error is now not to be recovered. Does the Minister agree that that is deeply unfair to taxpayers?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to encroach on what are legitimately policy questions for the Scottish Government. The policy of this Government is clear and set out in the Bill, but I am grateful to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice for continuing to work with me constructively to make the Bill as workable as possible, with alignment where possible, such that if we end up diverging we are still able to ensure that this Parliament does everything it can, and the Scottish Government do everything they choose to do, to bear down on fraud and error.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Does the Minister share my surprise that a Member of the party responsible for more than a decade of rising poverty, record benefit delays, and billions lost to fraud and error is now suddenly concerned about tackling that? Across the House, while we recognise the need to tackle fraud in our welfare system, we should also recognise the huge issue with tax avoidance and evasion—as recently highlighted by the Public Accounts Committee—which requires significant attention.

Andrew Western: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. This Government are determined to bear down on tax evasion with 5,000 additional investigators. Wherever we see people ripping off the public purse, whether that is defrauding the Department for Work and Pensions or abusing the tax system, we are determined to bear down on them, and that is what we will do.

PIP Application Process

8. **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the personal independence payment application process. [905398]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): The PIP application process is outdated and can be very difficult to navigate. The health transformation programme will deliver radical improvements and much better efficiency.

Anna Sabine: In my constituency, I was contacted by a woman who had suffered two strokes, resulting in permanent right-side paralysis and ongoing mobility difficulties. Despite her condition being permanent, she has had to undergo reassessment for PIP and has appealed for it to be reinstated. I welcome the Government changing the reassessment requirement for people with long-term health conditions. Will the Minister clarify what steps the Government are taking to reduce the stress and difficulty of the PIP application process for people with those serious health conditions?

Sir Stephen Timms: The health transformation programme that I mentioned will allow the introduction of a modern digital service, which is certainly not how the existing arrangements could be characterised. It is a big job—the programme will run until 2029—but the outcome from it will be a process that is simpler and

easier to understand, which I hope will reduce the stress to which the hon. Member has rightly drawn attention, with shorter decision times.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): Over the summer, I have been doing a deep dive into children with special educational needs and disabilities, not least the transition points between education and work. As part of the Timms review—the Minister's own review—will he ensure that that interface is looked at, so that there is a smooth transition for young people, as opposed to the cliff edges that many of them face when making the transition into work?

Sir Stephen Timms: The review will look specifically at the PIP assessment, but one proposal in our Green Paper published earlier this year was increasing the age of transition from DLA to PIP from 16 to 18. I think that that change could assist with the concern expressed by my hon. Friend. We are looking at the consultation responses that we have received.

Poverty Reduction

9. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on reducing poverty. [905399]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): We are determined to drive down child poverty in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and right across Scotland and the rest of the UK. Our child poverty strategy will look at every lever at our disposal to drive up family incomes, to drive down family costs and to give every child the best start in life. I discuss such issues regularly with the Chancellor and Ministers across Government, because we will leave no stone unturned to ensure that every child can fulfil their potential—they deserve it and our country needs it.

Graham Leadbitter: Two million pensioners in the UK are in poverty, and the British state pension is among the worst in north-west Europe. During the independence referendum, Better Together claimed that our pensions are more affordable when Scotland is part of the UK. Eleven years on, will the Minister tell me exactly what the Union is doing for Scottish pensioners, other than impoverishing them?

Liz Kendall: Investing an additional £31 billion in the triple lock over this Parliament is delivering huge benefits to pensioners in Scotland, as are our measures to drive up the uptake of pension credit in order to help the very poorest pensioners; our measures to stabilise the economy; and our investment in the NHS, on which many pensioners rely. I am proud of the action that we are taking. Given that this Government have agreed and are giving Scotland its biggest ever funding settlement, the hon. Gentleman should ask some challenging questions of his Government, to ensure that they deliver for Scotland's pensioners, too.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, a staggering one in four kids in Derby lived in poverty. Our local charities, such as the Derby Food 4 Thought Alliance, do amazing work; last year, they handed out 20,000 food parcels. Will the Secretary of State ensure

that the upcoming child poverty strategy addresses the root causes of child food poverty, so that parents are not left struggling to put tea on the table?

Liz Kendall: I understand very well the issue that my hon. Friend raises. As a former chair of Feeding Leicester, the programme to end hunger in my city, I see only too clearly the links between poverty and dependence on emergency food parcels. I am very proud that we have already slashed deductions in universal credit and extended the crisis and resilience fund, providing it with its first three-year funding settlement. There is much more to do. We want to make sure that children have hungry minds, not hungry bellies, and we are determined to deliver that.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): The best way to reduce poverty is for people to be in work, but as a result of this Government's damaging economic policies, we have seen youth unemployment rise by 6% since the general election. What representations will the Secretary of State make to the Chancellor ahead of the Budget to ensure that more damage is not done?

Liz Kendall: The Labour party believes that everybody who can work must work. The hon. Gentleman should look at his own party's record: progress on the disability employment gap and the lone parent employment rate stalled under its watch, and economic inactivity rose. We are the only country in the G7 whose employment rate has not got back to pre-pandemic levels. We are overhauling our employment system to help more people into work, and to get on in work. I am proud of our record; maybe he should look at his own.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Ind): Tackling poverty should be a key priority of any Government who wish to see their people thrive. The Equality Act 2010 includes a socioeconomic duty on all public bodies to address inequalities "when making strategic decisions". When will that duty be enacted in England?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. Throughout its work, the DWP is already looking at how to narrow the gaps between different parts of the country and different groups of people. We have set our jobcentres and employment systems new targets for reducing those gaps, and we are taking cross-Government action to tackle child poverty. We have achieved a lot. There is a lot more to do, but this Government, unlike Opposition Members, have made tackling poverty an absolute priority. Our child poverty strategy is coming out in the autumn, so I ask hon. Members to watch this space.

Universal Credit: 16 to 24-year-olds

10. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What estimate she has made of the number of 16 to 24-year-olds receiving universal credit. [905400]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): The latest provisional statistics, taken from Stat-Xplore, show that in July 2025, there were 768,000 people aged 16 to 24 on universal credit. About a quarter of those young people—around 180,000—are on universal credit and in work.

Sarah Bool: According to the Library, in my constituency, the claimant count among those aged 16 to 24 has risen by 46%; that is one of the largest percentage increases in the country. Conservative Members know that the Government have a moral duty not to let our young people learn that a life of benefits is the life for them, so how does the Minister explain that increase? What will she do?

Alison McGovern: I must remind Conservative Members again that it was their party that introduced universal credit, removing the distinction between out-of-work benefits and in-work benefits. For three quarters of young people who are out of work and on universal credit, our guarantee for young people will make sure that they get a second chance in life, after they were utterly failed during the pandemic by the Conservative party.

Data Sharing: Local Authorities

11. **Sarah Hall** (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to improve data sharing between her Department and local authorities. [905401]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The Department continues to provide a broad range of data to local authorities to enable fast, accurate assessments for services, including blue badges and free school meals. Looking ahead, the Department is committed to expanding real-time data sharing in critical areas, such as housing benefit and care homes, while also testing innovative models such as the WorkWell scheme, which bring together local and central services to deliver more joined-up support for citizens.

Sarah Hall: In Warrington South, too many children entitled to free school meals are missing out because of avoidable administrative barriers. No child should have to sit in a classroom hungry; every child deserves a full stomach and a fair chance. A simple change would make a big difference and ensure that every eligible child got the support that they are entitled to. It would ease pressure on families, help to reduce child poverty, and give schools confidence that pupils are ready to learn. Will the Minister commit to strengthening data sharing with not only local authorities, but the Department for Education, so that automatic enrolment for free school meals can be introduced?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is entirely right to raise this issue. We will look at that, working closely with the Department for Education, as part of the child poverty strategy. We of course share her ambition to ensure that families can claim the support that they need. Our expansion of free school meals to all children in households claiming universal credit will make it much easier for parents to know if they are eligible, as well as lifting some 100,000 children out of poverty.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his reply; as always, he is very positive in his responses. He referred to the anti-poverty strategy. What discussions has he had about the anti-poverty strategy for us in Northern Ireland? Levels of poverty and mental health issues have risen dramatically, and young people in

particular are under great pressure. The Minister is always compassionate and understanding; what is he doing in relation to the Northern Ireland Assembly to make things better for us as well?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman will understand that we want this strategy to be for England, Wales, Scotland and, of course, Northern Ireland. He will be reassured to learn that those leading on the child poverty strategy have held a number of meetings with Ministers in Northern Ireland to ensure that its specific needs are taken into consideration.

NEET: Young People

13. **Damien Egan** (Bristol North East) (Lab): What steps is she taking to support young people into employment, education or training in Bristol North East constituency. [905403]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): One in eight young people are not in education, employment or training. That is bad for them, bad for businesses and bad for our country as a whole. Our west of England youth guarantee trailblazer, which covers my hon. Friend's constituency, is helping to remove barriers to work for young people, including by providing free bus travel for participants and connecting young people with skills support. Last month, I announced an additional £45 million to extend our youth guarantee trailblazers, so that we can guarantee that all young people are earning or learning.

Damien Egan: That is fantastic to hear. Will the Secretary of State set out the practical impact of the west of England youth guarantee trailblazer so far? Assuming that it is positive, will she confirm plans to back it up with more investment, in order to support our young people in the Bristol area?

Liz Kendall: I am really proud of the work being led in the west of England—including by our fantastic Mayor, Helen Godwin—to help more young people. The trailblazer is engaging much more deeply with employers—it has engaged over 135 of them. It is helping to enrol young people on employability courses and giving them more work placements, giving them the skills and experience they need. As my hon. Friend knows, young people say that they need a job to gain experience, but in order to get the job, they need that experience. We are trying to turn that around. We have announced additional funding of up to another £5 million for that west of England youth guarantee trailblazer. A lot has been done, but there is a lot more to do.

Pension Credit Uptake

14. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps she is taking to increase the uptake of pension credit. [905404]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): The Government are committed to ensuring that all pensioners receive the support to which they are entitled. That is why we have been running the biggest ever pension credit take-up campaign. We plan to continue promotional activity from September

through to the end of this financial year, with the focus not just on eligible pensioners but on their friends and family too.

Christine Jardine: Earlier this year, a constituent of mine in Edinburgh West contacted me about the delay she had faced in getting the pension credit she was entitled to. She applied in September last year and was told that she would receive it in November, but it was March before she got her pension credit awarded. The delay meant that she went without extra support just when she lost her winter fuel allowance, so what steps will the Minister take to cut those delays and stop more vulnerable pensioners from being left cold this winter?

Torsten Bell: I hope the hon. Member will write to me with the details of the case she raised. On the more general picture, I can reassure her that we now have a lower backlog of pension credit cases to be processed than we inherited from the last Government, despite the record number of claims that have come through.

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): Boots has been a significant employer in my constituency since 1927, and many of my constituents have been proud to work for it. However, those close to claiming their pensions have been advised that they will be unable to withdraw their pension at an unreduced rate at the age of 60, contrary to what they were led to believe. Does the Minister recognise the frustration that many of the Boots pensioners feel, and does he agree that the Pensions Ombudsman should progress swiftly with its process?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend has raised this matter with me before, and the one thing I can confirm is that she is a powerful advocate for her constituents on this very important issue for them. As she knows, I cannot comment on individual cases—particularly as the matter is now with the Pensions Ombudsman—but more generally, it is important that promises made to pensioners about their pensions are lived up to. Making sure that happens is exactly why the Pensions Ombudsman exists.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Thanks to our Conservative winter fuel payments campaign, thousands of pensioners have signed up to pension credit, and millions more pensioners will receive winter fuel allowance, now that the Labour party has admitted that its policy on winter fuel payments was wrong. However, the Social Security Advisory Committee recently concluded that the Government's winter fuel plans fall short of delivering their objectives of fairness, administrative simplicity and targeted support. It seems that the Government have prioritised civil service bureaucracy over helping frozen pensioners. Does the Minister agree with the Social Security Advisory Committee's conclusion about their policies?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Member for his question, and I congratulate Members on all sides of this House who have run campaigns to drive up pension credit uptake. That is very important, and it is why we have seen 60,000 extra awards over the course of the year to

July 2025 compared with the previous year. That work, which is very welcome, has been done by not just Members but civil society organisations and local authorities.

On the points that the hon. Member raised about the process for winter fuel payments this winter and going forward, I do not agree with the characterisation he chose to present. Particularly on the tax side, the process will be automatic. Nobody will be brought into tax or self-assessment purely because of that change; the vast majority of people will have their winter fuel payments automatically recouped through the pay-as-you-earn system; and anyone who wants to can opt out. I remind Members that the deadline for that is 15 September.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Around a year ago, the Labour Government inherited from the previous Conservative Government around 3 million pensioners in poverty. Sadly, last winter's cuts to the winter fuel payment saw many pensioners pushed into hardship. In the light of winter fuel price hikes, will the Minister reconsider the Government's proposals and ensure that moneys are paid to pensioners who missed out on the winter fuel payment last winter?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Member for his question, but would gently say that every time he opposes every single tax rise or any difficult choice in this House, he is saying that the Liberal Democrats are not a party that could deliver on commitments, for example, to the triple lock, which will increase in cost, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned earlier, by £31 billion by the end of this Parliament. There are things called "choices", which are necessary if we are to provide for our top priorities—and for Labour Members, the top priorities, when it comes to pensioners, are making sure that we can increase the state pension, the bedrock of most pensioners' living standards, and saving the NHS, and that is exactly what we will continue to do.

Remote PIP Assessments

15. **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of increasing the number of remote personal independence payment assessments on claimants in West Dorset constituency. [905405]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We will increase the number of face-to-face, rather than remote, PIP assessments, and will increase the number of health professionals in assessment centres in order to deliver that. I think the hon. Gentleman will agree, however, that it is important to keep telephone or video alternatives for those who need them.

Edward Morello: Many West Dorset constituents have written to me with deep anxiety about the assessment for personal independence payments, and especially the use of remote assessments. One constituent, despite previously being awarded enhanced PIP, has endured months of repeated phone assessments, which have triggered severe panic attacks and high blood pressure, and caused lasting psychological harm. The Secretary of State has given me a commitment to moving away

from phone-based assessments, so what additional resources will be made available to support the roll-out of more face-to-face assessments in West Dorset?

Sir Stephen Timms: There was a switch to remote assessments in the pandemic, for obvious reasons, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made the point repeatedly that, as was said in the "Pathways to Work" Green Paper, we want to move sharply back to face-to-face, while keeping alternatives for those who need them. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will have spoken to people for whom the prospect of going to an assessment centre provokes the kind of anxiety that his constituent experienced as a result of a telephone call. We are speaking to the assessment providers, and we have already increased the proportion of face-to-face assessments. That work will continue.

NEET: Young People

16. **Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in Southend East and Rochford constituency. [905406]

20. **David Burton-Sampson** (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support young people into employment, education or training in Southend West and Leigh constituency. [905410]

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): With permission, I will answer these questions together, as they are both about the great city of Southend.

Colleagues in Southend jobcentre are working very hard with Southend young people to help them gain skills, experience and confidence. The team have launched a bespoke employability workshop designed for young people, and recently delivered a regional work experience pilot for college students. They also work with our great partners, such as the King's Trust and FirstPoint Training, to provide placements and opportunities, and there is also the employer-led Movement to Work programme.

Mr Alaba: Young people across the UK who are not in education, employment or training are more than twice as likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that support reaches those who need it most?

Alison McGovern: The Secretary of State mentioned some moments ago that in everything we do in the Department for Work and Pensions, we are trying to close the gap between those who have suffered disadvantage and those who have not. Young people, especially those who have experienced poverty, are vulnerable to mental ill health, and the pandemic generation deserve more support to get chances that they have missed. That is why we have a joint work and health unit with the Department of Health and Social Care. We also have many agreements across Whitehall relating to our net zero mission, as well as our investment in defence, to help employers recruit the next generation, whatever their background.

David Burton-Sampson: In Southend West and Leigh, I will soon host a youth day, featuring local star of "The Apprentice" Chisola Chitambala, who is now

an apprenticeship coach, among other things. Does the Minister agree that early interventions, like this youth day, are really important to prevent young people from becoming another NEET statistic?

Alison McGovern: I agree with my hon. Friend, and congratulate him on his youth day and the work he is doing on this kind of early intervention. The data clearly show that if people get qualifications, some work experience, and support for their health and support with other factors in life, that is very protective against being without work, education or training. We have to give a second chance to those who need one, and take steps to prevent people from being in that situation in the first place.

Children in Poverty

17. **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to reduce the number of children in poverty in Leigh and Atherton constituency. [905407]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): It is a shameful legacy from the Conservatives that more than a third of children in my hon. Friend's constituency are living in poverty according to the Child Poverty Action Group, and we are determined to tackle that. We will be lifting more than 100,000 children out of poverty by providing free school meals to all children whose families are on universal credit, benefiting more than 7,300 children in Leigh and Atherton. We will also be helping to feed them during the summer holidays by extending the holiday activities and food programme, alongside our fair repayment rate in universal credit and our crisis and resilience fund. We are helping struggling families. There is much more we will do in our child poverty strategy this autumn, but we can and we are making a difference.

Jo Platt: I thank the Secretary of State wholeheartedly for that response, and I agree with her. Because of the lack of action from the last Government, 26.6% of children in Leigh and Atherton are living in poverty. I welcome the measures that this Government are taking, including the extension of free school meals, but more needs to be done. Can she reassure us that she is working hard on the child poverty strategy to ensure that it addresses the needs of all children in poverty, including those with disabilities and special educational needs, so that every child can reach their full potential?

Liz Kendall: We will absolutely do that. The child poverty taskforce, which includes Ministers from across Government, had a specific session on children with disabilities and special educational needs, including with families and the charities that fight so hard to deliver improvements. I am not a patient person, but I ask my hon. Friend to wait until the child poverty strategy is published in the autumn, because we believe that every child—no matter where they are born or their ability or what their parents did—must be given an equal start in life.

Employment: Trailblazer Programme

18. **Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase levels of employment through the trailblazer programme to tackle economic activity. [905408]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): This Government are determined to get Britain working again. That is why we are investing £80 million in our trailblazer programmes to drive down economic inactivity. We are overhauling our job centres to provide better, more personalised employment support. We are delivering a youth guarantee, so that every young person is earning or learning, and we are providing a record £3.8 billion to help sick and disabled people who can work to get into work. There is much further to go, but we are already making a difference.

Will Stone: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. A lot of disabled people in Swindon with long-term health conditions tell me that they want to get to work, but are just simply not given the opportunity. What are this Government doing to support those people to get dignified work?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, because he raises an important point that I do not want to let go, which is how many people with a long-term health condition or a disability are desperate to work. Our own survey of people on sickness and disability benefits found that 200,000 people would work right now if they were given an opportunity. We need to give people help to tackle their underlying health conditions, which we are doing through our investment in the NHS. We need to encourage employers to do more to give opportunities to disabled people to work. Above all, this Government are determined to meet our responsibilities, with £3.8 billion invested into employment support for sick and disabled people—the biggest amount in a generation. I look forward to working with him and organisations in Swindon to make sure we get that support right locally.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that the reason that unemployment is higher today than the day she took office is the jobs tax, which increases employers' costs by £25 billion? What hope does her trailblazer programme have when the Chancellor is working against her?

Liz Kendall: I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Gentleman's premise. Economic inactivity is down by 400,000 because we are moving more people from being out of work and not looking for work to starting to have to look for work. Employment is up by 725,000. We have created 380,000 jobs. I know there is more we need to do. We are working very closely with employers. We are overhauling what we are doing. One of the things that employers say to us is, "We do not want to tell our story to thousands of different job centres." We are putting in a single account manager and we are overhauling our support for employers. I would be happy to meet him and employers in his constituency to see what more we can do to support them, because we want to get Britain working and earning again.

Topical Questions

T1. [905414] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): Let me start by congratulating all the pupils who have received their exam results over the last few weeks. Having good qualifications is essential in today's economy, and it is brilliant to see so many young people doing so well. However, the number of young people not in education, employment or training is one of the biggest challenges facing the country, and young people are much more likely to be NEETs if they lack basic skills. That is why I am so proud of the action that the Government are taking to increase the number of youth apprenticeships, overhaul foundation apprenticeships and, above all, introduce a youth guarantee so that every young person is earning or learning.

Chris Vince: I hope you had a lovely recess, Mr Speaker.

Harlow is full of fantastic schools, and I see the potential of young people there every single day, but that potential is often overlooked because of economic circumstances. Will the Secretary of State explain how the new crisis and resilience fund will support the poorest children in Harlow?

Liz Kendall: In the spending review we announced this first ever multi-year settlement for local support, replacing the household support fund. The crisis and resilience fund will provide £1 billion every single year, and will give families emergency help if, for example, their white goods break down or they need food urgently. However, we want to start shifting it increasingly towards tackling the root causes of poverty, helping people to become more financially resilient through the provision of debt advice. We recently held a meeting with more than 600 stakeholders to discuss how we could achieve that shift, because we want to prevent people from falling into poverty and to give them the tools that they need to emerge from poverty themselves.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Lady back after the summer. She said recently that it had been "a bumpy...few months"—an understatement, in my view. Last time we stood here, she had just completed a rather humiliating climbdown on her welfare savings plans. She set out to save money, but ended up spending it. You couldn't make it up, Mr Speaker, but here we are: the number of benefit claimants has hit a record high; the sickness benefit bill is heading up and up; and still the right hon. Lady has Back Benchers and Cabinet colleagues calling for even more spending on welfare. The Chancellor is busy doing her sums in advance of the Budget, so can the right hon. Lady tell us how much lifting the two-child benefits cap will cost?

Liz Kendall: I am not often called understated, but I thank the hon. Lady for her comments.

Welfare reform is always difficult because it involves real people and real lives, and it is a complicated and personal issue. However, we are investing £3.8 billion in employment support to help sick and disabled people into work, we are introducing the first ever right to try work, and we are dealing fundamentally with the perverse incentive left by the Conservative party which encouraged people to define themselves as incapable of work. We are

addressing that by raising the standard allowance of universal credit and halving the health top-up for new claims. There is much more that we need to do, and we will be publishing our strategy to deal with child poverty in the autumn, but I am proud to say that the last Labour Government lifted 600,000 children out of poverty, while the hon. Lady's party plunged 900,000 children into poverty. We will take action, and, as I said earlier, the hon. Lady should watch this space.

Helen Whately: I asked the right hon. Lady a simple question, but I fear that she does not know the answer; she certainly did not reply to it. What is clear is that Labour wants to spend more on welfare. So do the Liberal Democrats, and so does Reform. Only one party here is telling the truth about the welfare bill: the country cannot afford it.

May I urge the right hon. Lady to take up my proposals? Will she stop giving people benefits for common mental health problems such as anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and give them help instead? Will she stop giving personal independence payments to foreign citizens who have not paid into our system and free cars to people who do not need them? Will she stop people scamming the benefits system over the phone and on the internet? Will she keep the two-child benefits cap, and get the benefits bill under control?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that we are on topicals? It is your own Members who are not going to get in.

Liz Kendall: The Conservative party failed on welfare because it failed on work. The reason why we inherited such a dire situation with sickness and disability benefits is that the Conservatives failed to get people into work. We are turning that around, and it is about time the hon. Lady and Opposition Members put forward a proper plan of action that actually gets people into work. We believe in work; it is a pity the Conservative party does not.

T2. [905415] **Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab):** Meur ras, Mr Speaker. The number of young NEET people is often a reflection of a range of different factors: poverty, poor mental health services, lack of access to support services, and inadequate transport, SEND and care services, especially in remote coastal areas such as Camborne, Redruth and Hayle. Can the Minister reassure the House and these young people that joined-up, cross-departmental working groups have been set up to tackle this issue head-on?

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): Yes, that is exactly how we are working, and I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Our "Get Britain Working" plan identified Cornwall as a rural industrial legacy employment area, and we specifically pointed out the lack of connectivity. That is why, when it comes to our new jobcentres service, we are also trialling jobcentres on wheels: buses that can take support to where people are and which are designed for rural areas. They recently featured on "The One Show".

Mr Speaker: We come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Government are right to want to see more people with disabilities and long-term sickness get into work. Sadly, this was used to justify the savage cuts to benefits that were proposed earlier this year. My colleagues and I are hearing reports of cuts to current awards through Access to Work, and to new payments, being done by the back door. Can the Minister cast any light on whether guidance has been given to civil servants on such cuts?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): There has been no change at all to policy on Access to Work. As the hon. Member knows, we did consult, in the Green Paper earlier in the year, on reform to Access to Work. There has been a big increase in demand for it, and reform is needed. We are looking at the consultation responses at the moment. There may have been instances in the past where the published guidance was not always properly applied. It is being applied now, and that may give rise to some of the issues that have been drawn to his attention, but there has been no change at all in the policy.

T6. [905419] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): I warmly commend the locally led £100 million Connect to Work programme, which supports those facing complex barriers to employment to get into work and to stay in work. A constituent of mine, Charlie, has explained to me some of the barriers to work that he experiences living with autism spectrum disorder and ADHD, but he is a dedicated and focused young man who is to be commended for wanting to be a useful member of society. What support will Connect to Work, and other schemes like it, offer Charlie and other constituents of mine in Dartford?

Liz Kendall: We want to give people like Charlie the chances and choices in life that he deserves. Our Connect to Work programme will do everything from helping people access health treatment to providing work placements and building their confidence through training, skills—whatever meets their individual needs. That is the key to this: an end to a one-size-fits-all tick-box approach, and tailored support for him. We are also working closely with employers so that they remove the barriers to work and can employ people with all the skills and talent that people like Charlie have.

T3. [905416] **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): One of the main benefits of saving into a private pension is the tax relief that people get from the Government, which is one of the smartest ways to save for later life. Any move by this Government to cut pension tax relief will devastate savings rates and the adequacy of pension provisions. I would hope that the Secretary of State knows that, so can she assure me that she has made it clear that when the Chancellor is looking to fill the fiscal black hole of her own making, she must not target pensions?

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): The hon. Lady only had to wait till next week's Treasury questions, when she could have asked her question, but she has the same answer. What we should do is look at the record of parties and what they have done. When I look back over the last 14 years of Tory Budgets, I see a party—[*Interruption.*] And the Lib Dems; thank you for pointing that out. I have seen

parties chopping and changing pension tax relief left, right and centre, because they had no plan. Those were the same Budgets that drove child poverty up and wages down.

T7. [905420] **Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): It is great to be back after taking paternity leave, and thank you for your support, Mr Speaker. I welcome the Government's parental leave review, but currently partners only get unpaid time off work for two antenatal appointments. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a gap, and can he confirm that the review is looking at how we can better support parents at that crucial time?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the recent addition to his family. I hope he had a restful summer, although I doubt he did considering the likely lack of sleep. He is right to raise this issue. It is now past the date for the call for evidence, but if he wants to write to me directly about that issue, I will ensure it is fed in.

T4. [905417] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Cruel cuts to the winter fuel allowance by both this Labour Government and the SNP Government in Edinburgh left thousands of pensioners cold in their homes last winter. When will the Secretary of State apologise for the misery her Government have caused for vulnerable pensioners in the Scottish Borders and across the United Kingdom?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Member for his question. We discussed this issue at some length in the statement before the recess. He knows that the priority for the Labour party has been to raise the state pension by committing to the triple lock throughout this Parliament at a cost of £31 billion a year. For the new state pension, that will mean an increase of £1,900 a year by the end of this Parliament.

On winter fuel payments specifically—and I thought this was the Conservative party's position—most people think that we should not be paying hundreds of pounds to the very richest pensioners. We have listened to concerns and raised the threshold, but it is important to maintain that principle. If the Conservatives' position is now that they want a return to universal winter fuel payments, they need to have a word with the Leader of the Opposition, who has not supported universal winter fuel payments or, indeed, a universal state pension.

T8. [905422] **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I am visiting the jobcentre in Rugby next week, and I am looking forward to hearing more about its work with local businesses, and also with people with disabilities and special educational needs, to get people back into work. Will the Minister set out what further steps we are taking on that very important job for a Labour Government?

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am glad he is visiting Rugby jobcentre, and I encourage all Members across the House to go to their local jobcentres, because their work coaches have the most experience and knowledge about what we need to do to get people into work. We are creating "jobcentre in your pocket", so that everyone can have access to

help 24 hours a day. Letting technology take the strain will mean that our work coaches can do more of what they do best, which is giving people—person to person—the confidence to take up life's chances.

T5. [905418] John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Last week, Policy Exchange published a very insightful report, "Out of Control", looking at the pathways to benefit entitlements. It made this point:

"Fifty years ago, just one in 2,500 people was said to have Autism; today that has risen to one in 36 children".

Will the ministerial team undertake to look at the implications for the Department of that definitional creep and the specific implications for benefit entitlements?

Sir Stephen Timms: We have set up a panel of experts to advise us on how best to improve employment prospects for people with autism and neurodivergence. As the right hon. Member knows, we will be undertaking a review of the PIP assessment, co-producing it with disabled people, so that we have a clear way forward for who should and who should not be entitled to the personal independence payment.

T9. [905423] Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Can my hon. Friend set out how this Government are reforming pensions long term to help people in Bracknell Forest and across the country to save for their futures?

Torsten Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for his crucial question. That is exactly why we have revived the landmark pensions commission. We have to confront the reality that we are on track for tomorrow's pensioners to be poorer than today's. Auto-enrolment has been a huge success, with 88% of eligible employees now saving, but 45% of working-age adults, including 3 million self-employed and one in four low earners, are currently saving nothing. The commission will ensure that we build a pension system that is strong, fair and sustainable.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The carer's allowance overpayments review was due to report in early summer. It is now 1 September. In recent weeks, I have become aware of a case where the DWP has informed somebody that they now owe it £18,000. That is a scandal. When will the review report back?

Sir Stephen Timms: We have received the report from Liz Sayce, and I want to thank her very much for her review of earnings-related overpayments of carer's allowance. We are currently considering the findings. We are, as the hon. Lady knows, making a number of changes. We have increased the earnings threshold for carer's allowance in a way that I think will help avoid these problems in the future. We are looking at the possibility of a taper on carer's allowance. We will come forward, before very long at all, with both the report and the Government's response to it.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): As someone who proudly served the trade union movement for two decades before entering this place, I warmly welcome the Government's improvement to

workers' rights. Will the Minister set out what steps are being taken to ensure that no one is left behind in the vital reforms to statutory sick pay?

Alison McGovern: I know that so many of my hon. Friends will, like her, welcome the changes we are making to statutory sick pay, which will improve eligibility for 1.3 million of the lowest-paid employees and remove the waiting period. Many of those who will benefit are low-paid women. The removal of the waiting period will mean that all employees receive at least £60 more at the start of their sickness absence compared to the current system, but we will continue to evaluate the measures as they are implemented.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Scotland is the only part of these islands where child poverty is falling, as a result of the Scottish child payment and the mitigation of the bedroom cap. When will the Labour Government move from empty words to actual action to take children out of poverty?

Liz Kendall: We are already extending free school meals to all families on universal credit. We have extended the holiday activities and food programme, so that we feed poor kids not just during school but in the holidays, too. We have introduced a new fair repayment rate in universal credit. We have made the first ever multi-year settlement for the crisis and resilience fund to help struggling families. We are introducing and rolling out breakfast clubs. Our child poverty strategy will be published in the autumn. We are already taking action to tackle poverty and we will do more. I say to the hon. Lady that the Scottish Government need to look at how they are spending the biggest ever funding settlement, given in the spending review, including on employment support, because helping parents into good quality jobs is the long-term key to tackling poverty and inequality.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I was delighted to see the establishment of the disability advisory panel a week or so ago. *[Interruption.]* I am so sorry, Mr Speaker; I have a cold. How will the advisory panel link with the co-production in the Timms review?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We have announced that Zara Todd will be the chair of the Department's disability advisory panel. The panel was announced in the "Get Britain Working" White Paper last year. Separately, we will set up a group to work with me on the review of the PIP assessment. I will, of course, talk to the disability advisory panel about the arrangements, but they will be separate structures.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Despite his new role in riding to the rescue of the Treasury, is the Pensions Minister still available to fulfil in principle the undertaking he gave me before the recess to have a meeting about the plight of ExxonMobil pensioners and the difficulties in them getting the discretionary surplus benefits to which I think they should be entitled?

Torsten Bell: Absolutely.

Borders and Asylum

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the statement by the Home Secretary, I should like to say something about the House's sub judice resolution. The case of Epping Forest district council v. Somani Hotels is still active and before the courts, but because the case concerns wider issues relating to the planning consent required for hotels to house asylum seekers, I have decided to grant a waiver so that Members are free to refer to it in proceedings. However, I remind the House that there are other active criminal prosecutions related to disorder around the Bell hotel and elsewhere, as well as one prosecution of an asylum seeker for alleged sexual offences. Hon. Members may refer to the general issues relating to asylum accommodation, but should avoid discussing any specific criminal cases.

3.39 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): With permission, I will update the House on the actions we are taking with France to strengthen our border security and the next steps in our reforms to the asylum system.

The House will be aware that when we came into government, we found an asylum and immigration system in chaos: for seven years, small boat gangs had been allowed to embed their criminal trade along the French coast; the asylum backlog was soaring; and illegal working was being ignored. The previous Government had lost control of the system and, as a result, opened many hundreds of asylum hotels across the country, while returns were a third lower than in 2010. Before leaving office, they deliberately cut asylum decision making by 70%, leaving behind a steeply rising backlog. It is little wonder that people across the country lost confidence in the system and demanded to know why they were paying the price of a system that was so out of control.

However, that does not mean that people rejected the long and proud history of Britain doing our bit to help those fleeing persecution or conflict—including, in the past decade, families from Ukraine, Syria and Hong Kong. It is the British way to do our bit alongside other countries to help those who need sanctuary. However, the system has to be controlled and managed, based on fair and properly enforced rules, not chaos and exploitation driven by criminal smuggler gangs. It is exactly because of our important tradition that substantial reforms are needed now.

In our first year in government, we have taken immediate action, laying the foundations for more fundamental reform. We restored asylum decision making and then rapidly increased the rate of decisions. Had we continued with the previous Government's freeze on asylum decisions, thousands more people would have been in hotels and asylum accommodation by now. Instead, we removed 35,000 people with no right to be here, which included a 28% increase in returns of failed asylum seekers and a 14% increase in removals of foreign criminals. We have increased raids and arrests on illegal working by 50%, and we cut the annual hotel bill by almost a billion pounds in the last financial year. We are rolling out digital ID and biometric kits so that immigration enforcement can check on the spot whether someone has a right to work or a right to be in the UK. On channel

crossings and organised immigration crime, we are putting in place new powers, new structures and new international agreements to help to dismantle the criminal industry behind the boats.

I want to update the House on the further steps we are now taking. In August, I signed the new treaty with France allowing us, for the first time, to directly return those who arrive on small boats. The first detentions—of people immediately on arrival in Dover—took place the next day, and we expect the first returns to begin later this month. Applications have been opened for the reciprocal legal route, with the first cases under consideration, subject to strict security checks. We have made it clear that this is a pilot scheme, but the more that we prove the concept at the outset, the better we will be able to develop and grow it.

The principles the treaty embodies are crucial. No one should be making these dangerous or illegal journeys on small boats; if they do, we want to see them swiftly returned. In return, we believe in doing our bit alongside other countries to help those who have fled persecution through managed and controlled legal programmes.

This summer we have taken further action to strengthen enforcement against smuggling gangs. France has reviewed its maritime approach to allow for the interception of taxi boats in French waters, and we will continue to work with France to implement the change as soon as possible. In the past year, the National Crime Agency has led 347 disruptions of immigration crime networks—its highest level on record, and a 40% increase in a year.

Over the summer, we announced a £100 million uplift in funding for border security and up to 300 more personnel in the National Crime Agency focusing on targeting the smuggler gangs. The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill will give them stronger powers: counter-terrorism powers against smuggler gangs, powers to seize and download the mobile phones of small boat arrivals, and the power to ban sex offenders from the asylum system altogether. If Opposition parties work with us to speed the passage of the Bill through the other place, instead of opposing it, those powers could be in place within months, making our country safer and more secure.

Let me turn to the major reforms that are needed to fix the broken asylum system that we inherited. Although we have increased decision making and returns, the overall system remains sclerotic, outdated and unfair. As we committed to in the immigration White Paper, we will shortly set out more radical reforms to modernise the asylum system and boost our border security. We will be tackling the pull factors, strengthening enforcement, making sure that people are treated fairly and reforming the way that the European convention on human rights is interpreted here at home. We will be speeding up the system, cutting numbers and ending the use of hotels, and developing controlled and managed routes for genuine refugees.

At the heart of the reforms will be a complete overhaul of the appeals system—the biggest obstacle to reducing the size of the asylum system and ending hotel use. Tens of thousands of people in asylum accommodation are currently waiting for appeals, and under the current system that figure is to grow, with an average wait time already of 54 weeks. We have already funded thousands

of additional sitting days this year, and the border security Bill will introduce a statutory timeframe of 24 weeks.

However, we need to go further. We will introduce a new independent body to deal with immigration and asylum appeals. It will be fully independent of Government and staffed by professionally trained adjudicators, with safeguards to ensure high standards. It will be able to surge capacity as needed and to accelerate and prioritise cases, alongside new procedures to tackle repeat applications and unnecessary delays. We are also increasing detention and returns capacity, including a 1,000-bed expansion at Campsfield and Haslar, with the first tranche of additional beds coming online within months to support many thousands more enforced removals each year.

Our reforms will also address the overly complex system for family migration, including changes to the way that article 8 of the ECHR is interpreted. We should be clear that international law is important. It is because other countries know that we abide by international law that we have been able to make new agreements with France, to return people who arrive on small boats, and with Germany, to stop the warehousing of small boats by criminal gangs, and it is why we have been able to explore return hubs partnerships with other European countries. However, we need the interpretation of international law to keep up with the realities and challenges of today's world.

There is one area where we need to make more immediate changes. The current rules for family reunion for refugees were designed many years ago to help families separated by war, conflict and persecution, but the way they are used has now changed. Even just before the pandemic, refugees who applied to bring family to the UK did so on average more than one or two years after they had been granted protection, which was long enough for them to get jobs, find housing and be able to provide their family with some support. In Denmark and Switzerland, those who are granted humanitarian protection are currently not able to apply to bring family for at least two years after protection has been granted.

However, in the UK those family applications now come in, on average, around a month after protection has been granted, often even before a newly granted refugee has left asylum accommodation. As a consequence, refugee families who arrive are far more likely to seek homelessness assistance. Some councils are finding that more than a quarter of their family homelessness applications are linked to refugee family reunion. That is not sustainable. Currently, there are also no conditions on family reunion for refugee sponsors, unlike those in place if the sponsor is a British citizen or long-term UK resident. That is not fair.

The proportion of migrants who have arrived on small boats and then applied to bring family has also increased sharply in recent years, with signs that smuggler gangs are now able to use the promise of family reunion to promote dangerous journeys to the UK. We continue to believe that families staying together is important, which is why we will seek to prioritise family groups among the applicants to come to Britain under our new deal with France, but reforms are needed. So in our asylum policy statement later this year, we will set out a new system for family migration, including looking at contribution requirements, longer periods before newly

granted refugees can apply, and dedicated controlled arrangements for unaccompanied children and those fleeing persecution who have family in the UK.

We aim to have some of those changes in place for the spring, but in the meantime we do need to address the immediate pressures on local authorities and the risks from criminal gangs using family reunion as a pull factor to encourage more people on to dangerous boats. Therefore, this week we are bringing forward new immigration rules to temporarily suspend new applications under the existing dedicated refugee family reunion route. Until the new framework is introduced, refugees will be covered by the same family migration rules and conditions as everyone else.

Let me turn next to the action we are taking to ensure that every asylum hotel will be closed for good under this Government, not just by shifting individuals from hotels to other sites but by driving down the numbers in supported accommodation overall, and not in a chaotic way through piecemeal court judgments, but through a controlled, managed and orderly programme: driving down inflow into the asylum system, clearing the appeals backlog, which is crucial, and continuing to increase returns. Within the asylum estate, we are reconfiguring sites, increasing room sharing, tightening the test for accommodation and working at pace to identify alternative, cheaper and more appropriate accommodation with other Departments and with local authorities. We are increasing standards and security and joint public safety co-operation between the police, accommodation providers and the Home Office to ensure that laws and rules are enforced.

I understand and agree with local councils and communities who want the asylum hotels in their communities closed, because we need to close all asylum hotels—we need to do so for good—but that must be done in a controlled and orderly manner, not through a return to the previous Government's chaos that led to the opening of hotels in the first place.

Finally, let me update the House on the continued legal and controlled support that we will provide for those facing conflict and persecution. We will continue to do our bit to support Ukraine, extending the Ukraine permission extension scheme by a further 24 months, with further details to be set out in due course. We are also taking immediate action to rescue children who have been seriously injured in the horrendous onslaught on civilians in Gaza so that they can get the health treatment they need. The Foreign Secretary will update the House shortly on the progress to get those children out.

I confirm that the Home Office has put in place systems to issue expedited visas with biometric checks conducted prior to arrival for children and their immediate accompanying family members. We have done the same for all the Chevening scholars and are now in the process of doing so for the next group of students from Gaza who have been awarded fully funded scholarships and places at UK universities so that they can start their studies in autumn this year. Later this year, we will set out plans to establish a permanent framework for refugee students to come and study in the UK so that we can help more talented young people fleeing war and persecution to find a better future, alongside capped and managed ways for refugees to work here in the UK.

[Yvette Cooper]

The Government are determined to fix every aspect of the broken system we inherited and to restore the confidence of the British people, solving problems, not exploiting them, with a serious and comprehensive plan, not fantasy claims based on sums that do not add up or gimmicks that failed in the past. What we will never do is seek to stir up chaos, division or hate, because that is not who we are as a country, and that is not what Britain stands for.

This is a practical plan to strengthen our border security, to fix the asylum chaos and to rebuild confidence in an asylum and immigration system that serves our national interests, protects our national security and reflects our national values. When we wave the Union flag, when we wave the St George's flag, when we sing "God Save the King" and when we celebrate everything that is great about Britain and about our country, we do so with pride because of the values that our flags, our King and our country represent: togetherness, fairness and decency, respect for each other and respect for the rule of law. That is what our country stands for. That is the British way to fix the problems we face. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

3.55 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. The Government have now been in office for well over a year, and I think it is fair to say that not even their kindest friends would say they think it has gone well, but listening to her statement, it sounds like she thinks everything is fine and that if there are any problems, it is somehow somebody else's fault. Is she living in a parallel universe? After over a year in office, she must now take responsibility for what is happening under this Government.

It was interesting to note that, during her statement, she did not mention her favourite phrase from a year or so ago—namely, that she was going to "smash the gangs." I wonder why she was so silent on her previously favourite catchphrase. The answer is that it is not going very well. She mentioned National Crime Agency disruptions. Let me gently point out that 84% of those National Crime Agency disruptions that she cited a few minutes ago are classified as not being high impact, and National Crime Agency arrests for organised immigration crime actually went down by 16% in the last financial year. That is hardly smashing the gangs. In fact, the NCA's arrests for organised immigration crime in that financial year were only 26—a drop in the ocean compared with the tens of thousands crossing the channel.

It was also rather conspicuous that the Home Secretary did not mention even a word about the numbers illegally crossing the English channel. I wonder why that was. I wonder why she forgot to say a single word about that. The reason, I am afraid, is pretty clear. Far from smashing the gangs, so far this year, 29,000—to be precise, 29,003—illegal immigrants have crossed the English channel. That is the worst year in history, and it is up by 38% compared with last year. That is not success; it is failure. Things are not getting any better; they are getting worse. This Government are failing and everyone can see it. That is why there are protests up and down the country, and

where those protests are peaceful, I support them. That is why 75% of the public think the Government are handling immigration and asylum badly. That is a shocking figure; let it sink in.

Let me turn to hotels. In the nine months before the last general election, 200 hotels were closed down, including the Bell hotel in Epping, but since the election the numbers in asylum hotels have actually gone up by 8%. Had that previous trend of closures continued, there would be no asylum hotels open at all today. I ask the Home Secretary to confirm that she will not reduce hotel usage simply by shunting asylum seekers from hotels into flats and houses in multiple occupation, which are desperately needed by young people. Will she give the House that categorical assurance?

Last week the Home Secretary's lawyers said that the rights of illegal immigrants were more important than the rights of local people in places such as Epping. When this was expressly put in those terms to the Education Secretary yesterday on "Sunday Morning with Trevor Phillips", she shamefully agreed. Those statements are a disgrace. Does the Home Secretary realise how angry that makes people feel? It speaks of a Government not on the side of the people in this country. It means the Government appear to care more about the rights of illegal immigrants than our own citizens. Will she apologise for what her lawyers and the Education Secretary said, and will she undertake to ensure that Ministers and their lawyers will never say that again?

The Home Secretary talks about her returns deal with France. It has been reported that the deal will return only about 50 people a week, amounting to 6% of arrivals. Does she accept that allowing 94% of illegal arrivals to stay will act as no deterrent at all? If she does not accept that figure of 50 a week, will she tell the House exactly how many immigrants crossing the channel will in fact be returned under her deal? She may recall that back in July we were told by the Government that the first returns would happen "within weeks". Will she confirm to the House that the number that has actually been returned so far is precisely zero?

The Home Secretary said to the House a couple of minutes ago that there would be security checks on those people reciprocally taken from France into the UK, but will she confirm that her agreement with France says expressly that the French Government will not provide the UK Government with any information at all—any personal data about those migrants—so if there are criminal convictions or suspicions about extremism or terrorism, the French Government will not provide information to us? If that is true, as her agreement says, how can she possibly conduct security checks?

The Home Secretary talked about tweaks to family visa rules. Let me be clear about the Opposition's position on this. If someone enters this country illegally, they should not be allowed to bring in any family members. In fact, everybody entering this country illegally should be immediately removed, to their country of origin if possible, and if that is not possible, to a safe third country such as Rwanda—a scheme which she cancelled just days before it was due to start. The public expect that approach—an approach which she cancelled—because the numbers crossing the channel so far this year have been the worst ever; the worst in history.

It is not just that the numbers are high. Hundreds of migrants, having crossed the channel and living in those hotels, have been charged with criminal offences, including sexual assaults on girls as young as eight years old and multiple rapes. This is not just a border security crisis; it is a public safety crisis as well, and people up and down this country are furious. That is why they are protesting, and that is why 75% of the public think this Government are failing on asylum and immigration.

If this Government were serious about fixing this problem, they would know that little tweaks here and there are not enough. Tweaks to article 8 are not going to be enough. Tweaking the family reunion rules is not enough. Returning maybe 50 people a week, if we are lucky, to France is not going to be enough. Intercepting maybe a few boats—worthy though that is—is not going to be enough. The only way these crossings will stop—the only way we are going to get back control of our borders—is if everybody crossing the channel knows that they will be returned. We tabled a Bill in Parliament a few weeks ago to do that. We had a plan to do that: the Rwanda Bill. We need to go further by disapplying to immigration matters the entire Human Rights Act 1998, not just tinkering with article 8. If the Government were serious, that is what they would do.

If the Home Secretary really wants to control our borders, and if she really wants to get down the record numbers that have been crossing on her watch, she would back our plan, disapply the Human Rights Act in its entirety to immigration matters, and ensure that every single person crossing the channel is immediately removed.

Yvette Cooper: I worry about the shadow Home Secretary's amnesia. In the 14 years that the Conservatives were in government, they never managed to do any of the fantasy things that he claims they did. Let us come back to reality from his fantasy rhetoric.

The shadow Home Secretary talked about the approach that his Government were taking before the election. It is worth reminding the House of what that approach was. Asylum decisions dropped by 70%. The Conservatives effectively had a freeze on taking asylum decisions, and they were returning those asylum seekers nowhere—not to France, not to the safe countries that people had passed through, and not to Rwanda, despite running that scheme for over two years with only four volunteers going at a cost of £700 million. Their approach left us with a soaring backlog. Had we continued with that totally failed approach—not taking asylum decisions, not returning people anywhere—there would have been tens of thousands more people in asylum accommodation and hotels across the country right now. That is the kind of chaos that his policies were heading towards. It is the kind of chaos that he is promising again now.

The House will remember the shadow Home Secretary's personal record. Small boat arrivals went up tenfold on his watch as immigration Minister. Fewer than 1,000 asylum seekers were in hotels by the time he became immigration Minister, but there were more than 20,000 by the time he left his post. On his new concern for local councils, he was the immigration Minister who wrote to local authorities to tell them that he was stopping the requirement on them to agree to accommodation and that he had

“instead, authorised Providers to identify any suitable properties that they consider appropriate.”

We agree with communities across the country that asylum hotels must all close, and I understand why individual councils want to take action in their areas, but I say to the shadow Home Secretary that a party that wants to be in government should have a proper plan for the whole country, and not just promote a chaotic approach that ends up making things worse in lots of areas. That is the Conservatives' record. We have asylum hotels in the first place because the Conservatives did no planning and let the Manston chaos get out of control. As immigration Ministers, both the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and the shadow Home Secretary rushed around the country opening hotels instead of taking a practical, steady approach to get to the heart of the problem, reduce the asylum system, strengthen our border security and tackle and reform the appeals that are causing huge delays.

Let me make a final point. The Government strongly believe that sex offenders should be banned from the asylum system altogether. That is why we have put those details into the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which the shadow Home Secretary's party has voted against time and again and is still resisting in the House of Lords. If Opposition parties supported and worked with us, that law could be on the statute book and we could have stronger powers against sex offenders, stronger counter-terrorism powers to go after criminal gangs, and stronger powers to tackle the offences being committed in the channel and across the country.

The trouble is that what the Conservatives are doing in opposition is an even worse version of what they did in government: ramping up the rhetoric with policies that would make the chaos worse. This Government will fix the chaos that we inherited and strengthen our border security for the sake of the whole country.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for everything that she has revealed today—it will make a difference. As we move from hotels into community distribution, how can we ensure sufficient vetting and transparency in asylum dispersal—especially for groups known to be high risk—in order to safeguard our residents, restore faith among our communities and prevent the threat of disorder such as that seen in Nuneaton this summer?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Anyone who comes to our country needs to abide by our laws. The rules need to be enforced. We also believe that new partnership and stronger measures are needed between policing and immigration enforcement and the Home Office to ensure that there are proper public safety plans for the asylum estate. We are drawing up new arrangements, including not only stronger checks at the border but stronger arrangements in local communities. I recognise the important point that she makes.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the Home Secretary, as always, for advance sight of her statement.

Anyone with any sense knows that the Conservatives trashed our asylum system and left the backlog spiralling out of control, with applications for asylum routinely

[Lisa Smart]

taking years to process. Some of the Home Secretary's remarks are welcome, but I worry that this Government risk repeating some of the same mistakes.

The Liberal Democrats will closely scrutinise the plan that the Home Secretary has talked about today, but given that the Home Office itself says that one of the reasons that those human beings seeking asylum make dangerous small-boat crossings is the lack of safe, alternative family reunion routes, cutting those back further seems counterproductive, especially when more than half of those granted family reunion visas in the year ending June 2025 were children under 18.

It is right that the Government have increased the rate of decisions made—those with no right to be here should be sent back swiftly, and those who have a valid claim should be able to settle, work, integrate and contribute to our communities. The backlog is still too large, however, and initial application decisions still take too long. As the Home Secretary stated, a significant share of the backlog comes from appeals. According to the Government's own figures, in 2024 almost half of rejected asylum applications were overturned on appeal. For applicants from high-grant countries, that proportion was even higher. I would welcome clarity from the Home Secretary on how long it is currently taking to process the average asylum application, and on what concrete steps are being taken to ensure not only that cases are processed more swiftly, but that decisions are right the first time, so that applicants are not left in limbo, the courts are not overburdened and taxpayers are not footing the bill for avoidable delays.

I welcome the Home Secretary's encouraging comments about the reciprocal agreement with France. Can she confirm whether the Government plan for that to be scaled up and, if so, when? Given that one of the main drivers of dangerous channel crossings is the absence of safe, legal family reunion routes, does the Home Secretary agree that cutting family reunion rules risks making the small-boat crisis worse, not better?

The Home Secretary rightly also mentioned the impact on local authorities. When individuals leave hotels, many present as homeless, creating an unsustainable burden on councils, including my own. Will the Home Secretary explain how she is working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to support councils and ensure that this crisis is not simply shifted from one overstretched system to another?

In recent weeks, constituents have been in touch with me as they are concerned about the number of flags that have gone up on lampposts around our area. They worry that the flags have been put up by those who seek to divide our community, not bring it together. Patriotism is a good thing. We should be proud of our country. We should be proud that our country welcomed people such as my nan in the 1930s, when she was fleeing the Nazis. We should be proud of our record of doing our bit. We should be proud of the British values I see in action across my community every day.

I am proud of those police officers who kept everyone safe during the protests at two hotels in my constituency over the summer; proud of those teachers and pupils who welcome new classmates when they have been placed in one of the hotels; and really proud of those

who volunteer their time to support new arrivals, whether through local churches or other voluntary groups and charities—because that is what patriotism looks like.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks and questions. At the heart of the France pilot that we have developed is the principle that those who arrive on dangerous and illegal small boats should be returned, but alongside that we should also have a legal route for those who apply and who go through proper security checks. As part of that, we will seek to prioritise people who have a connection to the UK, such as family groups—people who have family connections to the UK. Families will continue to need to be an underpinning part of the approach. The House will recall that the Ukraine family scheme was an important part of the response to the situation in Ukraine, for which Labour called in opposition.

The family reunion arrangements are being used differently from how they were used five years ago. The number of people applying for family reunion immediately—before they have a job, a house or any way of being able to support their families—is increasing the homelessness pressures on local authorities at a time when we need them not just to do their bit to help to clear hotels, but, crucially, to provide homelessness support in the local community. It is important to ensure that arrangements for the families of refugees do not put additional pressure on the homelessness support system, so we will set out reforms and ensure that, in the interim, refugees are included in the existing arrangements that apply to all sponsors in the UK for family reunion.

We need to speed up appeals. The average appeal time is now 54 weeks, which is far too long. Some appeals go on for way longer, meaning people with repeat appeals are in asylum accommodation for years, preventing the closure of asylum hotels that needs to take place, which is why we need the reforms.

Finally, the hon. Lady raised the issue of flags. I strongly support the flying of flags across the country—we fly the St George's flag in Pontefract castle each year. As she will know, the Union flag is on the Labour party membership card—[*Interruption.*] I can show her a copy if she has not seen one. Flags should be an embodiment of bringing our country together—that will be the same in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—and a way to bring our country together through symbolism.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): A couple of years ago, I was working in local government in Scotland, trying to deal with the impact of asylum hotels. At that time, the shadow Home Secretary was a Minister in the Home Office, and he opened hotel after hotel, without even telling councils that that was happening, so his amnesia today is staggering. We did not have asylum hotels five years ago, but we have them now because the last Government signed a contract with private providers that has cost billions of pounds, putting pressure on communities, as well as being a procurement scandal. Will the Home Secretary commit to reading the report on this issue that the Home Affairs Committee is about to publish, and to looking as creatively as she can at managing those asylum contracts to get the best deal possible for the taxpayer?

Yvette Cooper: I look forward to reading the Home Affairs Committee's report and I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Committee. We have already been

working to get better value from the contracts that we inherited, which is one reason that we have saved nearly £1 billion on asylum accommodation costs since the election. He is right to point out that the previous Government completely lost control of the system in 2022. There was a total lack of planning or any grip on the situation, as well as chaos around management that was incredibly costly. The sudden surge of asylum hotels opening all over the country, with poor contracts that provided poor value for money, was bad for the taxpayer and damaging to having an effective system across the country. We cannot go back to that kind of chaos.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Home Secretary, please: we have a tinder-box situation in Epping. We have the Bell hotel, with alleged sexual and physical assaults, and now twice-weekly major protests, some of which became violent, with injuries to police officers. Appallingly, last week the Government successfully appealed against the injunction on the hotel, prioritising the rights of illegal migrants over the rights and, indeed, safety of the people of Epping. Our community is in distress. The situation is untenable. This week the schools are back. The hotel is in the wrong place, right near a school, and many concerned parents have contacted me. When will the Home Secretary and the Government listen to us, address this issue and do the right and safe thing: close the Bell hotel immediately?

Yvette Cooper: I agree that all asylum hotels need to be closed as swiftly as possible, including the Bell hotel. That needs to be done in an orderly and sustainable manner so that they are closed for good. The hon. Gentleman is not right in the characterisation of the Government's case, because we are clear that all asylum hotels need to close. We need to ensure that that is done in an ordered way that does not simply make the problem worse in other neighbouring areas or cause the kind of disordered chaos that led to the opening of so many hotels in the first place. We also need to strengthen the security and the co-operation with policing, and we want to strengthen the law on asylum seekers who commit offences and can be banned from the system. That will be part of our Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill as well.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It was Orwell who urged us to be proud of our countries and to call out the nationalists trying to demand that we express our pride or be called traitors accordingly. Let us be proud of this country and the work it has done to support people fleeing persecution; let us be proud of what we have done to help families from Ukraine and Hong Kong. I know the Home Secretary recognises that safe and legal routes for refugee children to be reunited with their parents are something that we should be proud of. In that vein, if there is to be a delay in providing those safe and legal routes, will it apply to all children, including Ukrainian children, or will we recognise that helping children so that they do not face penalties is our best and proudest action?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes important points. The new arrangements that we set out will include both stronger border security and reforms to the asylum system to make it more controlled and managed and to reduce its size, as well as to have the controlled and managed

legal routes. That needs to include arrangements for family and dedicated arrangements around unaccompanied children. My hon. Friend is right to raise that as a serious issue. Obviously we have a separate dedicated scheme for Ukraine, and we are continuing with that scheme.

On my hon. Friend's point about what we should recognise, I think that people across the country continue to support that. Having spoken to Ukrainian mums who described how they fled in the first few weeks of Putin's invasion, knowing that their home villages had been overrun by Russian troops and not knowing whether other family members were safe or whether they would ever be able to return again, let me say that we should always remember what people can be fleeing from and the importance of countries working together to support them.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Does the Home Secretary believe that the rights of the people coming over the channel in dinghies should take precedence over the rights of local residents in places such as Epping, as her lawyers argued for in court and as the Education Secretary said in an interview at the weekend?

Yvette Cooper: No, that is wrong. That is wrong about the Government's position. The Government have made it clear that all asylum hotels need to close, and they need to do so in an orderly manner that does not end up increasing the problems in other areas. We need to close the hotels for the whole country, and the judge himself has said that this is not about a hierarchy of rights.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I am very glad the Home Secretary has acknowledged that, like other countries, we have a duty to safeguard those fleeing persecution and seeking sanctuary in Britain. The reason we had 400 asylum hotels back in 2023, at a cost of £9 million a day, and we now have just over 200 asylum hotels, is that the Conservative party failed to deal with asylum claim applications, which this country and this Government are now doing. If there is any Government who will end the use of hotels for asylum seekers, it is this Labour Government.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's points. We need the consistent, practical plans that will close hotels right across the country, clear the appeals backlog, which would otherwise grow, and prevent the increase in asylum claims in the first place. We also need the restarting of decisions, because had we carried on with the freeze on asylum decisions that the previous Government left us with, there would be tens of thousands more people in hotels across the country right now. That would have been deeply wrong.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): People with a wide range of views about how to tackle immigration spoke to me over the summer, and none of them is happy with how things are. They are furious about how the Conservatives trashed our border security, and they certainly do not want the hare-brained schemes of Reform—they want action that fixes the system fast. After years of failure, will the Home Secretary finally ensure that our immigration system keeps out people who would come here for the wrong reasons, while properly supporting those who need our help?

Yvette Cooper: Yes, we need to strengthen our border security. That is why the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which is currently passing through the other place, includes the ability to use counter-terrorism powers against criminal smuggler gangs. Those powers are crucial—we need to strengthen the work of the National Crime Agency in going after those gangs, because they are pursuing a vile trade in human lives.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I do not envy the Home Secretary trying to clear up the mess that the last Government left on migration. I doubt, however, that the measures she is currently putting before the House will be as successful as she and I wish them to be. They do not really deal with the fact that many migrants are not coming from war-torn countries; they are coming from France, which is not persecuting them in any recognisable form. The reason is demand pull from this country—migrants believe they will have a better and an easier time, and get through the system more easily, in this country than they would in France or in other European countries. Denmark has been successful in reducing the demand pull. If the Home Secretary's measures are to be as successful as she wishes them to be, will she look more closely at what Denmark has done to improve the situation?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to say that obviously, small boats are mainly setting off from France—people have travelled through France. That is exactly why we have negotiated the pilot agreement with France to be able to return people there. It is the first time this has happened; it is something that previous Governments tried and completely failed to do. It is important that we do that and build on it, but we also need to tackle some of those pull factors, particularly illegal working. That is why we have had a 50% increase in illegal work raids and arrests. We also need to recognise that family reunion is being used by some criminal gangs. One thing Denmark has done is increase the time before refugees can apply for family reunion, so that they are more likely to be working and supporting their families and to prevent criminal gangs from being able to use family reunion as a pull factor.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Home Secretary has spoken about tweaks to the rules and regulations, and potentially to interpretation of the law. The problem with that, of course, is that our courts will also interpret the law, and may go against what the Home Secretary wants to do. Will she set out what changes to the law she will introduce to ensure we stop the illegal migrants coming to this country?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to change the law. First, obviously, we have the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which will bring in a whole series of changes including counter-terrorism powers, banning sex offenders from the asylum system and a new offence of endangerment. We also believe that new legal changes to the asylum system are going to be needed, and we will bring forward further legislation in order to make those changes. Later this year, we will set out detailed reforms—not just on appeals, but more widely around the asylum system—to enable us to tackle some of both the historic chaos and the delays in the system, and to get that system back under control.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): As many are aware, a number of well-known delivery companies and other companies are employing asylum seekers with no right to work, which is helping to incentivise the boat crossings and ultimately to undermine our national security. Will the Home Secretary liaise with the Treasury before the Budget to discuss bringing in a windfall tax on some of those delivery companies, so that they can start contributing to the cost of a problem that they are helping to exacerbate?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the gig economy and the need to ensure that it does not become rife with abuse and misuse when it comes to illegal working. That is why we are bringing in—again, in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which unfortunately the Conservatives and Reform have continued to vote against—requirements for employers in the gig economy to abide by checks on illegal working. We have also recently signed with some of the major delivery companies a new agreement to share information, so that we can target abuse and crime.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): What a country the UK is becoming! Rarely has the national mood been so ugly and intimidating. People are congregating at hotels, screaming at asylum seekers to go home, and those on the right wing are so emboldened that they feel the streets belong to them. Does the Home Secretary not realise that every time she moves on to Reform's ground, all she is doing is further encouraging and emboldening them? How about trying something different? How about just occasionally saying something positive about immigration? How about not dehumanising asylum seekers, and instead showing them some compassion, decency and humanity?

Yvette Cooper: I just point out to the hon. Member that I have spoken about Ukrainian mums and their experiences fleeing from Putin; the students in Gaza who currently cannot take up their places—we are working on expedited visas for them, so that they can pursue a better future—and the importance of having a proper, legal and controlled route as part of an effective system. That has been part of our history, but we also have to have a system that is properly controlled and managed. We have to have a system that is not open to abuse, misuse and exploitation by criminal gangs. We also need stronger border security, so that it is Government, and not gangs, who choose who comes to our country.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement. There is a lot to unpick, and we need more detail on this new appeals system. One of my key concerns when I was in the Home Office many years ago was the poor legal advice that people were getting early on. Lawyers were making them jump through many hopeless hoops to extend their stay unnecessarily. They were putting them in a miserable situation, costing the taxpayer, and creating chaos and duplication in the system. Is the Home Secretary looking at what legal advice people will get at an early stage, so that appeals and processes can be expedited?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is a former Home Office Minister; she has a lot of experience with immigration case issues, and real concerns about the advice people

are given and the way that decisions are made. We are strengthening some of the regulation, and improving the way the legal advice system works, in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. I would be happy to talk to my hon. Friend further about this issue.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Stanwell hotel in my constituency is being used to house asylum seekers. I wrote to Home Office Ministers on 24 July, again on 25 July, and again on 29 July, and I have had zero responses to any of those letters. Please will the Home Secretary show some respect to my constituents and the people of Spelthorne and reply to their questions and concerns?

Yvette Cooper: I will ensure that the hon. Member gets a written response to his questions, but let me also make it clear that all asylum hotels, including the hotel in his constituency, need to close. They need to do so in an orderly manner, and in a way that does not make the problem worse elsewhere or create more chaos, as we have seen in the past. That is the best way for us to reduce the size of the asylum system, to clear all the backlogs, and to ensure that we have an effective system.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): The European convention on human rights is an important bedrock, protecting not only vulnerable people's rights here in the UK, but also our strong international relationships, which were crucial to securing the returns deal with France, and co-operation with Germany and other European partners on finally clamping down on the scourge of the people smuggling gangs that we inherited. Leaving the ECHR fully cannot be a solution to our problems, but that does not mean that every aspect of it works in the right way, and it is clear that it stands in the way of our taking some actions that we need to take if we are to deal with this issue seriously. I welcome the Home Secretary's clarification of how we will take forward interpretation of article 8. May I seek confirmation that we will not shy away from further clarification, like the clarification she gave today, where the ECHR is getting in the way of the action that we know we need to take to provide the border security that our country is crying out for?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to talk about international law, and the ECHR being part of the reason why we have been able to get international agreements; other countries know that we will abide by international law. That is how we got the French pilot, which the previous Government were repeatedly unable to do. The way in which the ECHR is interpreted is significant and needs to keep up to date. We have a challenge around article 8 and family cases; far too many cases are being treated as exceptions to the rules that Parliament has set. We think the rules need to change for us to address that, and we need to work through changes to how article 8 in particular is interpreted in our immigration and asylum system. We will set out more details on that in our asylum reform package later this year.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Every time the Home Secretary announces a new policy on illegal migration, illegal migration goes up, so I think a period of silence would be most welcome from her. Does she

agree that the only way to stop the pull factor is to detain, deport and never allow illegal migrants to claim asylum in this country?

Yvette Cooper: The pilot scheme we have agreed with France involves, for the first time, our being able to detain people on their arrival in Dover—this has not happened before—and return them to France, where the boats set off from. Previous Governments, including the one that the hon. Gentleman supported and was part of, were unable to agree or achieve that. We have also increased returns of failed asylum seekers by nearly 30% since the election alone, because we believe that the rules need to be enforced, and that returns need to be increased. The problem with his party's approach is that it sounds a lot like the last Tory Government's grand promises, which totally failed. His party is just rehashing the same chaotic promises, without ever being able to provide the detail of how it would make any of its policies work. The British way is to roll up our sleeves and do things in a practical way, increase returns, and sort the problems out.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The Home Secretary said in her statement that she will never “seek to stir up chaos, division or hate”, yet that is what we have seen this summer. The far right are emboldened, because of racism and demonisation in the media and from politicians. Instead of scapegoating refugees and asylum seekers, perhaps the Home Secretary needs to be thinking about more humane policies, including safe routes, employment and the right to remain. Can she explain whether these policies have been, or will be, considered?

Yvette Cooper: The French pilot scheme involves allowing people who apply lawfully and go through proper security checks to come to the UK on a one-for-one basis, as we return those who have arrived on dangerous small boats in the hands of criminal gangs. I also set out in my statement our intention to have a permanent framework under which refugee students can come to the UK, rather than our taking an ad hoc approach, as we currently do to Gaza students. There needs to be a more systematic approach, as well as capped and controlled approaches to other refugee work programmes. That has to come alongside better controls and management of the existing system, which has become chaotic, with long delays and the undermining of our border security by criminal gangs. We have to do these things together, in a way that pulls our country together, rather than seeing division and tension continue.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Reform announced in the summer that it would house all asylum seekers on former RAF bases. In my constituency, RAF Linton-on-Ouse was ruled out, on the grounds that its location in a small village made that inappropriate. Will the Home Secretary confirm that she has no plans to reverse the decision to rule out such inappropriate RAF bases?

Yvette Cooper: Obviously, we do not want asylum accommodation in inappropriate places. We must reduce the overall size of the asylum system, while ensuring that we can move people, when possible, from hotels to alternative and better sites. Any arrangement that is

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aimed simply at expanding the asylum system, as happens if there is a freeze on asylum decisions—and some of the policies that Reform is unfortunately pursuing risk increasing the number of people stuck in the asylum system, because Reform has no plans for practical returns—will make the problem worse. We need practical changes to bring the numbers down.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): It has come to my attention that in government, the job of Home Secretary does not always attract the greatest thanks, so I want to thank my right hon. Friend for the response that she and her Department have given to the letter from 100 colleagues about the Gaza students, and for what she said this afternoon about considering a permanent scheme. Will she confirm, however, that the visas, when they are issued, will be the same as any international student visa, in that the scholars will be able to bring their families and dependants with them?

Yvette Cooper: As my hon. Friend will know, many student visas do not allow students to bring dependants to the United Kingdom. There will be exceptional circumstances, such as those involving Gaza, but the overall approach—for example, to student visas relating to masters courses—is not to include dependants. We do, however, want to ensure that the refugee route for students is available, recognising that some people will be able to come and be educated at UK universities to develop their incredible talents, but will want to return to their home countries in future to rebuild them. There may be others who are not able to return, because that is the nature of the crisis we face.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): In her statement, the Home Secretary mentioned that the National Crime Agency had disrupted 347 immigration crime networks. Can she tell us how many gangs were smashed during the same period?

Yvette Cooper: Many of those disruptions are exactly about pursuing gangs, and there are more than 40 high-profile and high-value disruptions that the National Crime Agency itself has said are having a significant impact on degrading, undermining and stopping the criminal gangs. Some of the arrests that have been co-ordinated with France and Germany are also preventing criminal gang activity by, for instance, taking out the leaders of some of those gangs.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Is it any wonder that an Opposition Member described the shadow Home Secretary's asylum policy as "silly", given that it was a Conservative Government who failed to process claims, filled up hotels, left people in limbo and broke the bank in the process, just as they broke the bank when it came to everything that they touched? Opening asylum hotels did not happen on our watch, and we want to shut them. We want to save the public purse significant sums of money, and we want to get the system right. Will the Home Secretary tell the people of Bournemouth East, whom I represent, how she is speeding up the process of closing asylum hotels in Bournemouth and in Britain?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We need to end asylum hotels across the board, and that means ensuring that we can clear the appeals backlogs through major appeals reform, because that is currently the main obstacle to the faster closure of hotels. It means preventing people from taking up accommodation in the first place when they are not entitled to it, and it means looking for alternative sites that are more appropriate, which will mean working with other Government Departments. It also means, crucially, recognising that carrying on with the system that we inherited—the frozen system, in which the last Government were not returning people and not making asylum decisions—would have left us with tens of thousands more people in asylum hotels. That is the system that Conservative Members want to go back to, but it would be deeply damaging for my hon. Friend's constituents, and for the country.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Providing safer routes for refugees is not going to eradicate the entire problem—none of us is saying that it will—but it is surely part of the solution to stopping trafficking across the channel. Is it not just cruel madness to restrict family reunion, which is one of the few safe routes that currently exist, particularly when we know that 93% of the refugee family reunion visas granted this year were for women and children? Will this not increase the number of people putting themselves at the mercy of evil traffickers, and the number of tragedies in the channel?

Yvette Cooper: I know that this is an issue in which the hon. Member has taken a very strong interest over a long period of time. Since he and I first started discussing this issue many years ago, the way in which the family reunion system is used has changed. It has gone from people applying one or two years after they have refugee protection here in the UK to people applying in around a month. That means that the people applying have often not left asylum accommodation or asylum hotels. They do not have housing, jobs or ways to support family members whom they seek to bring to the UK, and we have also seen that criminal gangs are using and exploiting the system. That is why we are temporarily pausing the existing refugee family reunion route, and we will consult on the new arrangements that should be brought in. We will aim to bring in some of those arrangements by this spring.

In the interim, refugees will be covered by exactly the same rules as everyone else, and by the same conditions as everyone else, through the appendix FM process. But there is a concern, because there are no conditions on refugee family reunion at the moment. The way in which it is being used has changed, and there is a responsibility on us to not have huge problems with homelessness assistance for local authorities, and to have a managed system that also supports contributions and does not simply end up being exploited by criminal gangs.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and I recognise the complexity of the issues that she is facing. I was very struck by Lord Dubs's description of his personal circumstances on the radio this morning. His father left Prague as soon as the Nazis invaded in 1939. Lord Dubs got Kindertransport—he was one

of the last ones out—and his mother followed a few months later. That is not the one or two-year timetable that we have talked about in terms of the parity of the scheme, so perhaps there needs to be an “Alf Dubs test” that would make sure that families facing similar circumstances, where their lives are in jeopardy, would be protected. He also mentioned ensuring that people understand why people flee as refugees. The conflation between economic migrants and refugees is, frankly, very unhelpful.

Yvette Cooper: I recognise the important points that my hon. Friend makes and the work that Lord Dubs has done over many years, particularly in championing unaccompanied child refugees. We have recognised that there will need to be dedicated arrangements that recognise the particular plight of unaccompanied child refugees, but this needs to be done in a properly controlled and managed way, which it has not been for a long time. Under the existing systems that will apply to everyone over the next six months while we bring in the new arrangements, there are always provisions for exceptional circumstances, but we need to prevent the current system from pushing significant homelessness pressure on to local authorities, and from being exploited by criminal gangs.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The only effective measure of the Government’s actions is the number of crossings, isn’t it?

Yvette Cooper: There is a big problem with the small boats, as we have seen the criminal gangs change their tactics, particularly to exploit the French rules meaning that, up until now, France has not been intervening in French waters. Not just that, but people who have come to the UK lawfully, but are coming to the end of their visas, are claiming asylum when nothing has changed in their country. We need to ensure tighter rules about that, as well as action on border security to prevent dangerous boat crossings, which undermine security and put lives at risk.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): My constituency, like Britain as a whole, has long been home to people of all faiths and cultures who came here or whose forebears came here from all around the world. Over the summer, we have seen the growth of ugly rhetoric, including the term “indigenous Britons”, which risks a culture of fear in many of our communities. What are the Government doing to address this insidious trend?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Ours is a country that has been strengthened through many generations by people coming to our shores from all over the world to work, reunite with family, be part of communities, set up businesses and be part of our public services, particularly our national health service. They have done so for generation after generation. That is an important part of our country and will continue to be so for the future. We have had long debates about how the immigration system of course needs to be controlled and managed, but we also recognise the need for our country to come together. Whatever their history or family history, people must be able to come together and be proud of the country that Great Britain is, not be divided, pursue hatred or pit people against each other.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Our communities are divided, and they are scared. We—all of us—want to be with our families, and communities are at their strongest when family life is protected and supported. If the Secretary of State lifted the ban on asylum seekers working, she would be giving those who subsequently achieve refugee status a stronger footing to support their families and be ready to join our communities, and they would not need to seek the homelessness relief she mentioned. Instead of keeping children and their families apart, why does she not help families to support themselves?

Yvette Cooper: I know that the hon. Member will be as concerned as I am about the lives at risk in small boat crossings, and we have to do everything we can to prevent those dangerous boat crossings, including when families are on them. However, part of what the criminal gangs do—it is part of their sell—is to claim that it will be really easy to work, and that is to work illegally, in the UK. It is part of their pitch, and that is one of the reasons why it is so important to tackle illegal working. That promise of being able to work easily and get income is one of the things the criminal gangs exploit to get a lot of people to part with their money and get involved in the criminal gangs’ vile trade.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I was struck by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) about the importance of good and appropriate legal advice for people seeking immigration status in the UK. I recall two cases in which constituents have been very badly let down by their solicitors, and I have brought those two cases to the attention of the Home Office. Given that justice is devolved to the Scottish Government, when changes are made to the regulation of this issue will the Home Secretary commit to discussing this with the Scottish Government and, if necessary, the Law Society of Scotland?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the points my hon. Friend makes about legal advice on migration issues. Immigration is not a devolved issue, and we need to ensure high standards of legal advice right across the country. We obviously have such discussions with all the devolved Administrations, and we will continue to do so as the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill passes through Parliament.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Will the Home Secretary set out how many migrants will be returned to France over the coming 12 months?

Yvette Cooper: We have set out that this is a pilot, and that we want to build and grow it. There is no cap on the overall numbers to go as part of the pilot, and we need to build it as we go. We have also said that we will not set out the kinds of operational details that criminal gangs will simply use and manipulate, but we will provide updates, as each month goes by, on the progress of the scheme. It is important in two ways: first, it is the basis from which we can then expand to actually be able to return people to France and undermine the model of the criminal gangs; and underpinning this is a fairness principle, which is that if you arrive on a dangerous illegal small boat and pay a criminal gang, you should

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be returned. But we should do our bit, alongside other countries, to help those who apply through a legal route and go through proper security checks.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): This summer, my community has been deeply divided by misinformation about asylum hotels and local crime rates. This has been exploited by parts of the national media and, frankly, Conservative and Reform politicians and local activist groups seeking simply to stoke fear. Like everyone on the Labour Benches, I stood on a manifesto to end hotel use, so can I thank the Home Secretary for getting on with the job of restoring order to our asylum system to address the chaos left by the previous Government? Can she reassure my constituents that we remain committed to tackling the vile organised crime gangs that drive the boats, to clearing the asylum backlog to give those who are seeking asylum the chance to restore their lives here and give them certainty, and to ending hotel use in communities like mine and across the country?

Yvette Cooper: As my hon. Friend says, we made clear in our manifesto that we will end asylum hotel use. We need to put an end to asylum hotel use right across the country, and to do so in an orderly way. We also need to ensure that the rules are properly enforced and laws are properly respected. We will strengthen the law. That is why, for example, the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill bans sex offenders from the asylum system and strengthens counter-terrorism powers to go after the criminal gangs. It is astonishing, frankly, that the Conservatives and Reform refuse to support it, when we need those laws in place as rapidly as possible. We will do so alongside ensuring that there are proper controlled and managed legal ways to support refugees, as our country has always done, because that is a proud part of our history.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Past waves of refugees who came to this country quite rightly had to identify themselves and come here legally. What percentage, does the Home Secretary think, of people who arrive illegally by small boats do so having torn up their identification documents, and should such people ever be granted asylum?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member will know that there are different identity checks as part of the asylum system. Those are tested through the courts. One of the reasons asylum claims can be turned down is if there is a lack of credibility in the application. That can be a lack of credibility because of concerns about deliberately lost documents, for example, or not having proper identity information. It is important that we do that. It is why we are also increasing the digital ID and biometric checks as part of the ways to prevent illegal working, and linking that back to the biometric asylum system.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): Illegal working not only undermines the integrity of our immigration system, it erodes trust in our communities. In Aldershot, constituents have raised concerns about people continuing to work illegally even after reports have been made to the Home Office. That risks leaving local people feeling that the

system is neither fair nor properly enforced. I welcome that Home Office illegal working raids are up 50%, but what action are the Government taking to strengthen enforcement and how is the Home Office ensuring that reports are acted on swiftly, so that trust in our communities can be maintained?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have increased illegal working arrests and raids by 50% and significantly increased the fines for employers engaged in illegal working. Further to that, the organised immigration crime domestic taskforce, which brings together policing here in the UK, is looking at the ways in which organised immigration crime networks are linked to organised crime and the exploitation of illegal workers in the UK, so it is about going after some of those employers operating bogus tactics, alongside the existing raids.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Home Secretary's confirmation in her statement of the expedited visas for students, particularly those from Gaza. I wrote to both the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary this summer to appeal for exactly this move, and I know how welcome it will be to those students.

The Home Secretary talks about a capped work scheme. We talk a lot about the pressure on local authorities and the cost to the taxpayer. Does she not agree that if we gave asylum seekers the right to work, pay national insurance and tax and contribute, they would then be carrying their own burden, and they would no longer be a weight on the taxpayer?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the campaigning the hon. Lady has done to support students in Gaza, because the situation we are seeing there is horrendous. The Foreign Secretary will shortly make a statement about the truly abominable situation in Gaza, as well as the work we are doing to get out students who have fully funded places in the UK and provide them with support.

On the hon. Lady's question, I would say that the criminal smuggling gangs use the potential to work in the UK as a pull factor—as part of their advertising—which is a point the French Government have raised many times. The challenge with the scenario she sets out is that it would make it even easier for the criminal gangs to use that factor as part of their advertising to try to persuade people to part with their money and make an incredibly dangerous journey across the channel.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): The stigmatising and dehumanising of asylum seekers has stirred up race hate in our communities, thankfully by only a small number, and I have been really disturbed to see that racism perpetrated on the streets of York. However, I am even more disturbed to hear that there are planned assaults on asylum hotels across the country, not least in York, where we have children and families staying. What policing operations will be in place to protect those children and families from this hate and ensure their safety over the coming weeks?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to point out the dangers of divisive, dehumanising language towards other human beings and to point to our shared humanity. We can have disagreements with people; we can have different views about the way in which systems should work and rules should be enforced and we can recognise

that there will be people who have to be returned because they have no right to be in the UK. However, we can also avoid the kind of demonising language that ends up escalating tensions or promoting hatred and violence—something that we in this country should never do.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The Home Secretary has today described the people smugglers as criminals and the boat crossings as illegal. Does she therefore agree that the 29,000 individuals who have entered this country illegally from France this year should be classified as lawbreakers who should at least be deported straightaway or be banned from claiming asylum in the future?

Yvette Cooper: The laws on illegal entry go right back to 1972, I think; the issue of illegal entry is long standing. I say to the hon. Gentleman that the policy of the previous Government—his Government—was to claim that everybody was going to be returned to France or sent to Rwanda, but they ran their scheme in Rwanda for two and a half years during which time only four volunteers were sent, so nobody was returned, and they never managed to return anybody to France. We are clear that we believe that people who arrive on dangerous boat crossings or via illegal routes should be returned to France. We have set up the pilot scheme to develop that; we want to build it. It is something the previous Government never managed to do. There is no point in their fantasy claims—we need practical steps, which is what we are doing with France.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): One of the hotels that houses asylum seekers in Kent is the Holiday Inn in Ashford. The decision to house them there was taken by the Conservatives when they were in power. Many people living there are going through an appeal process, so I welcome the decision to speed up the appeals process. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me and my constituents that this Government will end the use of the Holiday Inn as an asylum hotel as soon as possible?

Yvette Cooper: I assure my hon. Friend that we will end the use of asylum hotels, including the hotel in his constituency. Part of the way we will do that is by clearing the appeals backlog. The reason for setting up the new independent appeals commission is so that it can swiftly surge capacity if there are changes in the number of cases going to appeal. It will be able to respond much more quickly and some of the procedures will be changed so that it can fast-track decision making and returns for those who do not have a right to be in the UK.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): After the horrors of the last century, we pledged to protect people fleeing war and persecution. That included parents and their children. Today the asylum system is in chaos, and this serves no one save those who peddle hatred. Border Force staff represented by the Public and Commercial Services Union have produced a “Safe Routes” report outlining how a Ukrainian-style visa system would prevent deaths in the channel and stop the smuggling gangs overnight. Will the Home Secretary listen to officers on the frontline who are seeking to deliver a practical and humane solution to the present chaos?

Yvette Cooper: The principle behind the France pilot, which we want to build and grow, is that people can apply through a legal process and go through proper security checks but that we will return people who come on these dangerous small boats facilitated by criminal gangs. That principle is really important. We want a system that can better return those who are being exploited by criminal gangs and using illegal entry, and we will do that by undermining their business model. Alongside that, we will do what our country has always done throughout history: provide a legal process—controlled and managed—to support those who have fled persecution and conflict. That is what happened as part of the Ukraine scheme, and it is what we now seek to do as part of a refugee approach to students. We need a proper system across the board that both brings control to a chaotic system and is true to our historic values.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I commend her for the way she is working with our neighbouring countries to deal with this problem. The approach of the previous Government was basically to stand on the cliffs of Dover shouting abuse across the channel and to tell them that they should keep all refugees and we would take none. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are going to provide a solution to this problem, it has to come from the sort of co-operation that she has been working on?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend; we saw what happened under the previous Government and the system we inherited. That Government made grand but empty claims about where people were going to be returned to but had none of the agreements and nothing workable in place to actually do it. Instead, they had people stuck—potentially indefinitely—in the asylum system, which would have meant increasing numbers of asylum hotels. In contrast, we have already achieved a 28% increase in returns of failed asylum seekers and put in place the foundations for building a new approach with France and other European countries. I think that most people recognise the complexity of this issue rather than the fantasy promise approach, which ends up undermining trust.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Does the Home Secretary accept that some of the UK's adversaries are seeking to weaponise illegal migration, and does she share my concern about the growing nexus between malign state actors and non-state actors, such as the criminal gangs she has mentioned? If she accepts that that collaboration and malevolent co-operation is going on, does she then agree that it is a national security threat and that even though there will be more counter-terrorism powers under the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill for the National Crime Agency, which I welcome, there should also be more collaboration between the Security Service and the National Crime Agency?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the points made by the right hon. Member. The Prime Minister said last year that border security is a national security issue; he is right about that. He is also right that we see malign forces attempting to exploit and undermine border security,

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and he is right to talk about the interaction we see sometimes between malign state-backed threats and organised immigration crime. That is why we already have growing co-operation between the intelligence and security agencies and the National Crime Agency, who are looking at some of those smuggler gang threats and routes; they have pursued further issues there. They are also looking at strengthened checks that we may be able to do at our borders. His points strengthen the argument for international co-operation with other law enforcement and intelligence and security agencies.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): In a previous life, I worked on the Turkey-Greece returns deal, which returned refugees who had crossed in small boats from Turkey to the Greek islands in return for properly registered asylum seekers in Turkey. As we all know, that deal drastically reduced the number of small boats that crossed into Turkey. Does the Home Secretary think that the UK's deal with France, negotiated just last month, is already having a deterrent effect? Might that be connected to our having seen the smallest number of crossings in August since 2019?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that crossings in August were at their lowest for several years even though there was the same level of crossing days as last summer. He will know that a lot of different factors are involved. We have been seeking with France, through the implementation of its maritime review, to be able to make stronger interventions.

I welcome the point that my hon. Friend made about the Greece-Turkey deal, which did have a significant impact on those crossings. That is why we believe that pursuing this co-operation with France is the right thing to do. I welcome the work that the French Government have done to support the pilot agreement on returns.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): As an Eastbourne boy born and bred, I am a proud Englishman. In Winston Churchill's St George's day speech in 1933, he said that his England was one where no one would think of persecuting a man on account of his religion or his race. Does the Home Secretary agree with Winston Churchill that our country and our flag represent unity and tolerance? Does she agree with me that those who attempt to divide our communities in the name of our flag are no patriots of Churchill's England, no patriots of today's England and no patriots of our great country?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the hon. Member about the importance of patriotism that brings our country together. That is what our flags symbolise and what our values as a country symbolise. Obviously, the Union Jack is in itself as a flag the very embodiment of coming together. For those of us who represent English constituencies, we are proud to fly the St George's flag and proud to stand up for the shared values that he described—there is patriotism around those English values and British values—about coming together, fairness, decency and respect; that is what we do. That is why we all want an ordered system that criminal gangs cannot exploit—we respect the rule of law—but it is also why we should never discuss any of these issues in a way that promotes hate and division. That is not the kind of country we are.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): At the start of the summer, I welcomed the Government's decisive action in sanctioning Chinese companies involved in manufacturing and supplying boats used by criminal gangs to facilitate dangerous channel crossings. Disrupting those supply chains is a vital part of smashing the gangs. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what discussions she has had with international counterparts to co-ordinate efforts to target those companies and ensure that the sanctions are enforced globally?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to welcome the Foreign Secretary's introduction of sanctions for criminal smuggler gangs, and this is the first time that has been done. We also have extensive co-operation through the National Crime Agency. For example, we have massively strengthened the co-operation with Iraq, because we know that Iraqi Kurdish gangs are operating in northern France. We have recently signed a new agreement with Iraq, as well as with Turkey, Bulgaria, Belgium, France and, crucially, with Germany, which is going to change its law to help us go after the criminal gangs and their supply chains. The work that is being done to disrupt supply chains is having an impact. It is significant, too, that we are seeing not only disruptions and arrests internationally as well as in the UK; we are also seeing fewer boats physically crossing, although the criminal gangs are resorting to overcrowding those boats instead.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I note that the Appeal Court judges in last Thursday's judgment were using article 8 of the European convention on human rights as a reason for the interim injunction on the Bell hotel to be quashed, yet the Home Secretary has argued in her statement today that she wants to alter the interpretation of that same article 8. Would not a much better, quicker and more effective route be the one proposed by the shadow Home Secretary this afternoon—namely, simply to disapply all immigration matters from the European Court of Human Rights?

Yvette Cooper: That is not my understanding of what those on the Opposition Front Bench were arguing for; that was about the Human Rights Act risking there being more issues with the domestic courts being unable to take decisions before things go to the European courts, but I will leave the hon. Gentleman to wrangle with his party about what its position is. We think there needs to be reform of the way article 8 is interpreted. Too many cases around family rules have been treated as exceptions, and that higher level of decision making cannot be exceptional if so many cases are being treated as exceptions. This means that we need to look at the rules themselves, and we also need much greater clarity about the way we believe those rules should be interpreted, and the way family migration should be interpreted in the courts.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Much has been said about the role of the European convention on human rights, and it appears that the party of Churchill is seeking to abandon his legacy in its lurch towards the right, just as there is a growing consensus among European nations that we need to modernise it for today's times. Does the Home Secretary agree that Britain should be part of leading that change, rather than leaving and turning us into Belarus or Russia?

Yvette Cooper: We have a strong history of leading on international standards and international legal frameworks. Of course, laws and the ways in which they are interpreted need to move with the times and keep up to date with the new challenges, including in a world of mass communications where we face very different kinds of challenges than we did 20 or 50 years ago. My hon. Friend is right to say that the UK has always played that leading role in defining those standards, and in making sure that other countries abide by international laws. We will lose out and not get the kind of international co-operation that we need if we just rip up that international law and co-operation.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I am proud that this country helps refugees, and I am intensely proud that I spent years building a charity working with Rwandan refugees from the genocide, but in Horley there have been two serious criminal incidents in the past three months relating to the Four Points hotel. My constituents have legitimate safety concerns, although the police have acted promptly, so what steps is the Home Secretary taking to ensure that the Four Points hotel is closed as an asylum hotel as soon as possible?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point. We want all asylum hotels to close, including in his constituency, and we need to do that in a controlled and orderly manner. We also need to strengthen the arrangements, to ensure that the law and the rules are enforced and that public safety considerations are taken seriously as part of the management of the whole asylum and immigration system. That is why we are developing new partnerships between policing, immigration enforcement, the Home Office and asylum accommodation providers. It is immensely important that there is proper shared information and stronger arrangements to ensure that criminality, wherever is found, it is properly and swiftly tackled.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Home Secretary, the former Immigration Minister, has some brass neck, do we not think? He opened so many hotels that at one stage I thought he might take over from Lenny Henry in fronting Premier Inn. My constituents are so fed up with this, and I am glad that the Home Secretary is taking it so seriously, getting the numbers down. While we do everything we can to get the numbers down, does she agree that everyone involved in the debate, particularly politicians, should not incite or encourage the sort of aggression and, actually, sheer racism that we have seen over the summer, some of which was directed towards our brave police officers?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that the previous Government, including the shadow Home Secretary when he was Immigration Minister, were responsible for a huge increase in asylum hotels and presided over a tenfold increase in small boat crossings. The important thing now is to ensure that we can end asylum hotels and bring back control into the system. But as we do so, we should ensure that we do not have divisive or hateful rhetoric, or anything that promotes violence against police officers or within communities, which is always a disgrace.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The Home Secretary is right to talk about tackling the push and pull factors—something we worked towards tackling when we were in government, despite challenges with bringing forward the use of third countries. That is because we need both a deterrent and a place to send people whose country of origin we either do not know or we do not have a returns agreement with. It is no surprise to me that arrivals have increased since that scheme was scrapped. I understand that a period of reset is happening in Downing Street, so how long before we can expect her to come to the Dispatch Box to introduce a third-country scheme?

Yvette Cooper: This Government have managed to get the agreement with France in place—that pilot agreement that we seek to build. France, obviously, is not the country where most of the people passing through started from, so it is effectively a third-country agreement that we have already put in place and are now working to implement on a pilot basis. We are also working with other European countries to explore returns hubs. But what we do not think is the right thing to do is have an incredibly expensive programme that sent just four volunteers and, during the two years-plus that it was in operation, ended up costing £700 million while 84,000 people arrived in the UK.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Peterborough is a proud and generous place and has welcomed many people through its doors over generations. I pay tribute to the churches, mosques and community groups that are welcoming people and looking after them. But people are getting fed up with a system that is broken, and it was broken before my right hon. Friend became Home Secretary. Many of my constituents will welcome the record deportations and the focus on article 8 and making efficiencies in driving forward the system. But to be honest, the biggest issue in my constituency remains the hotel that was opened by Serco with no consultation with the police or the council beforehand. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that she will ensure that there is no single bureaucratic block and no stone left unturned in getting the Dragonfly hotel closed as soon as possible, as part of fixing this rotten, broken system?

Yvette Cooper: We have made it clear that we need to end all asylum hotels, including the hotel in my hon. Friend's constituency. It is because we believe in the UK's long history of helping those fleeing persecution and conflict in an ordered way that we also need to get control and fix the chaos that we inherited, including ending asylum hotels, which are undermining confidence in the whole system and were introduced exactly because the previous Government lost control of the system. That is what now needs to be turned around, and those are the foundations we are putting in place.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Home Secretary has touched on it a couple of times, but I am yet to hear from her about the scope of the Government's asylum accommodation programme, which is currently rated "amber". Despite the fact that 29,003 asylum seekers have arrived by small boat so far this year, the scope of the programme, following its strategic refresh, will mean the creation of only 5,000 bed spaces by the

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

end of 2026, spread across three accommodation pilots. Where will those three pilots be, how many bed spaces will each have, and at what stage is each one?

Yvette Cooper: We are developing alternative approaches to asylum accommodation, including work with local councils that have come forward and with other Departments. We will provide an update as we make progress. Two things need to happen together: the shift to alternative sites must follow value-for-money tests—not having the proper assessments in place was a mistake that often happened in the past, as the Public Accounts Committee identified—and we must reduce the number of people in the asylum accommodation system overall. If we do not reduce the numbers in the system but simply move the problem around from place to place, we will not solve it and get it back under control.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Ensuring that we have a humane and functioning asylum and immigration system requires competence, credibility and compassion. I welcome the credible plan that the Government have put in place. Our approach must also be holistic, part of which means tackling the root causes of displacement, conflict and persecution. The Home Secretary has touched on how we are working with other countries, but will she also talk about how she is working across Government to address those drivers of displacement?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's point. She is absolutely right to say that any comprehensive and effective approach—internationally, not just here in the UK—must consider the causes and drivers of mass migration: people fleeing persecution and conflict, and the economic migration issues that have caused significant challenges. The Foreign Secretary and I have set up a joint migration team to work closely on some of those issues, and he has also made issues around migration a key priority for the Foreign Office. This is clearly an important cross-Government issue on which we are working together.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): When Labour was in opposition, it attacked the Conservatives on the small number of asylum seekers who had been removed to Rwanda as part of the Tory deterrent. Now that the Conservatives are in opposition, they are attacking Labour for the small number of asylum seekers who will be removed to France as part of the Labour deterrent. Does the Home Secretary accept that, in order for a deterrent to work, people considering that dangerous crossing need to know that it may be in vain?

Yvette Cooper: We have established the agreement with France as a pilot agreement, and we want to develop and expand it. It allows us to detain people immediately on arrival at Western Jet Foil in Dover in order then to be returned. The first cases have been referred to France, and we expect the first returns to start during the course of this month. As well as the impact of undermining the criminal business model of the gangs—the deterrence that the hon. Gentleman talks about—there is the important principle that people arriving illegally on dangerous boats having paid criminal

gangs should be returned, but the UK should do its bit, in a controlled and managed way alongside other countries, for those who apply through legal routes and go through proper security checks.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement and strongly welcome the enforcement action taken recently by UK Border Force, Cumbria police and local trading standards to crack down on illegal trading and illegal retail work in my Carlisle constituency. Will she reassure my constituents that there will be no let-up in that enforcement activity, and that the same rigour will be applied to migrant workers employed as delivery riders?

Yvette Cooper: I, too, welcome the law enforcement work in my hon. Friend's constituency. We have set up a domestic organised immigration crime taskforce to work across different police forces on the networks that are exploiting illegal working, which often have networks into all kinds of other organised crime, undermine communities and town centres, and exploit individuals and border security. We are strengthening that domestic work, which had never before been done, as a result of the report by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): On the watch of this Home Secretary, 2025 has been the worst year on record for small boat crossings. The Government claim that they want to end the use of asylum hotels, but the right hon. Lady is not telling us when they will do that. I would like reassurance that we will not see an increase in houses in multiple occupation, local houses or flats being rented for those individuals, or any increase in costs for local councils.

Yvette Cooper: Unfortunately, the Conservative Front Benchers want us to go back to the position that we inherited from the previous Government. Their freeze on asylum decisions would have left us with tens of thousands more people in asylum hotels. We will end asylum hotels over the course of this Parliament, not simply by moving people to different kinds of accommodation—that is an important point—but by reducing the overall size of the asylum system. The previous Government's policies were doing the opposite and increasing it. If we do not reduce the overall size of the asylum system, we will never solve the problem, or rebuild the confidence of people across the UK.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): In the east end of London, we have a proud history of welcoming refugees and migrants, many of them fleeing war and persecution, but over recent years and months, the political and media establishment has been complicit in the normalisation of Islamophobia and anti-migrant rhetoric. Over the summer, there have been campaigns to target asylum seekers outside hotels, and people have resorted to violent aggression, including yesterday in my constituency. That is putting all of us at risk. What exactly will the Home Secretary do to ensure that asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and all those who live in my constituency are safe from attempts—including those organised by the far right—to create fear and division in our area?

Yvette Cooper: Everyone has a right to be safe, and to respect. The pursuit of division, hatred and violence is never acceptable, in the immigration and asylum system or more widely across our country. It is hugely important that alongside all the reforms that we introduce—we do need reform to the system—we have clear recognition of our shared humanity and the need to prevent any kind of violence and hatred, or the tensions and problems that my hon. Friend describes.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): With the number of crossings up more than 40% this year alone, at some 30,000, clearly the Government's policies are acting as a magnet, not a deterrent. When will the Home Secretary realise that the only effective deterrent is to detain and deport everyone who comes here illegally, and that to do that, we must leave the European convention on human rights?

Yvette Cooper: This Government have, since the election, increased the number of returns of those who have no right to be here. There has been a 28% increase in returns of failed asylum seekers. We are strengthening enforcement and bringing in new counter-terrorism powers that allow us to go after the criminal gangs. Incomprehensibly, the hon. Gentleman's party voted against those counter-terrorism powers. It seems to oppose the action that we need to take to go after the criminal gangs. If he and the Conservatives were to support the new powers, we could bring them in swiftly, in the course of a few months, and give our law enforcement the power to take stronger action against the criminal gangs. I hope that he supports the agreement with France, which provides for the immediate detention of people arriving in the UK, and their return to France. The trouble with his party's policies is that they sound an awful lot like the previous Conservative Government's policies, which totally failed. The Conservative Government were chaos; his party seems to be chaos on steroids. His party is not trying to solve the problem. All it is trying to do is exploit it. We need a properly controlled and managed system that goes after the criminal gangs, who should not be able to get away with their vile trade.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): Gloucester has a proud history as a welcoming and diverse city. Just last week, I was pleased to attend the Ukrainian independence day celebrations in my constituency with some of those who have sought refuge in our city. However, many constituents have written to me, particularly those who live next door to the asylum hotel that was opened by the last Conservative Government, with legitimate concerns about the future of that site, and the impact on them of things like protests on their front doorstep. Will the Home Secretary reassure my constituents that the policy that she has announced today will speed up the end of the use of that hotel for asylum seekers? Will she meet me to discuss the impact of such sites on local residents in Gloucester?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell my hon. Friend that we will end the use of asylum hotels. We will close the asylum hotels that the previous Government opened, including in his constituency; it is hugely important that we do. He is right to talk about our long history of people from across the country supporting refugees. They include the more than 100,000 families who came forward to

offer homes to Ukrainians at the beginning of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. That spirit and those values are immensely important, but people need to know that the system is being properly controlled and managed, and that misuse is being tackled. That is why it is so important to end the use of asylum hotels.

Lewis Cocking (Bromborough) (Con): It is clear that the Government have lost control. The Government are going against their own election manifesto by taking the issue through the courts. I have asked this question before but not had an answer, so I ask it again: can the Home Secretary give me a date when the hotel in my constituency of Bromborough will close to illegal asylum seekers?

Yvette Cooper: We have been clear that we will end the use of the asylum hotels that were opened by the previous Government; we will close those asylum hotels. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support our reforms to the appeals system, so that we can speed them through Parliament and clear the backlog. I hope that he supports the increase in decision making that we had to introduce after his party froze decision making, creating a soaring backlog that would have increased the number of people in hotels. I also hope that he will support the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which is passing through the other place and will bring in stronger counter-terrorism powers, enabling us to go after the criminal gangs who are organising the small boats; sadly, his party is still opposing the Bill.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): We must stop criminal gangs launching illegal crossings from the French coast. Will the Home Secretary update us on her conversations with the French authorities to ensure that their tactics include intervening in shallow waters, so that they stop as many of these boats as possible at source?

Yvette Cooper: The French Government have been undertaking a maritime review, and the Interior Minister has been strongly pursuing the issue to ensure that there can be intervention in French waters. Criminal gangs operate taxi-boat tactics to load people on to the boats in shallow waters, resulting in some of the disgraceful scenes that we have seen, so the maritime review is looking at ways to intervene in shallow waters to prevent the boat crossings in the first place. Alongside that, there is the extension of the Compagnie de Marche and the additional patrols along French beaches that have been agreed, as well as the new judicial prosecution unit in Dunkirk, which is now working closely with the Border Security Command. These are part of the important foundations for strengthening law enforcement.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Whatever the promised tinkering with article 8, the reality is that this Government, or any Government, will only get a grip on out-of-control illegal immigration by quitting the ECHR. I agree that article 8 is a problem, but the answer is article 58, which allows the Government to serve notice that they are leaving the ECHR. Unless and until they do that, we are not going to solve this problem. How does the Home Secretary hope to sort out this mess while her every action is subject to the foreign stipulations and, ultimately, the foreign Court that is diligently applying the ECHR to which she clings? Does that not

[Jim Allister]

mean that we go round endlessly in a circle? Will the appeal panels be subject to judicial review, during which, again, the ECHR can be relied on?

Yvette Cooper: Having international law and abiding by it has helped us to get new agreements to return people who arrive by small boats. It is also helping us to work with other European countries on returns hubs, so that we can increase returns. I think there is a problem with the way that article 8 is being interpreted in the courts; that is why I have been clear that reforms are needed. We will bring those forward in a major package of reforms to the asylum system before the end of this year.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): The Conservatives and Reform appear to be engaged in competitive populism, and one of the consequences of that is opportunism. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is surprising that they pose as the parties who are on the side of local democracy when it comes to asylum hotels? Can she confirm that not only did the current shadow Home Secretary decide in March 2020 to suspend the practice of consulting local authorities before opening asylum hotels in their area, but that the practice remained suspended for the rest of the time that the Conservatives were in government, even after the emergency of the pandemic ended?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. The shadow Home Secretary not only lifted the responsibility to consult local authorities, but voted against amendments put forward by the Labour Opposition at the time to strengthen the work with local authorities. This Government are strengthening that work with local authorities instead. All the shadow Home Secretary and the shadow Justice Secretary seem to do is chase each other's tails to try to get to the next photo opportunity first, or chase the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). It is just more chaos from the Opposition parties.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is not populist to want safe and secure communities, but we are going round in circles. The only way we are going to solve this crisis is by withdrawing from outdated refugee conventions, rescinding the insidious ECHR from our laws, and using British military assets to prevent incursion into British waters. Will the Home Secretary commit to doing that today?

Yvette Cooper: I point out to the hon. Member that his party was in power during eight years in which criminal gangs were able to take hold along the borders and undermine our border security. It should be Governments, not gangs, who decide who enters our country. We need the counter-terrorism powers to go after those criminal gangs, and the hon. Gentleman and his party are still voting against them. Shameful!

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It cannot be denied that we have inherited a very difficult position, and that there has recently been a real increase in the rhetoric on this issue, which is causing serious worry, upset, anger and mistrust in our communities. Many vital measures to tackle this organised crime, such as counter-terror-style powers against gangs, a new offence on endangerment at sea, banning sex offenders from the

asylum system and powers to search phones, are stuck in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the Tories and Reform were really serious about these changes, they would stop voting and organising against the Bill, put their constituents and my constituents at the heart of this matter, and let us put the Bill into force?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The Tories and Reform could start working with us tomorrow to speed up the passage of this crucial legislation, which would give our law enforcement counter-terrorism powers to go after smuggler gangs. These new offences would mean that they could download and search the mobile phones of people arriving on small boats and, crucially, ban sex offenders from the asylum system altogether. You would think that the Opposition parties would support that; instead, they have been blocking the Bill. That is shameful.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Our country should be proud of the fact that in the 1930s we welcomed 10,000 Jewish children from Europe on the Kindertransport. Alas, our predecessors would not countenance bringing across those children's parents, and we know that the cost of that decision was the massacre of those parents in the Holocaust. There has always been vocal opposition to migration in this country, but I remind the Government that responsibility lies with them. Across our country today, thousands of vulnerable refugees are afraid; they are afraid of the rise in right-wing activity and in right-wing rhetoric—rhetoric that this Government have flirted with. I invite the Government not to follow the Conservative party or Reform UK into the abyss and to treat this issue with the compassion it deserves.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member refers to the Kindertransport and the important support for children it provided. The UK also took orphaned Jewish children from concentration camps and provided them with a home and a future in the UK. We have a long history of supporting those who have fled persecution and conflict, and that is exactly why it is so important that the system is properly managed and controlled and that we tackle the chaos we have inherited and strengthen our border security, in order to restore confidence in the very system and values that the hon. Member describes. This Government will never pursue the violence-promoting rhetoric that can cause such division. We will always be responsible and serious about the practical steps that need to be taken to deal with the chaos we inherited.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the content of the Home Secretary's statement, particularly the UK-France migrant deal, which provides a safe and legal route for all those families who are genuinely fleeing persecution and who play by the rules and want to enter the country legally. The deal balances that with the need to remove from this country and send back to France those who try to jump the queue in small boats.

The shadow Home Secretary suggested that the potential figure of 50 returns a week under this pilot scheme is not enough. Under the last Government, 128,000 people crossed the channel; can the Home Secretary remind the House how many of those people were returned to France? It was not 50 a week or 100 a week—it was zero a week, every week for six and a half years.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The previous Government made a whole series of grand but empty claims. They returned no one to France who had arrived on a small boat—they had no agreement in place to do so—and they also sent no one to Rwanda, other than four volunteers who were paid to go. Again and again, all the previous Government did was escalate the rhetoric and the chaos, rather than take the practical steps necessary to get the returns we need.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): In her statement, the Home Secretary set out that the Government would establish an independent body to process asylum appeals. That will work only if it is delivered at pace, resourced and well-staffed, so can she set out when that independent body will start recruiting arbitrators and support staff and when it will be operating at full pelt? Will it operate seven days a week? If in a year's time we come back from next summer's recess with immigration rates higher than this year's, will the Home Secretary take personal responsibility for that?

Yvette Cooper: We are seeking accelerated legislation to bring in the new independent appeals commission. The hon. Gentleman will know that once that legislation begins its passage through the House, it will be possible to start implementation and make sure we can invest in getting the trained adjudicators in place. We will provide an update before the end of this year, both on the timetable and on the further details of how that appeals system will work. Obviously, it has to be fully independent of the Home Office and of the Government, but it needs to be able to surge and respond swiftly in order to prevent the growth of huge backlogs. I really hope that the hon. Gentleman and his party will be able to support that legislation, because if they do so, we will be able to move it through much more quickly and implement the new body much more quickly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dr Scott Arthur.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I had forgotten how much I enjoyed bobbing.

We all want to be proud of the UK's asylum system, but because of the mess we inherited from the previous Government, none of us are there right now; that is just a fact. I thank the Home Secretary for the methodical work that she is doing to get a grip of the situation and get the system back on track. It really pains me, though, that some of the people who are behind this mess are now sitting on the Opposition Benches and seeking to weaponise it, rather than apologising to the country. Does the Home Secretary share my hope that extending the Ukrainian visa scheme and the refugee student scheme, bringing Gaza students here and supporting injured Gazan children will provide a chance to show the UK immigration system at its best?

Yvette Cooper: I hope the Conservatives will support Gazan students being able to take up their places and scholarships in the UK, just as I hope they will also support the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which they are still opposing.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Government appear to be conflating the terms “illegal immigrant” and “asylum seeker.” The UK has rightly in the past taken in asylum seekers, including Ukrainians fleeing persecution, but they are different from those who are crossing the channel illegally, the vast majority of whom are men aged 20 to 30 who appear to have no children or families crossing with them. I have three questions for the Home Secretary: does she agree with the Prime Minister's comments that the UK has plenty of housing to accommodate illegal immigrants; will she rule out the use of houses of multiple occupation; and will she rule out the use of social housing for illegal immigrants?

Yvette Cooper: Given what the hon. Member said about crossings, I hope he will support the French pilot agreement, which means we can return to France people who make these dangerous or illegal journeys and in exchange have a legal process for people who apply properly, follow the rules and go through security checks. We have been clear that the way to tackle the chaos in the asylum system is to end asylum hotels, but to do so by reducing the overall number of people in the asylum accommodation system, and that includes sorting out the appeals chaos we inherited from the hon. Member's party.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The Home Secretary was right to emphasise that respect for each other and respect for the rule of law are fundamental British values, and they are underpinned by our robust human rights framework, which underscores and protects individual liberties. Winston Churchill knew that, which is why he was such a supporter of the European convention on human rights after world war two. Will the Home Secretary do all she can to protect our human rights framework from those on the Opposition Benches who would tear it up for a cheap headline, by campaigning as hard as she can to make sure that the ECHR is fit for the 21st century, restoring public confidence?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that we need reforms, but we also need to recognise that international law can help to underpin international co-operation. The criminal gangs operate across borders and exploit the fact that too often Governments and law enforcement agencies do not operate across borders in order to go after them. That is why we need that international co-operation in place, underpinned by a legal framework.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): The national conversation on immigration and asylum is being dominated loudly by colleagues in this place who have a sorry track record of stirring up division and dehumanising people seeking sanctuary from some of the world's harshest regimes and conflicts. Many of my constituents have raised their fears with me this summer. Given that immigration has soared since we left the European Union, does the Home Secretary agree that the architects of the damaging Brexit campaign are probably the people least likely to have the answer to the small boat crossings, and that we must do all we can to emphasise the benefits and value that migrants bring to the UK, as they have done for centuries?

Yvette Cooper: The Conservative party in government managed to create chaos in the asylum system and let criminal gangs take over along our borders while illegal

[Yvette Cooper]

migration quadrupled in the space of just four years. Immigration has always been an important part of our history, and that is why it needs to be properly controlled and managed in a fair and sensible way, which has not happened too often in the past. It needs to be serious and respectful to other people, to make sure that we as a country come together at the same time as making sure there are proper controls in the system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Does she accept that the frustration many feel about illegal immigration must never be confused with opinions about those who come and add to our society in the NHS, in agriculture and in many other jobs where we rely on help from foreign nationals? Does the Home Secretary not accept that the route to the UK from the Republic of Ireland through Northern Ireland is feeding that frenzy? Will she finally rightfully close the current loopholes and block the back-door access to the United Kingdom from the Republic of Ireland?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right that people have long supported those coming to work in our NHS through legal routes. Those routes have to be controlled and managed, however, and migration quadrupling under the previous Government was a serious problem. That is why we are bringing legal migration down; that is why we put that in the immigration White Paper. The hon. Gentleman is also right that some of the most serious concerns are about dangerous and illegal boat crossings that are underpinned and facilitated by criminal gangs. He raises a separate issue about Ireland and Northern Ireland, but he will know that the common travel area is a long-standing part of our history and arrangements. We have close security co-operation with the Irish Government and Irish law enforcement for exactly that reason, and it is an important part of the arrangements and the close relationship between our countries.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): That concludes the statement. I thank the Home Secretary and Members for their time. The Home Secretary has been on her feet for around two and a half hours and we have had over 80 Back-Bench contributions. I will now give the House a few moments to settle and for the Front-Bench teams to swap over.

Middle East

5.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement on the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Iran.

In Gaza, the situation on the ground is unimaginably bleak. Horrifying images and accounts will be seared into the minds of colleagues across this House. They are almost impossible to put into words, but we can and must be precise with our language, because on 22 August the United Nations-backed IPC mechanism confirmed what we are witnessing: famine—famine in Gaza city; famine in its surrounding neighbourhoods now spreading across the wider territory; famine which, if unchecked, will spiral into widespread starvation.

This was foreseen: it is the terrible conclusion of the obstacles we have warned about for over six months. Since 1 July, over 300 people have died from malnutrition, including 119 children. More than 132,000 children under the age of five are at risk of dying from hunger by June next year. This is not a natural disaster; it is a man-made famine in the 21st century, and I am outraged by the Israeli Government's refusal to allow in sufficient aid. We need a massive humanitarian response to prevent more deaths, crucial non-governmental organisations, humanitarians and health workers to be allowed to operate, and stockpiles of aid on Gaza's borders to be released. In the past three months, more than 2,000 Gazans have been killed trying to feed their families, and Hamas themselves are exploiting the chaos and deliberately starving Israeli hostages for abhorrent political purposes.

I know that these words of condemnation, echoed across legislatures all over the world, are not enough, but be in no doubt: we have acted as a country where we can. We restored funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. We suspended arms exports that could be used in Gaza. We signed a landmark agreement with the Palestinian Authority. We stood up for the independence of international courts. We have delivered three sanctions packages on violent settlers and far-right Israeli Ministers for incitement. We have suspended trade negotiations with the Israeli Government. We are at the forefront of the international community's work to plan for a stable, post-conflict peace. We have now provided more than £250 million in development assistance over the past two years.

Today, we are going further. I can announce an additional £15 million of aid and medical care for Gaza and the region. We continue to work alongside regional partners, including Egypt and Jordan, to enable the United Nations and non-governmental organisations to ensure that aid reaches those most in need. Brave medics in Gaza tell us that essential medicines are running out and they cannot operate safely. That is why we are funding UK-Med, whose field hospitals have treated more than 600,000 Gazans. It is also why we are funding the World Health Organisation in Egypt to treat thousands of evacuated Gazan people.

Meanwhile, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said earlier, we are working with the World Health Organisation to get critically ill and injured children

into the UK, where they will receive specialist NHS treatment. The first patients are expected to arrive in the UK in the coming weeks. Extracting people from a war zone is, of course, complex and dangerous, and it relies entirely on Israeli permissions. I am pressing the Israeli Government for that to happen as quickly as possible. We are also supporting brilliant students granted Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Chevening scholarships and other scholarships to escape Gaza, so that they can take up their places for the coming academic year.

I recognise that those things only touch the edges of this catastrophe. We all know that there is only one way out: an immediate ceasefire that would see the unconditional release by Hamas of all hostages and a transformation in the delivery of aid. We know it, our US and European allies know it, and our Gulf partners know it, too. I am working night and day with them to deliver a ceasefire and a wider political process to deliver long-term peace. To make a ceasefire last, we need a monitoring mechanism, the disarmament of Hamas and a new governance framework for Gaza. That is the focus of our intense diplomacy in the region.

In contrast, further military operations in Gaza City will only prolong and deepen the crisis. Together with our partners, we demand an immediate halt to the operation. Each week brings new horrors. Last week's double strike on Nasser hospital—one of Gaza's last remaining major health facilities—killed 20 people, including five journalists. I remind Israel once again that international law requires the protection of healthcare workers, journalists and civilians. These actions will not end the war, and they will not bring the hostages home, let alone make them safer, as hostage families have recognised. Such actions will sow despair and anger across the region for generations.

In the west bank, the Israeli Government are tightening their stranglehold on the Palestinian economy and continue to approve illegal settlement construction, including just recently in the E1 area east of Jerusalem. That would erect a physical barrier to the contiguous Palestinian state, and it must not happen.

In July, I described before the UN General Assembly our intention to recognise the state of Palestine later this month, unless the Israeli Government take substantive steps to end the appalling situation in Gaza and commit to a long-term sustainable peace. That commitment responds to the current crisis, but stems from our historic responsibility to the region's security, reaching back over a century to the Balfour declaration. As I said last month in New York, I am deeply proud that it was a British Foreign Secretary who helped establish a homeland for the Jewish people, but the same declaration promised that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights"

of the Palestinian people. Those rights are more under threat than at any point in the past century.

To those who say recognition rewards Hamas or threatens Israeli security, it does neither. Recognition is rooted in the principle of a two-state solution, which Hamas rejects. We have been clear that any Palestinian state should be demilitarised. Indeed, President Abbas has confirmed that in writing. We see no contradiction between the two-state solution and our deep commitment to Israeli security, because security comes from stable borders, not indefinite occupation.

Before I finish, I would also like to update the House on Iran. On 28 August, the UK, along with France and Germany, triggered the snapback mechanism under UN Security Council resolution 2231. That means that if no new agreement is reached within 30 days, the sanctions that were lifted under the Iran nuclear deal—the joint comprehensive plan of action—will come back into force. Those wide-ranging sanctions include a full arms embargo and restrictions on Iran's nuclear, missile and drone programme. It was not a decision we took lightly. For years, we have worked with international partners to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. The 2015 deal was meant to do just that, but Iran has repeatedly undermined the agreement. Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium is now 40 times over the limit set by the JCPOA. Despite that clear escalation, we have made every effort over years of negotiations to bring Iran back to compliance. Those efforts have continued in recent months. I have urged Foreign Minister Araghchi to de-escalate and choose diplomacy.

In July, we offered Iran more time if it agreed to return to negotiations with the US and restore full access to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Last month, I warned Iran that time was short and we would have little choice but to trigger snapback. I regret to inform the House that Iran has not complied with its legal obligations, nor chosen the path of diplomacy, so we have had no choice but to act. I have long been clear that I will not allow snapback to expire without a durable and comprehensive deal. It would be unacceptable to allow this issue to fall off the UN Security Council agenda, despite the threat posed by Iran's nuclear programme. Snapback is not the end of diplomacy, as Secretary Rubio has also recently underlined. Iran can still meet our conditions. It can restore full IAEA access and address our concerns about its stockpile and enrichment, and it can return to negotiations. Alongside our partners, I will continue to urge Iran to choose that path.

In the worst of times, this Government will continue to take all the steps that we can to alleviate suffering, to help bring regional conflict to an end and to create the conditions for long-term peace and security. We will not rest until there is a ceasefire in Gaza, the hostages are returned, and a flood of aid reaches those in desperate need. Despite the obstacles before us, we will work with partners to preserve the two-state solution. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Foreign Secretary, who can speak for up to six and a half minutes.

6.9 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. Let me also express my sympathy for the people of Afghanistan who are suffering as a result of last night's major earthquake.

Since the House last met, the awful conflict in the middle east has continued to see lives lost, with intolerable suffering. Hamas continues to refuse the release of all remaining hostages, despite the best efforts of those trying to broker peace. The hostages are now approaching 700 days in captivity, and the whole House will have been sickened by the harrowing clip of the emaciated hostage Evyatar David, which was released by Hamas over the summer. The humanitarian situation in Gaza

[Priti Patel]

is dire, and we are all familiar with the reports that we have seen daily on news channels. The inhumane suffering, the recent airstrikes and the inability to provide food for civilians simply cannot go on. We all want an urgent and sustainable end to this conflict. We want to see the release of the hostages from terrorist captivity, and to see aid for the people of Gaza.

There are key questions for the British Government to answer. The British Government are in a position to help influence those outcomes, but are they actually fully leveraging their ability to do so? The Government's frequent statements have so far not moved the dial closer to a sustainable end to the conflict, and, as the Foreign Secretary himself has said, we are not in a position to see any alleviation of this horrendous situation. Diplomacy is about putting in the hard yards to find solutions, not just about giving statements, and I therefore want to ask the Foreign Secretary three specific questions.

First, are the Government taking any new specific action to tighten the screws on Hamas and pile more pressure on them to release the hostages? Should we expect more measures to further degrade Hamas's ability to finance their campaign of terror? Why are the Government not leading international efforts to produce a credible plan to do exactly that, with an agreement from all the key regional partners and players with an interest in peace to see Hamas leave Gaza? Secondly, can the Foreign Secretary update the House on precisely where we stand and what Britain is contributing to the efforts of the United Nations and our regional allies to broker the release of hostages, and to an end of the conflict? Are we intimately involved, and are we sending in the UK expertise to help, given that we have great expertise when it comes to brokering negotiations of this kind? Thirdly, while we note the Foreign Secretary's announcement yesterday about support for women and girls, the Government have yet to make essential breakthroughs on aid.

Ministers must obviously work around the clock with everyone—with all our partners, including the Israelis and multinational institutions—to unblock the situation by coming up with practical solutions, even new solutions, on which all sides can focus when it comes to getting medical and food aid into Gaza. That must provide a significant increase in food and medical supplies reaching civilians while also addressing Israeli concerns about aid diversion, because those concerns are constant. Is the UK working with the multilateral bodies to try to mediate in the divisions and breakdowns of trust that have emerged with the Government of Israel? Is the Foreign Secretary considering schemes similar to those implemented by the Conservative Government, such as the floating piers that, working with the United States and Cyprus, we put in place off the coast of Gaza to get aid in? We need pragmatic and practical solutions to get food and medical supplies to innocent civilians in Gaza.

Let me now turn to Labour's decision to recognise a Palestinian state. The Government announced that huge shift in British policy just days after the House went into recess. We all support a two-state solution that guarantees security for both Israelis and Palestinians, but the Foreign Secretary must know that recognising a Palestinian state in September will not secure the lasting peace that we all want to see. Recognition is meaningful

only if it is part of a formal peace process, and it should not happen while the hostages are still being held in terrorist captivity and while Hamas's reign of terror continues. Can the Foreign Secretary explain his plan to go ahead with recognition while hostages are still being held, and while Hamas, who have predictably welcomed and been emboldened by this move, continue to hold on to power in Gaza? What practical measures are we proposing to remove Hamas from Gaza?

The Foreign Secretary must realise that recognition will not secure the release of the hostages or get aid into Gaza immediately. We must always consider what tools of leverage we have in respect of future peace processes and negotiations that could actually help to establish a two-state solution and peace in the middle east. How will this unilateral action help to advance the best shot that we have at achieving a two-state solution, which is the expansion of the Abraham accords and Saudi normalisation, through which we could also calibrate our actions?

As for the question of the middle east more broadly, the appalling behaviour of the Iranian regime has gone on for too long, and the regime has brought the initiation of the snapback process on itself. The Iranian people deserve much better. Tehran must never obtain a nuclear weapon, and Conservatives remain clear about the fact that the recent US strikes were necessary. Can the Foreign Secretary tell us whether he believes that Iran has the capability and the intention of recommencing its nuclear programme, and whether his assumption is that the snapback process will be seen through to completion? Can he tell us whether or not he welcomes Israel's actions regarding the Houthi leadership in Yemen, and can he update the House on how the UK will use this moment to further degrade the Houthis' ability to carry out the attacks and strikes that we have seen recently?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone of her remarks. I am pleased that she agrees with me and, indeed, shares the sentiment of the entire House on the dire—as she described it—humanitarian situation in Gaza and the inhumanity that she also described. She will recognise that even before we came to power, the last Government were calling for the ceasefire that we all want to see.

The right hon. Lady asked what the Government were doing in relation to Hamas. In New York, with our Arab partners, the French and others, we were doing just that—supporting the Prime Minister's framework for peace, and working with colleagues to establish the circumstances of the day after. We have been crystal clear: there can be no role for Hamas. We need the demilitarisation of Gaza, and we are working with partners to try to set up the trusteeship, the new governance arrangement with Gaza. No Government are doing more than we are. We signed a memorandum of understanding with the Palestinian Authority, and we are working with it on reform in a deliberate, day-to-day action, because there must be a role for it subsequently.

The right hon. Lady asked what new solutions on aid might be found. That is where I depart with her sentiments, because I am not sure that we need new solutions. We need the old ones: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the World Food Programme. They exist, so let us support them. It was this party that

restored funding to UNRWA when it was opposed by the Opposition. Let me say gently to the right hon. Lady that that is not what feeds women and girls. The mechanisms are there, and they work all over the globe. This worked the last time we had a ceasefire, when as many as 600 trucks a day went in, and we can do it once more. That is the position of the UK Government.

I spoke to Tom Fletcher at the United Nations this morning to get the latest. The moderately good news is that the number of truck movements in August was higher than it was when I last updated the House in July, as the House was going into recess, but he reminded me that 60 or 70 trucks a day was nowhere near the number needed. I found the extra resources today because we know that the medical situation is dire, and the work that we can do with UK-Med is so important and so valued even when we are up against this horrific situation.

Let me be crystal clear: Hamas is a terrorist organisation. Our demands are unconditional and have not changed. The hostages must be released without delay, and there can be no role for Hamas. But equally, the right hon. Lady will have seen the situation in the west bank. She did not comment on the E1 development running a coach and horses through the idea of two states, which has been the united position of every single party in this Chamber. That is why we set out the plans for recognition. Unless we get the breakthrough that we need on the ceasefire and a full process, we will move to recognition when UNGA meets in New York.

I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's support on Iran and the snapback. My assessment is that no country needs the percentages of enriched uranium that we see in Iran. We do not have them in our country. We do not have them at sites like Sellafield and others, including the Urenco site. There is absolutely no need for them. We need a baseline, and that is why we need the inspectors back in. We need to know where the highly enriched uranium has gone, and that is why we have been very clear with the Iranians on the need to trigger snapback. We will see the sanctions come back unless we can reach a diplomatic solution in the next 30 days.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I read with alarm yesterday's report in *The Washington Post* detailing a plan for the future of Gaza that is circulating among the Trump Administration. They call it the "GREAT" plan. It proposes the total transformation of Gaza into a tourist region—a high-tech hub under temporary US administration. What is going to happen to the Gazans? Well, 2 million of them will be temporarily relocated to other countries, including Somaliland and South Sudan. Forced population transfer is contrary to, and a complete violation of, international humanitarian law.

Serious thought must be given to the day after for Gaza, and my Committee recommended as much in our report that was published in July, but this unserious, illegal and deeply dystopian plan cannot be the sum of that thinking. What are the Government doing to dissuade Donald Trump from following this path? What, alongside regional and European allies, are we doing to put forward a serious plan for a peaceful future in Israel, Gaza and the west bank that is ready for the day after this terrible war finally comes to an end?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend—my dear friend—for her remarks, and I commend the work of her Committee on the day after and the thoroughness of approach that is required. I have read the reports, but it is speculative stuff that I have seen in different news articles; it is not a comprehensive approach. In my discussions with the US system, I have seen nothing confirmed along the lines of what she said. The day after requires the removal of Hamas; it cannot be about the further displacement of the Gazan people. It is going to require a degree of finance and stability, which I think will require other states, particularly Arab partners. They would set themselves against the sorts of reports I have seen in the papers.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who has up to three minutes for his remarks.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I welcome the robust approach of the E3 in initiating the snapback mechanism in response to Iran's nuclear ambitions and programme, which are in breach of its undertakings.

The Foreign Secretary's statement on 21 July shocked this House, and we had a long debate about the situation in Gaza, yet the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and the west bank has deteriorated even further since then, as he has acknowledged. We have seen hundreds more Palestinians killed while seeking aid; famine declared in the strip; a chronic lack of medical supplies, attested to by UK medics volunteering in Nasser hospital; the start of IDF operations in Gaza City; and the images of emaciated hostages still held in brutal captivity by Hamas terrorists.

The human suffering is indeed beyond comprehension, yet the extremists are indifferent. Hamas terrorists publish videos intended to torment the families of hostages. Cabinet members Ben-Gvir and Smotrich advocate for the forced displacement of Palestinians. In Israel, the Hostages and Missing Families Forum and Opposition parties call for an end to the violence. In the UK, our constituents are desperate for the same. The bloodshed can be stopped only by decisive actions—actions that I regret the Government have so far failed to take.

The Prime Minister was wrong in principle to condition the recognition of Palestine on the actions of the Netanyahu Government, and wrong in practice, as he has been ignored. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm today that the UK will recognise Palestine later this month at the UN? The Government must learn a lesson and now apply relentless pressure on the Netanyahu Government, so the Liberal Democrats call today on the Foreign Secretary to finally sanction Prime Minister Netanyahu for expanding his military campaign and pursuing the illegal expansion of the E1 settlements, and to take the steps necessary to ban the export of all UK arms to Israel, including F-35 components. Will he also make representations to the Qatari Government to demand that they exile Hamas from their political headquarters unless they agree to the release of all the hostages immediately and unconditionally?

The Foreign Secretary bemoans that words are not enough to alleviate the suffering. He acknowledges that the Government have failed to move the combatants, yet there is one man who could unlock progress. Donald Trump

[Calum Miller]

has the power to secure peace in Gaza, if he chose to, by picking up the phone to Netanyahu. Will the Foreign Secretary tell the House how he will use his special relationship with Vice President Vance to help secure that goal, and will the Government commit to making a ceasefire in Gaza a priority during President Trump's state visit?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, particularly on Iran. He is absolutely right to place at the centre the 15,000 people who have been injured in Gaza while simply seeking aid, and the more than 2,000 who have died seeking aid. It is totally unacceptable, and he is right to remind the House about the position of the hostage families, who are crystal clear that they do not want to see further military endeavour and operation in Gaza City. What they want is a ceasefire, and they fear that further military endeavour will actually harm their loved ones further, not succeed in bringing them home.

The hon. Gentleman criticises our position on recognition. I ask him to reflect on that, because it must be right that the Government continue to give diplomacy an opportunity as we head to the UN alongside other partners. Surely he would want us to be working with our French, Australian and Canadian partners as we head to that gathering at UNGA, and surely he would want to see the Israelis commit to a ceasefire, commit to a process and end the war. All of that is what we are seeking to do as we make an assessment of where we have got to in the coming weeks. I reassure him that of course I raise the issue of Gaza with all levels of the US Administration. I did raise the situation in Gaza with Vice President Vance earlier in the summer and with Secretary of State Rubio, and I have spoken to envoy Steve Witkoff in the last 24 hours to get an update on this fast-moving situation. Direct sales of F-35s to Israel are banned, and the hon. Gentleman knows that we ban arms that could go to the IDF for use in Gaza.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement on Palestinian statehood and the additional aid announced for Gaza, as well as the recent work to evacuate students and children in need of medical treatment. However, the world's foremost group of genocide scholars has said that

"Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide in Article II of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide".

This is against the backdrop of Israel continuing to bombard Gaza, continuing to target and kill journalists, and continuing its policy of annexing the entire territory, with Trumpian visions of a Gaza where the self-determination of Palestinians is little more than a real estate opportunity. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that this monumental resolution by genocide scholars should now trigger our responsibility to act?

Mr Lammy: I say to my hon. Friend that we continue to do all we can to bring the horrific suffering in this war to an end. Of course I recognise what legal scholars are saying about the conflict and in relation to genocide. That must be, appropriately, a matter for the legal system, but I think the whole world looks on what is happening with deep, deep concern, and in every legislature across the world there is condemnation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Rishi Sunak.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I know that the whole House will want to join me in wishing you a very happy birthday.

I warmly welcome and support what the Foreign Secretary said about Iran, and in particular the joint E3 statement on imposing snapback sanctions. Tehran is a threat not just to regional security, but here at home, and he will know that our security services have foiled over 20 different Iranian-backed plots. He will have seen today that Russia and China have joined in a letter saying that they will work with Tehran in the UN to thwart snapback sanctions. Could he update the House on the work we will do with our allies on enforcement and, crucially, make it clear to companies and banks that there will be severe consequences for those that break the sanctions?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the former Prime Minister for his work on the Iran file and for the cross-party consensus that exists in the House in this area. As he knows, we work hand in glove with our French and German counterparts, in particular, and it was on that basis—the so-called E3—that we urged Iran to take us seriously, and to go back to the negotiation table with the US and let the inspectors back in. The Iranians still have an opportunity over the next 30 days, and we will of course do everything we can within the UN system to urge our Russian and Chinese friends to take seriously the solemn commitments, which we made in the 20th century and continue to back in this one, that we must stop nuclear proliferation. This is not a personal issue; it is a global issue of huge concern.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): The International Association of Genocide Scholars has passed a resolution stating that

"Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide".

I understand that the Foreign Secretary does not comment on these matters from the Dispatch Box, so I instead want to ask what action and efforts this Government are taking, alongside international partners, to ensure that evidence is collected and that matters are in hand to ensure that legal avenues can be pursued to address allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for recognising that that must rightly be a matter for lawyers, but I reassure her that we do fund and support organisations on the ground in gathering evidence. That is much easier in the west bank than it currently is in Gaza. At this Dispatch Box, I have said time and again that I think it is important that the Israelis let international journalists in to monitor the situation. I think that is hugely important. Where we can, we will continue to support journalists, organisations and federations to monitor and support that work, and we of course support a lot of NGOs on the ground.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Further to the answer the Foreign Secretary has just given, does he share my horror that, among the thousands of civilian deaths that have occurred in Gaza, it is estimated that at

least 200 journalists have been killed, some of them deliberately targeted? Does he agree that those of us who are supporters of Israel's right to defend itself need to tell the Israeli Government that this is unacceptable and cannot continue?

Mr Lammy: I associate myself entirely with the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. It is not only unacceptable; it also diminishes the Israeli Government in the eyes of young people across the globe who look at this with horror and cannot understand it, so I urge them to just step back and recognise the damage they are doing to their reputation collectively.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Attempts to settle the E1 area of the west bank, splitting Palestinian areas in two,

"buries the idea of a Palestinian state",

in the words of an Israeli Government Minister, by the end of this month. Would the Secretary of State commit to a further co-ordinated response with European partners over the coming weeks to ensure that those destructive plans are halted?

Mr Lammy: Yes, yes, yes. I have spent time in Bedouin villages that would be entirely gone as a result of these abysmal plans, so of course I will continue to work with partners to oppose them.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In May the Government revealed in court that they, the Executive, had made recent assessments of the risk of breaches of international humanitarian law in Gaza. I say breaches, but the Government revealed that they had found only one possible breach of IHL among tens of thousands of airstrikes in Gaza across 11 months. Surely this proves that the FCDO does not have the capacity to properly assess all the possible breaches of IHL in Gaza.

Mr Lammy: It is axiomatic that the hon. Gentleman is wrong. I made an assessment back in September that there was a clear risk—that was based on IHL assessments—and for that reason we suspended arms sales to Gaza. The machinery of government is working very well in the assessments we are able to make, notwithstanding how difficult it of course is to get all the evidence that is necessary.

Louise Sandher-Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): The famine in Gaza is clearly man-made and it is abominable. That tens of thousands of civilians have been brutally killed is abominable. The retention of the hostages by Hamas, and even the retention of the bodies of those who have passed away, is equally abominable. We can all see what is happening in Gaza and what is happening in the west bank, and this cannot be allowed to continue. What more messages can we send to Netanyahu and the Israeli Government to say that the two-state solution is the only way forward? It is the only way to guarantee peace and security in the middle east, which every single innocent civilian deserves, and to stop the increased illegal settlements in the west bank.

Mr Lammy: I want to associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend, and I congratulate her on her recent wedding. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] She is absolutely right because there seem to be those in the

Israeli Government who either want to see one state, in which case it is incumbent on them to be clear about how everyone in that one state has equality before the law, or want to see no state perpetuated forever. We must stand against that because it is not in the interests of Israel being safe and secure, and it is fundamentally against the interests of the Palestinian people, because the desire for two states is a just cause and one that we must stand behind.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What action will His Majesty's Government take if the Government of Israel proceed with their plan to build in the E1 corridor?

Mr Lammy: I am not going to get ahead of my skis. We continue to work with partners internationally on making those assessments. I spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister and was very clear that we stand against that. The right hon. Gentleman will recall that when these plans surfaced the previous Government stood against the E1 development. At that time, I think the Government's position was that they would recognise if they went ahead. We will continue to make that assessment, but I hope we can see the plans put to one side.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): Last month, along with eight party leaders across Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, I wrote to the Prime Minister about the catastrophic situation in Gaza and the deficits in the UK response to the unbearable suffering we are seeing—biblical levels of injustice, pain and hunger. Does the Foreign Secretary recognise the parallel crisis in the belief of ordinary people across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in international law and in the UK's response? People are not seeing their values reflected in the UK's actions in the continued supply of arms, the failure to levy all possible sanctions, and the strings attached to the recognition of the state of Palestine.

Mr Lammy: Can I just be clear? There is a lot of mendacity in some of the sort of stuff we see on TikTok. We have stopped the sale of arms to Israel. We have stopped the direct sales of F-35s to Israel. Germany only just recently made the decision that we made last September. The UK represents 1% of sales; 90% are Germany and the US system. There are many other Governments that supply and that have not made the decisions we have made. On recognition, we will continue to work with partners as we head towards the UN General Assembly and make the necessary assessments.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The Foreign Secretary, in his statement, outlined all the steps that this Government have taken against the Netanyahu Government. He has also repeatedly said that the UK has done everything it can. In my mind, both are tacit admittances of defeat, as we have seen the Netanyahu Government increase their activity in Gaza, and increase their prosecution and persecution of the Gazan people. If we have done so much and had no effect, and if there is nothing left to do, what does he expect to change before the UN General Assembly meeting and why should we not immediately recognise a Palestinian state?

Mr Lammy: Diplomacy is failing until it succeeds, so I am not going to give in to the hon. Gentleman's pessimism. And can I just say that Prime Minister Mustafa, after I had completed my statement at the UN, walked up to me and gave me a warm embrace. We continue to work alongside the Palestinian Authority as we make these fine judgments.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to trigger the snapback mechanism to address the Iranian regime's nuclear ambitions. Following arrests in May relating to a suspected Iranian-backed terror plot, my constituents in High Peak—and, indeed, three-quarters of Labour voters—want to see action on the terror threat posed by Tehran on the streets in the UK. Will the Foreign Secretary provide an update on the Government's progress in proscribing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist group?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question. He will know that, alongside the Home Secretary, we commissioned work from Jonathan Hall on the specific issue of state threats. We will be coming forward with further plans in the coming months.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary has just said:

"On the ground, it is unimaginably bleak. Horrifying images and accounts will be seared into the minds of colleagues across this House. They are almost impossible to put into words. But we can and must be precise with our language."

I agree. It is a genocide, isn't it?

Mr Lammy: I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman is legally qualified, but there are many lawyers who take that view. As he knows, we made an assessment, based on a clear risk of a breach of international humanitarian law, that meant we suspended arms sales that could be used in Gaza.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Benjamin Netanyahu's blockade and weaponisation of starvation has plunged Gaza into famine. That is why the UN Secretary-General has described this man-made catastrophe as a "failure of humanity". While children die of hunger, the Israeli Government continue to deny the existence of starvation in the very territory they seek to occupy. Before the summer recess, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary informed the House about additional aid for Gaza. Will he tell us how much of that aid has actually got into Gaza? What other further urgent steps are the Government taking to bring this inhumane treatment of the Palestinian population to an end?

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that the good news is that the aid we have supported is getting in. Principally, that has been of medical supplies, addressing the dire situation in Gaza. We have also been able to work with the World Food Programme. The World Food Programme appears to be the UN agency that is having the most effect in delivering aid on the ground. It is not sufficient, but it is having some effect. I will be in the region in the coming days discussing these issues in further detail.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am afraid that this is another profoundly disappointing statement from the Foreign Secretary that is devoid of anything that is likely to bring a swift end to this conflict. While at home the police have been arresting vicars and grannies, and the Government have been hiring American spy planes to fly over Gaza, the Israelis, as the Foreign Secretary himself has said, have intensified their campaign, aggression and the slaughter of innocents in that awful conflict. Everything he has said—all his condemnation—has come to nothing. In every statement he has made in this place when I have been here, he has stressed the importance of international humanitarian law. Why has he been so passive in defending the International Criminal Court in the face of another wave of American sanctions? What steps is he going to take to support that institution and the individuals who staff it in the face of those sanctions? What discussions has he had with the American Government to get them to reverse the sanctions?

Mr Lammy: It is just wrong to say that the Government have been passive in relation to the ICC. We fund the ICC and continue to support the ICC. I think I raised the ICC in my second meeting with Secretary of State Rubio. We work very closely with our Dutch colleagues in particular on the ICC. We have been crystal clear on the importance of international humanitarian law. I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman is wrong on this issue.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary will be aware that increasing numbers of human rights experts and genocide scholars assess that Israel's actions in Gaza equate to a genocide, with famine being deliberately created and hospitals being bombed to kill journalists. Against that backdrop, the Government are right to recognise the state of Palestine and to do so in a way that tries to drive change on the ground. Does he share my deep concern at the unacceptable new restrictions on visas and registration that are set to shut down the work of the most effective international humanitarian organisations in Gaza? What action are the Government taking to try to prevent that?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right. It is unacceptable to restrict the ability of aid workers to go about their work in the face of such suffering. I put alongside that another issue I am hugely concerned about, which is the effective starving of the Palestinian Authority of the funds to pay their staff and complete the reforms that we are trying to work on with them, such that they can never get to a position where they can apply the governance that I know they wish and hope to apply

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I despair at many aspects of the conduct of the Netanyahu Government and the suffering of Gazan civilians. However, I have grave reservations about the timing of this unilateral recognition of the state of Palestine, because I fear it will allow Hamas to claim that the vile massacres of 7 October have somehow succeeded. This concern is shared by many of my constituents. What reassurance can the Foreign Secretary give about the choice of timing and the signal that it sends?

Mr Lammy: I will be crystal clear for the right hon. Gentleman. Hamas are a proscribed terrorist organisation, and there can be no future for them in Israel. Part of the

work that I outlined on a framework for peace and on the day after in the region is on how we disarm in Gaza, and how the members of the Hamas leadership who are left exit Gaza and find a third place to be. There can be no role for Hamas. Given what has been said about the E1 developments, let us also remember what is happening on the west bank with settler violence, with those who seem totally opposed to two states. We have sought to try to effect change on the ground as we make that assessment.

I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, because the recognition is not unilateral; we are acting together with Canada, Australia and the French, combined for maximum leverage to bring about change on the ground.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Government's intention to recognise formally the state of Palestine at the UN later this month—which many Labour Members have pushed for ever since our election, and which was in our manifesto. It is the biggest shift in British foreign policy in decades, and a major step forward to giving the Palestinian people hope that they will have the state they have long been denied.

While I welcome the sanctions on Iran today, with the famine in Gaza now formally declared, and with 132,000 children expected to suffer from acute malnutrition between now and next June, will the Foreign Secretary tell the House whether the UK is actively looking at fresh sanctions on Israel to prevent that further tragedy?

Mr Lammy: I cannot comment on sanctions from the Dispatch Box. I know that my hon. Friend has long campaigned in his constituency and before his election on the issue of recognition, so I am grateful for his statements on that. I was updated on the situation this morning by Tom Fletcher; as I outlined, it is grim, dire and horrendous, which is why we have to work collectively with other partners. I will be back in the region to see what more we can do.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This should not really be difficult. We can, as I do, passionately support Israel's right to exist securely and in peace, call for the immediate release of the hostages without any strings attached and demand the exclusion of Hamas from the post-conflict settlement; at the same time, we must say, without a shred of equivocation, that the shooting and starving of innocent civilians in Gaza is nothing other than utterly and totally fundamentally evil. There can be no other word for it. Why have this Government still failed to sanction Netanyahu and his entire Cabinet?

Mr Lammy: I hear the strength of passion from the hon. Gentleman, but I urge him to look closely at our sanctions policy, which he would struggle to find from any other Government in the developed western world. We have had three packages of sanctions in the last year alone and two on Government Ministers; I do not think France has yet sanctioned Ministers. We have done a considerable amount.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I know this is a very sensitive subject, but I urge colleagues to keep their questions short and the Foreign Secretary to keep his answers on point.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement today. Israel's decision to escalate operations in Gaza further and to expand further into Gaza City, where famine has officially been declared, shows that it simply is not listening to our concerns. Given that the Government have raised concerns over and over again and suspended free trade and some arms licences, it almost seems that Israel is mocking our Government. Is it time to take further measures to ensure that we fulfil the UK's obligations as a third state under international law? We could be at risk here.

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are not at risk—we are not complicit. I am a former lawyer, and I study these things closely. I ask her to look closely at what we have done in relation to other Governments; we do not act unilaterally, but I think we are holding up pretty well. I wish the situation on the ground had changed. It has not yet changed, but we will continue to do everything we can to bring this war to an end.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The law of armed conflict is hardwired into the behaviour of our military, and we should demand the same of our friends and allies. Israel is our friend and ally. What assurances has the Foreign Secretary therefore had from his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence that they have gained from their Israeli interlocutors the assurances that we need that the 40 or 50 incidents involving the IDF on the west bank and in Gaza since 2023 will be brought to a proper conclusion, and that any wrongdoing is held to account?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman put his opening remarks very well, and I would accord with them. We need proper independent scrutiny of some of this behaviour. We did call for that, by the way, for the awful atrocity involving the World Central Kitchen staff, where British nationals lost their lives, and we await an update from the advocate general. I understand that the Israelis have said there will be an investigation into the incidents we saw last week, but there are many for which it is not clear that there will be an investigation. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to put this centre stage, which is, of course, something I do when I speak to the Israeli Government.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Foreign Secretary's historic move to recognise the state of Palestine and thank him for all the work he has done to progress this issue. While we follow the news from Gaza, let us remember the journalists who have risked their lives to bring us the news. My constituent, the former managing director of Al Jazeera English, is now mourning the deaths of six of his former colleagues in a targeted attack. I, too, am awaiting news from my former *Financial Times* colleague, who is still stuck in Gaza, where he is starving and at risk. Will the Foreign Secretary meet me and other media stakeholders to discuss how we can work together to progress evacuations and support our journalists on the ground?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to journalists and media workers, who play an essential role in putting the spotlight on the devastating reality of war. We are part of the Media Freedom Coalition, and the UK is of

[Mr Lammy]

course urging Israel to allow immediate independent foreign media access and to afford protections to journalists. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend on this matter.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Israeli Government are clearly hellbent on their horrific plan of eradicating Palestine with their continuing and ever-worsening genocide in Gaza, and now their approval of the shocking E1 plan that will divide the west bank and East Jerusalem. How can the Government continue to take no further action when there are so many options open to them? How many times have we heard the Foreign Secretary say in this Chamber that if things do not improve and if Israel does not desist, he will take further action, and yet he has not? When will this Government take action to end UK complicity and end the horror in Palestine?

Mr Lammy: I say to the hon. Lady that we banned arms sales that could be used in Israel back in September; Germany did so just a few weeks ago. We have had three rounds of sanctions against Israeli settlers and some of the expansion that we are seeing; France is yet to do the same. I ask her also to look at the amount of money that this Parliament and this Government have agreed to for aid, particularly for medical supplies—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady says there is more, but she does not quite articulate what more she believes we could do. We all want to bring this war to an end—we all want that. It is becoming a bit too easy to assert that without recognising the work that we are leading globally.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Starting on a positive note, I thank the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Middle East for their work to secure an agreement to get students and young people out of Gaza to continue their studies. So many of our debates make us feel powerless, but we have demonstrated, at least in one part of this jigsaw, some power to change people's lives by getting them here to study, so I thank them for that.

If that is the best of humanity, this summer has also seen the worst of humanity, with the forced starvation of hostages and civilians waiting at food stations. One concern raised by my constituents is whether there will be a Palestine, west bank and Gaza left to recognise. Can the Foreign Secretary reassure us that this Government will strain every muscle to bring the international community together so that we do not just recognise a state of Palestine but start a process that will deliver it on the ground?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and the way that he is standing up for the people of Peterborough. Let me be absolutely clear: we have supported the departure of over 500 individuals from Gaza since the beginning of the conflict. The Home Secretary has set out what more we are doing on UK medical evacuation of children, and there is more to follow in the coming weeks on the Chevening scholars and further students in receipt of full scholarships. We want to support those young people; they are the future of Gaza. We will do everything we can to defend that two-state solution, to defend a concept that goes back a long way, and to recognise the responsibility the UK has because of the Balfour declaration and our obligations to both sides of this ancient conflict.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Like the Secretary of State, I have supported a two-state solution for very many years, but there is a slight contradiction when he says that immediate recognition would not be rewarding Hamas because Hamas would be disarmed and a new state would be demilitarised. Is he saying that the recognition will not go ahead unless and until Hamas is disarmed? If the recognition will go ahead before Hamas is disarmed, should it not be confined to those parts of Palestine that are currently represented by the Palestinian Authority?

Mr Lammy: I remind the right hon. Gentleman of the letter that President Abbas wrote to President Macron, where he was clear for the first time that there can be no role for Hamas. We will make the assessment on recognition in the coming weeks, but clearly the E1 settlement has moved the dial even further away from where we were a few weeks ago. Recognition is a process.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary said that diplomacy fails until it succeeds. We have talked often in this House about the tragedy unfolding. As we approach the second anniversary, and as he goes to the UN to discuss and agree the recognition of a Palestinian state, can he explain to the House what threshold would need to be reached for a UN peacekeeping force to ensure safe passage of food and welfare to those who are starving and dying, even as we stand here today?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will understand that the Israeli Government have set themselves against some of the UN agencies that would need to uphold that, so I think that that feels unlikely from the conversations that we have had, but I do applaud the work of Cindy McCain and the World Food Programme to get essential food to people who need it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary chose very carefully his words about arms supplies that could be used in Gaza. Could he now be a bit clearer with the House? Are we still supplying parts for F-35 jets that are used to bombard people in Gaza? Is the information gathered by planes from RAF Akrotiri flying over Gaza being shared with the Israeli military forces? Thirdly, is RAF Akrotiri being used as a staging point for the delivery of weapons to Israel, in contravention of what he said about arms sales? Does he not realise that if we supply arms to a country that is complicit in war crimes, including genocide, we are also complicit in those war crimes?

Mr Lammy: I say to the right hon. Gentleman, who has considerable experience, that it is my job to make sure that we are not complicit. That is why we are not selling arms that could be used in Gaza, and it is why we are not selling direct F-35 kit to Israel. In terms of those reconnaissance flights, I am sure that he would agree that it has been right, certainly up to this point, to support hostage release. The only reason we have offered support is to find those hostages and get them home, and surely he would agree with that.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and his work on this very important matter. Over the

summer I received messages from Fossie, Joseph and Alice, three children from Eastwood Baptist church, among many other messages. They expressed their sadness at the situation in Gaza and wanted my assurance that we are doing all that we can as a Government to bring an end to this horrendous conflict, so I ask him today on their behalf: can he give me that assurance, and is he continuing to use all tools and sanctions at his disposal?

Mr Lammy: The answer is, very simply, yes. I am of Christian faith, like my hon. Friend's Baptist constituents, but people of all faiths and no faith are horrified by what they are seeing and want the United Kingdom to continue to do all it can to bring this horrifying war and suffering to an end. That is what we do every day.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I welcome the anticipated recognition of Palestine, expected later this month. Of itself it will make no difference on the ground, but I think it is an important piece of symbolism. We heard in an earlier question about the risks that journalists are facing, and we are aware that Israel blocks many journalists, including the BBC, from entering Gaza. What representations has the Foreign Secretary made to the Israelis about this?

Mr Lammy: I assure the hon. Member that I have made those representations to the Israeli Government, and so has the Minister for the Middle East, who sits next to me. I also know that this is a topic of conversation among other Foreign Ministers across the developed world. We think that international journalists play an important part in the landscape and scrutiny of any democratic country. Israel often reminds us that it is a democratic country, and it is important to let those journalists in.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I have been talking about starvation in Gaza for the last 18 months, and now it is officially recognised as a famine. Today I want to raise with the Foreign Secretary the starving of one man: Marwan Barghouti. Shortly after we announced the recognition and the Israeli Government retaliated, in my view, with the E1 plan, Ben-Gvir entered his cell in an Israeli prison, and he was very clearly being starved. It is time that Marwan Barghouti is freed by Israel. A man of peace who can push forward the peace process is being starved and not given access to his family, the International Red Cross or his legal team. What more can we do to see his release and enable him to get his human rights and not be harassed and threatened by Ben-Gvir, who we have sanctioned?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful, as I am sure the whole House is, for the update on that situation. I will not comment on the individual case, but when I was making the IHL assessment on a clear risk, which was previously referred to, one of the areas that I looked at closely and where I did believe there was a clear risk was the treatment of prisoners. I am therefore grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding the House about those humanitarian concerns.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Is the Foreign Secretary aware of the concerns expressed by his noble Friend Lord Hain about the possibility of contracts under the Army Collective Trading Service

being awarded to Elbit Systems UK, whose parent company Elbit Systems Ltd markets its weapons as being "battle tested" in Gaza and on the west bank? Lord Hain wrote to the Defence Secretary to say:

"Awarding this contract worth an estimated £1.9 billion to £2.5 billion would entrench Elbit Systems at the core of the UK's defence infrastructure for a full 15-year period"

and that to proceed with the contract would

"erode confidence in the integrity of our procurement system".

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Lord Hain's comments should be given the fullest possible consideration and that, if they are shown to be of substance, his right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary should not be awarding contracts to a company like that?

Mr Lammy: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that this is an open procurement. No decisions have been made, and no decisions will be made until 2026. The whole House will have heard what he said.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I think we all hear the frustration of the Foreign Secretary. He is leading in a way that other nations have not on this challenge, but it is that leadership role that we are looking to as a House. I think we all understand that nations individually have limited impact but that pressure can be brought to bear collectively. Can he tell us, for example, what more he is doing with his colleagues in the world community to stand with the Israeli opposition to Netanyahu and the Israeli hostages calling out his murderous behaviour?

The Foreign Secretary comes to the House and tells us that the famine is man-made, which is a war crime. What more is he doing to report the Israeli Government to the ICC or to say that we will recognise Palestine not as a threat but as a statement of positive intent with our colleagues? Above all, how are we working with our colleagues in Europe? The honest truth is, not a single child from Gaza who urgently needs medical assistance has yet come to the UK, but the European Union and World Health Organisation programme is getting children out at pace and at speed. What more could we be doing to work with them so that those children could come within days? They have already been cleared by Israeli officials. No, we must not judge ourselves by other countries; we must judge ourselves by whether we have truly done every single act we can. There is more that we could do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Lengthy questions just deny other colleagues the opportunity to speak.

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are working with our European counterparts. When I speak to Kaja Kallas and other European Foreign Ministers, what I get is the deep frustrations that she has heard me express in my answers. I remind my hon. Friend of the further £15 million that I have announced today to support humanitarian efforts, and in particular the supply of medicines in the area. The decisions that I announced at the UN a few weeks ago are absolutely not unilateral; they are working with other partners as we make an assessment on the ground of the situation prior to the UNGA.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that he specifically raised delivery of aid in his discussions with his US counterparts? The United States is a hugely important actor in that regard: it has the potential to be positive in improving the existing arrangements, but it also has the potential to be a blocker. His interaction with the US can make the difference.

Mr Lammy: I recognise the experience that the right hon. Gentleman brings to the Chamber. He will have heard the Prime Minister raise those issues with President Trump in Scotland, and I reassure him that I raised them with Vice President Vance in Kent. I got into a slight problem with a certain sort of fishing licence, but I did raise those issues as well.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for the reminder of the actions that the Government have already taken, including restoring funding to UNRWA, suspending arms exports that could be used in Gaza, suspending trade negotiations with the Israeli Government and imposing sanctions packages on violent settlers and far-right Israeli Ministers, but we need to see further action with regard to humanitarian aid getting into Gaza, where we are seeing a man-made famine. Does he agree that such action could be taken immediately if the Israeli Government allowed entry to those UN trucks on the borders of Gaza?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I do—100%.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The war in Gaza is horrific on a number of different levels. I would like to focus on one particular level: it is the deadliest conflict for journalists, who often act as our window into atrocities. Will the Secretary of State please explain why we are selling any arms to Israel?

Mr Lammy: I ask the hon. Gentleman to look in detail at export licences and how they work. As I have said, we are not sending arms to Israel. He will recognise, however, that we are continuing to export body armour that NGOs or journalists use on the ground in the west bank and indeed in Gaza. For the very reason he gave, I do not think that he would want us to stop.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcements, in particular on support to get critically ill children out of Gaza and into the UK to receive specialist NHS treatment. Does he agree that the Israeli Government's promises to carry on developing more illegal settlements in the west bank will further undermine the prospects for a two-state solution?

Mr Lammy: The plans deliberately attempt to thwart a two-state solution: they effectively split the land and they drive out Bedouin and villages. The plans were opposed by the last Government when they first surfaced, and they are opposed by all in the international community. They are entirely unacceptable. I repeated that to the Israeli Foreign Minister just a few days ago.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I am deeply concerned by the misery, suffering and death in Gaza. I thank the Foreign Secretary for the work he is doing with friends and allies in the region,

which is a key part of solving the problem. I also support a two-state solution, but is he not concerned that the ultimatum regarding unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state risks entirely disincentivising Hamas from negotiating any hostage release or ceasefire over the coming weeks and months?

Mr Lammy: I urge the hon. Gentleman to keep up to date with the latest. He will have seen that there have been announcements by Hamas on the terms for a ceasefire. We have not yet got that ceasefire; there remain disputes, for example, about the length of a ceasefire and withdrawal of the IDF from parts of Gaza. However, notwithstanding the concerns we all have, Hamas are in dialogue with our Egyptian and Qatari friends in particular.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's comments about recognition of Palestine, which, of course, is absolutely what all Labour Members stood on in our manifesto. I would like to raise specifically the devastation and starvation of people in Gaza and the numerous reports that the IDF are targeting doctors. Will he tell the House about UK efforts to evacuate people with family links to the UK, including Dr Radi, whose case I have raised many times in the House and with Ministers?

Mr Lammy: It was humbling to meet once more a group of doctors in New York who have served on the ground and to hear of the hardships that they had experienced as noble humanitarians. In the coming days, my hon. Friend will see the UK's efforts to evacuate people, particularly children, from Gaza. We rely on Israeli permits, so it is not straightforward or easy, but I am grateful that she has put the issue of doctors front and centre this afternoon.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): This morning, the Scottish Labour leader told a press conference in Glasgow:

"there is a genocide happening in Gaza. I believe Benjamin Netanyahu is a war criminal and he will have to face further sanctions."

Does the Foreign Secretary agree?

Mr Lammy: I have a list of statements that have been made by Yair Lapid, by the leader of the Democrats, Yair Golan, and by the Israeli Mossad director, Tamir Pardo, all of whom call into question much of what they are seeing on the ground—some of them use phrases like "ethnic cleansing"—so of course I am aware of what is being said. In the end, we need a ceasefire. We need to bring this horror show to an end.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I have known my right hon. Friend for more than 25 years, and I know that if he was up here on the Back Benches, he would be as angry and frustrated as we are. It gets frustrating coming here and expressing our concerns when, with all due respect, he wrings his hands and says, "We are doing all we can," then we go away and nothing moves on. What can my right hon. Friend say to us today to show that there is hope of something changing in the near future, because in the meantime it is the hostages and the people in Gaza who pay the heaviest price?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my dear friend for what he has said. He knows that this is extremely frustrating. I have spoken to envoy Steve Witkoff in the last 24 hours to be updated on the situation in terms of the ceasefire and the gaps that still exist between the two sides. There are still gaps, unfortunately. My hon. Friend knows that this will only come to an end with a ceasefire, so we continue to do everything we can. I sense that this month is an important month as we head towards UNGA, so let us see where we get to. The UN Assembly coming together is a big moment, and I am sure that the Israelis and Hamas recognise that.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Many happy returns, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Druze in Syria are suffering nothing short of atrocities, and that situation continues. What practical help can the UK give as the Israelis try to set up safe zones and humanitarian corridors for them?

Mr Lammy: The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), was in Syria last week discussing these very issues, and of course we have made representations to the Israelis about our concerns that some of their activity is undermining the prospects of the new Government.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for making it clear that this country has historic responsibilities in the region, and he has been consistent in calling for a ceasefire month after month. That has not happened, so I ask him in all sincerity: what changes does he really expect by simply continuing to repeat that? If Israel has the ability to qualify, through those “unless” statements, whether recognition is granted, I ask him to reflect on that. In answer to the earlier exchange on the potential for a peacekeeping force, surely Israel should not have the ability to put a block on that. The people of Palestine deserve better than that, surely.

Mr Lammy: Can I be very clear to my hon. Friend that Israel does not have a veto on our decision to recognise? I hear what has been said about a peacekeeping force, but I discussed these issues with the Secretary-General at the UN a few weeks ago and there are real tensions that Israel has put in the way with its ability to work with the UN. That is why I think it is doubtful that that will come to pass in the near term.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Back in May, I raised concerns about exemptions for licences for components that were going out to Israel. I wrote to the Foreign Secretary and it was passed on to the Department for Business and Trade. To date I have had no reply, so I have absolutely no idea whether those licences have been suspended and whether they are not being used. My residents are worried that while the licences are now for non-military items, the exemptions for licences may be used for things that could harm Palestinians. Will the Foreign Secretary please do all that he can to work with his colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade to make sure that we can get that reassurance?

Mr Lammy: Absolutely; I will take that up.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is truly momentous that this Government look set to put long-standing UK policy into practice and recognise Palestine this month, but it feels like time is running out for a two-state solution, as the Foreign Secretary has acknowledged. We have now witnessed man-made famine, the bombing of hospitals and hostages, and the denigration of the UN—I think the PLO delegation is banned from the General Assembly—going against all international norms, so would he agree with my constituents that on trade, sanctions and settlements, it is time to step up a gear in this ever-worsening situation and put the full force of action behind his very strong statements?

Mr Lammy: I disagree with that last part. I simply refer my hon. Friend to what I have said. She will struggle to find another Government in the developed western world who have done more on sanctions than we have. Even our neighbours in France and the European Union have not done as much as us on this issue, and our record on humanitarian aid is considerable. She has heard what has been said about the issue of recognition.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I know that the hundreds of constituents who have contacted me calling for action to end the heartbreaking suffering in Gaza will welcome the Foreign Secretary's recommitment to recognising Palestine. However, if, as he says, recognition is rooted in the principle of a two-state solution, why is granting it being used as a tool to change Israel's course, rather than taking other actions such as sanctioning Prime Minister Netanyahu?

Mr Lammy: I make no apology for trying to affect behaviour on the ground as we head to the UN General Assembly meeting and for giving diplomacy a chance. It still has an opportunity to work and that is why we did it.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Can I start by welcoming the announcement of the additional aid and medical care for Gaza that has been announced by the Secretary of State today? It is now widely reported that the Israeli Government are considering the annexation of the west bank as a direct result of the United Kingdom's plan to recognise Palestinian statehood, so will the Secretary of State make it absolutely clear that that move would constitute a blatant breach of international law? Further, will he assure the House that the Government will not hesitate to take the strongest possible action, diplomatically and politically, to condemn any such unlawful annexation?

Mr Lammy: It would be a breach of international humanitarian law, so we will keep working with our partners to try and ensure that it does not come about.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary asks what more this Government can do to ensure that the genocide in Gaza is ended. Might I suggest that the doctrine of responsibility to protect is enacted by the United Nations, and that any and all means possible are exhausted to demand an end to genocide? Intervene to defend the helpless. Intervene to help the trapped and starved civilians of Gaza, half of whom, I remind the House, are children. Act now, immediately!

Mr Lammy: I think I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said, and that is what we are attempting to do.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Instead of taking substantive steps to end the appalling situation in Gaza and agreeing to an immediate ceasefire and long-term sustainable peace, the Israeli Government have ignored us. They have failed to let aid go through, and created a man-made famine. It appears to me that the Israeli Government will only listen to Donald Trump and the United States, so can the Foreign Secretary please confirm what discussions he has had with Donald Trump to take action against the Israeli Government?

Mr Lammy: As I have said, I have spoken to Secretary of State Rubio, Envoy Steve Witkoff and Vice-President Vance about these issues. I leave discussions with the President of the United States to our great Prime Minister.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Data from the Israeli military shows that 83% of people killed in Gaza since October 2023 have been civilians. Killing at this mass scale for months on end is unparalleled in modern conflict. Will the Foreign Secretary act to place far more pressure on Israel to end the mass killing of civilians by suspending the UK's current trade agreement with Israel and sanctioning those responsible for breaching international law?

Mr Lammy: Over 63,000 people have now lost their lives and well over 100,000 are injured as a result of this war, so the hon. Member is right to put that front and centre. She will recognise that we made a decision about suspending any negotiations for a new trade agreement a few weeks ago.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Professor Oz-Salzberger described a "battle for the soul of Israel"

in the *Financial Times* of yesterday. Thousands and thousands of moderate voices in Israel are crying out for an end to this terrible war. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis march for peace. What can our Government do to support these people?

Mr Lammy: I am hugely grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing to mind the many Israelis marching and expressing deep concern for the plight of the hostages. I certainly have both Israeli and Jewish friends who are hugely concerned about the direction in which the Netanyahu Government are taking this war and this further military operation into Gaza City, which will inevitably lead to more loss of life.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): The United Nations described the famine in Gaza as a

"deliberate collapse of the systems needed for human survival" and

"a man-made disaster, a moral indictment, and a failure of humanity itself."

Every day my constituents ask me, "What more would it take for the Government to recognise this as genocide?" What would the Foreign Secretary have me say to them?

Mr Lammy: I would refer to the remarks I have made before at this Dispatch Box. I recognise what is being said. I recognise the work of international scholars particularly, and the fine judgments that must be made by the ICC and the ICJ, but we have an important democratic principle that these decisions must be made by lawyers, and it is for Governments to act in the way that I have set out today.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and the extensive work that he, his team and his officials have done to secure the international coalition of allies in the recognition of the state of Palestine—although that has been very much undermined by the Israeli Cabinet and what it proposes in relation to the E1 annexation plan. Is there more we can do to extend this coalition and increase the level of sanctions to stop this Israeli behaviour? Is it appropriate to transfer the UNGA meeting from New York to Geneva, as was done in 1988, so that the Palestinian delegation can attend?

Mr Lammy: I do think we need further dialogue on the issue of Palestinian attendance at that meeting. I recognise that these decisions were made previously and held in Geneva, but I hope that we can have some reconsideration and that we can afford the delegation the same privileges that they have had for many years.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): We have a UN-declared man-made famine, children and babies being starved to death, and journalists murdered. Now the world's leading genocide scholars state that Israel's actions meet the legal definition of genocide. It is clear that painstaking, careful international diplomacy is not working fast enough, and the Gazans are running out of time. Is it not time for us to lead our allies in actions that Israel might take notice of: sweeping trade sanctions, sanctions on Netanyahu and his entire Cabinet, and a commitment that we will recognise Gaza at the UN with no conditions?

Mr Lammy: The whole House will have heard what the hon. Member said, and she will have heard what I have said on a previous situation. I would ask her to look closely at what this Government have been doing—our leadership globally relative to other near partners. I think the decision we made a few weeks ago, and the provisions we set for how we would recognise and the judgments we will make as we head to UNGA, are particularly important.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary very much for the action taken by him and his colleagues to enable the safe passage of scholars to the UK, a number of whom hope to come to the University of Glasgow. I am also grateful for the work being done to evacuate critically injured children. The Foreign Secretary has enumerated the number of children who have already died of famine—119, with 132,000 under-fives also at risk of starvation in the next year. But we have already seen 17,000 children killed as a result of the conflict. I refuse to call it a war because it is not a war; there is one side that has arms and another side that does not have an equality of arms. The Foreign Secretary previously said that he would never rule out anything that could be helpful in this regard. I understand

why he will not commit to further sanctions at the Dispatch Box, but can he assure the House that he has not ruled out further sanctions, or any other actions that might be helpful, both in the run-up to the UN meeting and beyond?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for what she says in relation to children. Of course, there are not just the children who have died as a result of famine, which is horrific, but many thousands of children who are malnourished. Anyone who knows anything about education and children will know that if you malnourish children, you affect outcomes for them as they get older and move towards adulthood. That is why this is so horrific and disastrous for the consequences of peace and the outcomes that we want to see. I have heard what she said about sanctions.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary said that

“we can and must be precise with our language”.

I stand here 23 months after the atrocities of 7 October—completely unforgivable atrocities against civilians and other innocent people—and I join in his call for all hostages to be released. However, since 8 October 2023, Israel has been extremely precise in its language about what it was going to do in response to 7 October. Its playbook of war crime, genocide, murder, starvation, water blockages, power cuts and bombing hospitals and schools was laid out in extreme detail for all of us to see. Nobody on this planet can say we did not know. Over the 23 months, nothing this Government have done has prevented Israel from enacting its line-by-line extermination plan. It does not want two states between Palestine and Israel. It actually does not care about the lives of the remaining hostages. What will this Government do to help Israel see sense and save lives, both the hostages and the Palestinians?

Mr Lammy: I do think it is important that the hon. Gentleman, notwithstanding his strength of feeling, recognises that Israel is a complex place of many opinions. He will have found disputes, certainly from this Government but I think from many people in this Chamber, on the direction of travel that the Netanyahu Government have set themselves, and the extremists in that Government who have taken them on a certain path. I think that is an important qualification. We are doing all we can, but he will recognise that we do that with partners, seeking to exert leverage, and that is why we have made the decisions that we have most recently.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, now more than ever, the will of the international community must take precedence over the will of those who perpetuate conflict and deny a two-state solution? Of course that means Hamas, but also, sadly, the Israeli Government. Can he assure me that this Government are looking at previous times when the international community, with Britain at the forefront, has ended conflicts, despite difficulties, and built a fair and just peace, overcoming facts on the ground and restoring hope?

Mr Lammy: No conflicts are the same. That region has had numerous conflicts over the years. What we have seen over the past 23 months has been horrific. It is my job, as the country's chief diplomat, to do everything

I can, straining every sinew and working with colleagues, to bring the conflict to an end and keep my language diplomatic.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): We often get distracted by the semantics and jurisprudence of terms such as “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing”, but it is clear that, with the exception of a few, this House appears united—just as the country is as a whole—in its opposition to the actions of the far-right Netanyahu Government. The Foreign Secretary says that he wants to give diplomacy a chance—he constantly repeats that intention—but can he demonstrate to us that he is not being completely ignored throughout this? If he cannot, will he at least assure us that he will not allow the Elbit contract to go through, that RAF Akrotiri will not be used to the advantage of the Israeli military, and that there is no trade with illegal settlements?

Mr Lammy: On the last three points, yes.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): It is simply not enough at this stage to repeat the line about reminding Israel that international law requires the protection of healthcare workers, journalists and civilians—it is so clear that the Israeli Government are not doing that. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that, as a result of the UK's ongoing political role as Israel's close ally, UK weapons, including components, continue directly or indirectly to be sold to Israel? If he does not accept that, will he play a role in ensuring that no new Government contracts will be awarded to Elbit Systems UK, the central supplier of Israel's military assault in Gaza? The ICC and ICJ are watching, and the UK has its own obligations under international law.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but as I have said, we are not supplying arms to Israel—that decision was made back in September. It is my obligation and very solemn undertaking to ensure that we are not complicit. The standard that this legislature set is a very low one and a clear risk, and is not as high as standards found in international courts. It is for that reason that we suspended sales that could be used in Gaza, notwithstanding some of the mendacity that we see online.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Despite all the protestations that we have heard from the Dispatch Box, by the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and others, it seems that Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu will stop at nothing. Like a dog that has tasted blood, Netanyahu can be stopped only by military intervention. To be absolutely clear, we are not working with the likes of Canada, Australia and France when it comes to the recognition of the state of Palestine, because we have adopted what is known as a contradictory conditional statement. Will the Foreign Secretary make it plain that the UK Labour Government's position is that we will not recognise the state of Palestine so long as Benjamin Netanyahu fulfils certain conditions?

Mr Lammy: I set out my statement very clearly at the UN. The Prime Minister set out his statement at No. 10. When I finished my statement, the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority came to me and gave me an embrace. Yet the hon. Gentleman thinks that he knows

[Mr Lammy]

more and that the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority got it wrong. Of course we are working with our partners; of course we are trying to change the situation on the ground—I make absolutely no apologies for that. We will make our assessments for UNGA. The hon. Gentleman's judgment on this occasion is wrong.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I very much welcome the commitment to recognising the Palestinian state. Some of us have fought for that for many years. I also welcome the rest of the Foreign Secretary's statement, in so far as it goes. He is right to condemn what the Israelis are doing in Gaza with their policy of starvation, and he is right to recognise the Israeli attempts to split the west bank in a way that will prevent a Palestinian state from being created, but in his heart of hearts he knows that the Israelis will carry on regardless of his condemnation. Will he now give serious thought to the "what if"? What further action are the Government prepared to take to hold the Israelis to account and to get them to recognise the force of international arguments against them on both those points?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend brings considerable experience to the Chamber and to these issues. Of course, as he would expect, I and the FCDO plan for all scenarios, but we remain optimistic and hopeful. That is our solemn duty on behalf of the hostages still underground, and on behalf of those suffering in Gaza, particularly the children and women who are losing their lives and being injured in the way we have seen.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): My hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) was right to ask the Foreign Secretary to place sanctions on Prime Minister Netanyahu. Many of my constituents agree and ask me to urge the Government to take more steps to stop the famine in Gaza and stop the Israel Defence Forces killing many more innocent children, women and men in Gaza. Does the Foreign Secretary realise that many people in this country do not think that he is doing enough to stop the famine and end the killing? They are frustrated with him for what they see as his inaction.

Mr Lammy: I think that the British people are wise and deeply concerned about what they see, but I also think that their wisdom means that they ascribe blame, where appropriate, to the actors on the ground, remembering that one of those actors is a proscribed terrorist organisation. They recognise that Britain has a role to play and a historical duty, and they want to see Britain playing that role alongside partners, which is what we are doing.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the commitment to recognising the Palestinian state later this month. That is an essential step, and there can be no further delay. Israeli Government support for illegal settlement in the west bank and the decision to build in the E1 area are strategically designed to undermine the viability of a Palestinian state. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore commit to introducing a ban on all settlement trade, including services and investments, so that money from the UK cannot be used to fund that

illegal occupation, and so that the state of Palestine, which we are rightly recognising, has a chance of becoming a reality?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for continuing to press those issues over so many months on behalf of her constituents. Goods from settlements not entitled to tariff and trade preferences are important considerations. UK business guidance outlines clear risk to UK operators considering economic activity in the area.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The statement will conclude at 8 pm because we also have a statement on Ukraine. Colleagues will need to be as fast as they can.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): In hearing from the Foreign Secretary that 132,000 children are at risk of dying from hunger, one can only feel utter revulsion. I recognise what the Government have done, but in their public diplomacy with President Trump, their strategy appears to be to pander to him. Again, I understand why the Government have chosen to do that, but how concerned is the Foreign Secretary that their legacy in the middle east will be the same as that of the previous Labour Government: to be a poodle to an out-of-control American President amid horror?

Mr Lammy: I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was me and this Labour Government who signed a memorandum of understanding of support with the Palestinian Authority just a few months ago. We use every lever that we can diplomatically to be in dialogue with our partners and to seek to influence them. This is a complex set of issues. There are different approaches internationally, and he will have witnessed that, but we use every sinew diplomatically, and that is what the Prime Minister and I do every day.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Almost 1,500 healthcare workers have been killed, according to Médecins Sans Frontières, and more than 50,000 children have been killed or injured, according to UNICEF. If the Israeli Government declare that they are not targeting medical workers, journalists and civilians, they are clearly cavalier with human life, and tolerating that is no longer acceptable. Will the Foreign Secretary tell me what steps we will take to hold the Israeli Government to account properly under international law, and to make it clear that that is no longer acceptable and that we will not tolerate it?

Mr Lammy: In the interests of time, I simply refer my hon. Friend to the statements that I have already made from the Dispatch Box this afternoon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his clear commitment to delivering help and assistance and to finding a lasting solution. Does he accept that the retrieval of two more dead Israeli hostages, while 48 are still being held either dead or alive by Hamas, indicates the unwillingness of Hamas to bring this war to an end? Does the Secretary of State believe that there is any further way of bringing those hostages home, which I and we all believe would be a meaningful

step on the road to a ceasefire and a rebuilding of life for the people of Gaza, as well as for the Israelis on the other side of the strip?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right: the return of those hostages would see this war come to an end tomorrow. Recently, the sight of terribly malnourished hostages was chilling and horrendous, and heartbreaking for their families. I met hostage families just before the recess, and I will meet them again very shortly. He is right to centre them in his remarks.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his urgent work to evacuate and treat seriously injured and critically ill children from Gaza. New restrictions on aid are due to be implemented fully on 9 September. Aid organisations face being banned if they delegitimise the state of Israel or do not provide detailed information about Palestinian staff. Does he agree that women and girls have suffered the worst impacts of the war? Will he expand on how we can help to get more aid to them?

Mr Lammy: It is always women and girls who are the face of pain and suffering in conflict and the most desperate of circumstances. That is why we will continue to centre women and girls in all our development work, because that is critical. My hon. Friend is right to refer to the remarks that have been made; they are not the remarks that we would expect of any democratic partner. I urge the Israeli Government to think again.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I explain to my constituents every week how hard the Foreign Secretary and his ministerial team are working in this context, but every day women and children are killed and are starving. What is happening is a moral outrage of the first order. The International Criminal Court is a key pillar of international justice. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that he is doing everything possible to protect and enhance its independence from political interference, and to ensure that it is more than properly resourced to carry out its important work in this conflict?

Mr Lammy: The International Criminal Court is a fundamental part of the architecture that was set up after the atrocities of the second world war. The United Kingdom played a central role in that. That is why this Government—and I hope any Government—remain absolutely committed to the ICC and the International Court of Justice, and to their good and important work, which they must do free from and unfettered by political interference.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to recognising a Palestinian state at the United Nations General Assembly. Violence in the west bank has been horrific, with Israeli forces and settlers displacing more than 40,000 Palestinians due to assaults on northern refugee camps, and of course there are concerns about annexation. What actions will the Foreign Secretary take to protect Palestinians at risk of forced transfer? What work will he do with international partners to pressure the Israeli Government at UNGA?

Mr Lammy: That is a decision that I am discussing with the Palestinian Authority. Also, I will be in the region in the coming days, discussing what further support we can give to those who are suffering or at risk on the ground.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Today, the world's leading genocide scholars declared genocide in Gaza. Earlier this summer, famine was officially declared in Gaza. We have seen war crime after war crime, with more journalists killed and more hospitals bombed, and yet on sanctions the Government continue to drag their feet. How can it be morally justifiable that, while rightly being robust on Russia with extensive sanctions, when it comes to Israel and sanctions, we let it off lightly, to say the least? What is the difference and when will we see widespread sanctions on Israel?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is a lawyer, so when he says that, I would ask him to point to a nation that does more on sanctions on this file than the United Kingdom. I note that he has not been able to do that.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and the actions that the Government have taken already on sanctions, aid and proposals to recognise the Palestinian state. Given the facts on the ground, which he has recognised—the man-made famine, the killing of women, children, healthcare workers and journalists, the ongoing suffering of the hostages, and the intensification of the military campaign—will he confirm that he will continue to work with international allies and consider all further actions that he can take to bring about the end of this catastrophe?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): In recent months alone more than 1,000 of my constituents have contacted me about the brutal conflict in Gaza, making it the single biggest issue of concern to local people. I know that the Foreign Secretary and his Ministers are doing everything that they can behind the scenes and in private, but does he agree that the Palestinian people have an inalienable right to statehood and that a further group of countries, including the UK, recognising Palestine could provide a practical and, importantly, a public step towards making a two-state solution and a lasting peace possible?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. We believe passionately in a two-state solution and in keeping that dream alive. We believe in the inalienable right of the Palestinian people. That is why I set out what I did in the UN a few weeks ago.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for his stamina over the past two hours. I assure him that the horror of the unfolding famine in Gaza and concern about the future of the hostages are felt just as strongly on the Atlantic coast of Scotland as they are on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. International experts have rightly described what is going on in Gaza as a genocide. Anas Sarwar, the Scottish Labour leader, today described it as a genocide. Will such sentiments inform our next round of sanctions against Netanyahu's Government?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I recognise what is being said by international scholars around the world. He will recognise the sombre decisions that we have taken in relation to international humanitarian law, in particular the suspension of arms sales.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have tried to go as fast as I can, and I apologise to all the colleagues who are disappointed, but the final question goes to Tom Hayes.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What happened on 7 October was inhumane: Hamas are terrorists and the hostages must be returned immediately and safely. Israel is behaving insufferably and what the Israeli Government are doing is unacceptable. The International Criminal Court has indicted Israeli leaders for the war crime of starvation. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Israeli Government are guilty of violating articles of the fourth Geneva convention. Will the Government do all that they can to support British prosecutors and our British courts to arrest war criminals and hold them to account?

Mr Lammy: Madam Deputy Speaker, I too am sorry that other colleagues who wanted to ask questions were unable to do so today, but I am sure that much of the global community will see the strength of feeling that has been shown in the Chamber this afternoon in relation to this horrific war. As Foreign Secretary, it is my great honour to stand shoulder to shoulder with those giants of this Chamber who gave us the international humanitarian architecture that we have, and to be crystal clear in our support for it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is the end of the statement on the middle east.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 22 April, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary and the Attorney General raising a number of matters to do with domestic legal issues and our international obligations with regard to this conflict, but 132 days later, I have yet to receive a reply. What steps can I take to elicit the information that I need from the Foreign Secretary?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. This is not a matter for the Chair, but the right hon. Member has put his concerns on the record and they have been heard by Members on the Front Bench, including the Foreign Secretary himself.

Ukraine

8.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement about Ukraine.

Before I begin, I inform the House that yesterday we secured a £10 billion contract to supply Norway with at least five Type 26 frigates. This is the biggest British warship deal in our history. It strengthens NATO and our northern flank, and supports 4,000 British jobs and 400 British businesses for years to come. It shows that this Government are making defence an engine for growth across the regions and nations of the United Kingdom.

Turning to Ukraine, a few days ago Ukrainians around the world came together to mark a special day: 34 years of their country's independence—34 years as a proud and sovereign nation. Ukrainians, civilians and those from the military alike, continue to fight for that freedom with huge courage, three-and-a-half years on from the start of Putin's brutal, full-scale invasion. A secure Europe needs a strong Ukraine: its freedom is our freedom and its values our values. That is why the UK stands with Ukraine, and why this House stands united for Ukraine. When Ukraine marks its next independence day, we all hope to see Ukrainians celebrate in a time of peace, not in a time of war.

Over the summer, the UK, with our allies, has been working hard to make that hope a reality. The Prime Minister hosted President Zelensky in London, chaired various coalition of the willing meetings with President Macron and joined European leaders with President Zelensky to meet President Trump in Washington DC. I have spoken with Defence Ministers across the coalition about stepping up military support and securing a peace after any deal. Our military leaders have met multiple times to strengthen international contributions to the coalition, also known now as the "multinational force Ukraine."

We welcome President Trump's dedication to bringing this terrible war to an end, and we strongly welcome his commitment to make security guarantees "very secure," as he says, with the Europeans. At every stage, President Zelensky continues his support for a full, unconditional ceasefire and for talks on a lasting peace, yet Putin's response has been to launch some of the largest attacks on Ukraine since the start of the war. During last week's onslaught on Kyiv, at least 23 people were killed, four of whom were children, including a two-year-old. An attack on the British Council was an outrage: a Russian missile, fired into a civilian area, as part of an illegal war, damaged a British Government building, injuring a civilian worker.

It now appears that Putin is refusing a meeting with President Trump and President Zelensky, so while Ukraine wants peace, Putin wages war. President Trump is right: we must continue pushing for peace, as well as increasing pressure on Putin to come to the table. So we support measures to disrupt Russian oil revenues, and we welcome President Trump's comments that he is weighing very serious economic sanctions on Russia. The Foreign Secretary will have more to say on similar UK action very soon.

On the battlefield, intense fighting continues along the frontline. While Russian military activity has reduced in the Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts, as Russian ground forces relocate elements of those forces, over the past two weeks, they have advanced in the northern Donetsk region. Pokrovsk remains Russia's focus and its forces are using a variety of methods to infiltrate Ukrainian positions, but Putin continues to make only minor territorial gains, at a huge cost.

The most recent assessment by UK defence intelligence estimates that at the current pace since January, it would take Russia another 4.4 years to seize the Donbas, at a cost of almost 2 million more Russian casualties. Despite that, the increasing escalation of Russia's devastating drone strikes is a serious concern. In July, Russia launched approximately 6,200 one-way attack drones into Ukraine, another monthly record. In one night alone, over this weekend, Russia launched nearly 540 drones and 45 missiles.

The UK Government are stepping up our efforts for Ukraine. Our priorities are simple: support the fight today, secure the peace tomorrow. To support the fight today, we are providing £4.5 billion in military aid for Ukraine this year—the highest ever level. At the last Ukraine Defence Contact Group meeting, with over 50 nations and partners, in July, I launched a “50-day drive” to accelerate the assistance that we are giving. Fifty days on, the UK has delivered to Ukraine nearly 5 million rounds of munitions, around 60,000 artillery shells, rockets and missiles, 2,500 uncrewed platforms, 30 vehicles and engineering equipment, and 200 electronic warfare and air defence systems.

We will not jeopardise the peace by forgetting about the war. Next week, I will co-chair the 30th UDCG meeting with Germany's Minister Pistorius, alongside NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and 50 other allies and partners. I will host an E5 Defence Ministers summit in London next week, where we will be joined by the Ukrainian Defence Minister, and where together we will step up still further our support for Ukraine.

To secure the peace tomorrow, the UK continues, with the French, to lead the coalition of the willing. Some 200 military planners from more than 30 nations have helped design plans in the event of a ceasefire: plans to secure the skies and seas, and to train Ukrainian forces to defend their nation. This week, I will host Defence Ministers from across the coalition, with French Minister Lecornu, to further cement contributions to that coalition. For the armed forces, I am reviewing readiness levels and accelerating funding to prepare for any possible deployment. Peace is possible, and we will be ready. The Prime Minister and I will ensure that the House is fully informed of developments in the proper way.

May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to one of the driving figures of the coalition of the willing, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin? Today is his last day as the UK Chief of the Defence Staff. Tony has had a distinguished 35-year military career in the armed forces, serving in operations right across the globe. He is widely respected and a true friend of the Ukrainian people, as President Zelensky himself said last week. I am sure that everyone in the House will join me in thanking Tony for his outstanding service and wish every success to his successor as CDS, Air Chief Marshal Rich Knighton.

Let me end by saying that while President Putin likes to project strength, he is now weaker than ever. Since Putin launched his illegal invasion, he has not achieved any of his strategic aims. He has lost more than 10,000 tanks and armoured vehicles, and his Black sea fleet has been humiliated. He is forced to rely on states such as Iran for drones, North Korea for frontline troops and China for technology and components. He is using 40% of his total Government spending on the war, with interest rates now running at 18% and inflation at 9%. Moreover, Putin now faces a bigger NATO—32 nations strong, with an agreement to raise national spending on security to 5% by 2035—and a Ukraine that is more determined than ever to control its own future. A secure Europe needs a strong, sovereign Ukraine, and we in the UK will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

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

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I join him in paying tribute to the outgoing Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, who, as he says, has given such impactful leadership and support for Ukraine. I also send my best wishes to his successor as CDS, Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton. It was a privilege to work with both of them at the MOD.

Let me turn to Ukraine. It is being widely reported that in his speech to the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation summit today, Vladimir Putin said that the understandings reached at his meeting with President Trump in Alaska were opening the way to peace in Ukraine. How utterly cynical. What followed the summit in Alaska was not peace, but the brutal bombing of innocent civilians across Ukraine. In particular, just days ago, Putin unleashed the second-largest aerial attack of the whole war, killing at least 23 people, including four children, as the Secretary of State just confirmed.

Bomb damage included the British Council in Kyiv. We join the Government in utterly condemning the attack on the British Council and pay tribute to all its staff, who are playing their part in our national endeavour to support Ukraine. We pass on our best wishes to the member of staff who was injured in the attack. We note that the chief executive of the British Council, Scott McDonald, promised to continue operations wherever possible. Can the Secretary of State outline to what degree that has been achieved and what support the Government have provided to assist?

If Putin really wants to open the way to peace in Ukraine, as he said, he should recognise that the blame for this war lies squarely with his territorial ambitions, and that all the civilian and military bloodshed that continues is wholly the result of his unprovoked and illegal invasion. The reality is that Putin does not accept that basic fact. In his speech today at the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation summit, Putin is widely quoted as blaming others for the war, in particular his long-standing refrain that the war was caused by

“the West's constant attempts to draw Ukraine into NATO.”

Without ambiguity, we and all our allies must see that the war in Ukraine is a question of a free and sovereign democracy invaded without provocation by a bullying dictator. That is why, when we were in office, it was right

[James Cartlidge]

to provide such strong support to Ukraine from the outset of the invasion—indeed, even before it commenced—and why in opposition we stand shoulder to shoulder with the Government in continuing that policy. That is why we need to keep tightening the screws on Putin's war machine. Moscow should be denied safe harbours for its tankers and profits, and Europe should ban Russian oil and gas sooner than its current 2027 deadline.

The Euro-Atlantic alliance must lead a new pincer movement to further constraint Russia's energy revenues and stop Putin from getting his hands on military equipment, so I am glad that the Foreign Secretary will have more to say on sanctions very soon, as the Secretary of State for Defence said. Can he confirm whether the timeline is directly linked to US action? Would the UK go ahead with those plans for tougher sanctions if the US for some reason did not?

On any potential end to the fighting, we all desperately want to see peace in Ukraine, but we are clear that it must be a lasting, sustainable peace. That is why security guarantees are so important. The Secretary of State referred to President Trump's commitment to make security guarantees "very secure" with the Europeans. What further detail is he able to share on the likely shape of any such US security guarantees?

The Secretary of State states that the coalition of the willing would

"secure the skies and seas".

That seems to miss out the land force element. Does that mean that the Army would be sent to Ukraine only in a training role? He also said that he is

"reviewing readiness levels and accelerating funding to prepare for any possible deployment".

Does he expect that funding to come from the Treasury reserve or the existing MOD budget? On reviewing readiness, what is the timescale of the review? Is it yet at the stage where urgent operational requirements are being considered?

Finally, I strongly welcome the news that Norway has selected the Type 26, which is made in Scotland, for its future fleet. That is a huge deal that will support thousands of jobs, but it has been many years in the making, with significant input and progress under the previous Government. In December 2023, I had the pleasure of visiting the Norwegian MOD in Oslo, and I assure the House that the Type 26 was very much at the top of the agenda. To remind hon. Members, that was in the same week we announced that Britain and Norway would lead the maritime coalition supporting Ukraine's navy, underlining the strength of our naval alliance and our joint commitment to Ukraine.

It is clear that a key reason for Norway's decision is that it faces the same Russian threat that we do from Russian submarines and wants the best possible capability to respond, maximising interoperability with the Royal Navy. However, that Russian threat arises entirely from Putin's pursuit of aggression, rather than peace. Until that situation changes in reality rather than in rhetoric, we must continue to be robust in doing everything possible to support Ukraine.

John Healey: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's endorsement of the success in securing the Norway deal. Groundwork was certainly done under the last

Government, and he led a lot of that as the Defence Procurement Minister, but I have to say that we had a great deal more to do when we took over in July last year. Frankly, we had to reboot the campaign, which we did, and I am grateful that we have secured it, as it has huge military, economic and strategic importance.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's continuing support for the action we are taking to support Ukraine. He is absolutely right to call out Putin's remarks at the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation council, and the pressure is now on Putin to prove that he wants peace and to do what he says he wants. While he has sat down to discuss peace with President Trump in Alaska, he has of course been turning up his attacks in Ukraine. He launched this war, and he can stop it tomorrow if he chooses.

The hon. Gentleman asks about sanctions and encourages us to take further steps. He will know that we have already introduced more than 500 new sanctions against individuals, entities and ships. We have sanctioned 289 vessels as part of the Russian shadow fleet, and very soon the Foreign Secretary will announce further UK steps.

On the security guarantees, the commitments we have secured already from many of those involved in the discussion are substantial. The discussions continue, and we look for contributions to be further confirmed. Much of the shape of any deployment of a coalition of the willing will depend on the terms of any peace agreement. At this stage, I certainly do not want to offer any more public details on that, because it would only reinforce Putin's hand and make him and the Russians wiser.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I wholeheartedly welcome the historic frigate exports deal with Norway, and join him in paying tribute to Chief of the Defence Staff Admiral Radakin for his distinguished decades-long service to our country.

Recent Russian attacks across 14 different regions of Ukraine are not actions of peace. Words and actions must align, and it is abundantly clear that both from President Putin present a threat to us all. With such drastic escalation of Putin's violence running concurrently with peace negotiations, along with Putin's false reframing of his invasion as some sort of reaction to a Western-backed coup, can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State shed further light on what levers he has pulled to help enable a peaceful outcome?

John Healey: It is a truism that peace is secured through strength, and our task in countries such as the UK that strongly support Ukraine is to put it in the strongest possible position on the battlefield and at any negotiating table. That means stepping up military support for Ukraine now, which we are doing, and will do further at next week's UDCG meeting that I will co-chair. It also means stepping up economic pressure on Putin, which the House will have a chance to hear more about—the Foreign Secretary will announce further measures soon—and stepping up our preparations for securing any peace for the long term if Trump can help lead negotiations that will lead to a ceasefire and a peace

agreement. That is the way that we support Ukraine now, and it is how we can help reinforce the steps towards the possibility of peace tomorrow.

I say to my hon. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee and to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), that I will ensure tomorrow that Admiral Radakin is aware of the kind comments from both sides of the House. I know that he will appreciate them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Defence Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I join others in the House in thanking Admiral Sir Tony Radakin for his service, and wish him well in his next steps.

I was relieved to see the Prime Minister join fellow European leaders in Washington last month, standing shoulder to shoulder with President Zelensky in the wake of Donald Trump's fawning appeasement of Vladimir Putin in Alaska. Despite that show of support, I still fear that Trump would prefer to secure a quick and easy carve-up of Ukraine, rather than work to secure a peace that provides justice for Ukraine and guarantees its sovereignty against future Russian aggression. That is why I believe that the Government need to continue to lead from the front, but to take our European partners with us we really need to bolster Ukraine's defence and punish Putin. In that vein, can the Secretary of State update the House on what progress, if any, has been made on seizing the billions in frozen Russian assets across the G7? Can he update us on whether any assessment has been made of the volume and quality of weaponry that the seizure of those assets could help fund for Kyiv, or to what use they could be put in supporting the rebuilding of Ukraine?

We must also tighten the screws on Putin's war chest. I welcome the new £10 billion contract with Norway and the British jobs and businesses that it will support in the UK, which further demonstrates the need for us to work with our northern European allies in the fight against Russia's aggression. I am pleased that the Government have taken a step to further cut the Kremlin's profits through a reduction in the oil price cap, but that measure must be accompanied by more work to crack down on Russia's shadow fleet, as it continues to trade and transport oil sold above that price cap. A joined-up approach between us and our allies is vital, so will the Secretary of State commit to expanding the UK's designation of vessels in the shadow fleet, including those already sanctioned by the EU, Canada and the US, and will he seek reciprocal designations from those partners? As we reach a critical moment in negotiations, we need to be taking all the steps we can to provide Ukraine with the leverage and military matériel it needs, so will the Secretary of State consider sending UK Typhoon jets for use by the Ukrainian air force?

John Healey: I welcome the hon. Lady's strong focus on the need for further economic pressure on Putin and on Russia. She will recognise that the UK is out ahead of many other countries in the number of vessels we have sanctioned as part of the Russian shadow fleet. We are always ready to take further steps in that regard, and I

hope she will see very soon from the Foreign Secretary the UK's determination to go further still on economic pressure and on sanctions. She invites me to offer an update on progress on the use of seized assets; I am unable to do that, but she will know that this is not just a matter of whether it will be effective as a UK decision. The detailed work that is still being discussed with other key allies continues. We recognise the potential for using those assets seized from Russia to help rebuild and support Ukraine—that is something we are working on.

The hon. Lady urges us to lead European allies. It is not unreasonable to say that that is exactly what we are doing, not just through the UK providing our highest ever level of military aid this year, but in the way in which we have now stepped in to lead the UDCG. I will chair its 30th meeting alongside Minister Pistorius next week. We have also stepped in by leading the coalition of the willing with the French—more than 50 nations are part of the discussions about planning for Ukraine's long-term future, and I will host the Defence Ministers alongside Minister Lecornu this week to discuss that further.

However, there is one other point that I would make to the hon. Lady and to this House. It is often seen as the European coalition of the willing or the European UDCG, but these are coalitions of nations that go well beyond Europe. I was in Japan last week, and Prime Minister Ishiba of Japan has joined the discussions for the coalition of the willing. Some of the most stalwart supporters of Ukraine in terms of military aid since the start of the Russian invasion have been allies of ours—steadfast supporters of Ukraine from other parts of the world, from Australia to Japan and from New Zealand to Korea. That signals to Putin not just that Europe stands steadfast with Ukraine in challenging and confronting his aggression, but that we and many other countries see this as a security matter in the Euro-Atlantic that is indivisible from security in the Indo-Pacific.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for the update and for his continuing leadership on this issue. We have all been so moved by the extraordinary bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people in the face of Russian aggression, and in my constituency we know how important it is to stand by our friends in Ukraine. In my constituency, I have also had the privilege of being able to visit our armed forces and our industry and to see how much they have been inspired by our Ukrainian colleagues and their innovation on the battlefield. Will the Secretary of State give a bit of an update on the important lessons that the Ministry of Defence has learned from Ukrainians' innovation on the battlefield?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the courage of the Ukrainians is an inspiration to us all, including our own forces, as is their ability to fight and innovate in combat. We tried to capture that in the strategic defence review, which we published in June. It points the way to the sort of radical transformation that we will require in our own armed forces and defence system. I hope that my hon. Friend will see the hallmarks of that very soon when we publish the defence industrial strategy.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): A few weeks ago I returned from Ukraine with some others who had been delivering trucks and

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

medical aid to the Ukrainians for use on the frontline. I have made a number of such trips alongside other Members whom I can see across the Floor, united, as the Government are united, with the Opposition and the other parties. However, having watched the brutality stepped up by President Putin in recent weeks, and following the Alaskan conference in Anchorage, I must say that I am fundamentally still very disappointed. Yes, the Government are right that they are bringing together a coalition of the willing, but the least willing of all at the moment seems to be the White House, and my concern is that without the White House's commitment to showing Putin that his actions have consequences, this will continue to drag on. The United States is the one country that can really impress upon him that if the Russians carry on with these attacks, they will be sanctioned dramatically and the weapons that the Ukrainians desperately need will flow to them like water. I wonder whether the Government could say to the President, behind closed doors, "It is time to follow your words with actions and not keep on prevaricating."

John Healey: I appreciate the argument that the right hon. Gentleman makes. It is important to recognise that President Trump's role is essential and central in any opportunity to bring the two sides together. President Trump is playing a role that only he can play, and he has made it clear that the range of further steps, if they become necessary, at his disposal and for his decision include stepping up economic pressure on President Putin. We are ready to respond alongside that, and we are also ready to take our own decisions on economic pressure on President Putin and on Russia. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the Defence Committee Chair, that has got to be part of trying to ensure that the pressure on Putin and the support for Ukraine brings the two sides more rapidly to the negotiating table so that we can get the peace that we all want secured.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): My West Dunbartonshire constituents know the importance of standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine in this fight. Does the Minister agree that investments such as the £250 million to His Majesty's Naval Base Clyde and the landmark £10 billion deal with Norway—both of which secure thousands of jobs for people on the Clyde, many of whom live in my West Dunbartonshire constituency—all help to show our strength and deter future Russian aggression?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is a lesson from Ukraine that we have to take seriously: when a country is faced with conflict or is forced to fight, its armed forces are only as strong as the industry that stands behind them. Part of the significance of the frigate deal with Norway is that this will reinforce our British shipbuilding, our British innovation and our British technology base across the UK and especially in Scotland for many years to come.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I, too, congratulate Admiral Sir Tony Radakin and Air Chief Marshal Sir Rich Knighton and wish them well. A big "Well done" is also due to all involved in the Type 26 deal, including my hon. Friend the Member for

South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). I ask the Defence Secretary to cast his mind back to March, when I asked the Prime Minister whether it would be folly to put British troops into Ukraine without a US backstop—without a guarantee from the White House—and the Prime Minister agreed that it would indeed be folly. Does that remain the Government's position?

John Healey: The Government's position is that we are discussing the nature of security guarantees and the contribution that we can help lead through the coalition of the willing, alongside any American support, and together that is part of the configuration of making Ukraine strong and creating the circumstances in which serious negotiations, and we hope a peace agreement, can be reached.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I warmly thank my right hon. Friend for getting this Norwegian deal over the line. I feel a singular sense of pride about it, because my constituency of Glasgow South West and Govan will become the epicentre of Type 26 construction. Will he undertake to work with me to ensure that my constituents feel the full benefits of this investment? In that vein, will he urge the SNP Government to finally collaborate with us and to dispense with their ideological block on the defence sector, so that together, for want of a better word, we can be stronger for Scotland?

John Healey: First, may I say to my hon. Friend that all of us in the House appreciate the contribution that his constituents, as part of that Govan workforce, make to building the outstanding British ships? The Norwegian Prime Minister had a telling way of explaining the decision on Sunday, when he said that they had weighed two questions:

"Who is our most strategic partner? And who has delivered the best frigates?... The answer to both is the United Kingdom."

It is also telling that the nationalist-led Scottish Government are yet to welcome this contract and this success.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): First, I commend the Defence Secretary and Admiral Sir Tony Radakin for their commitment to a just peace in Ukraine. However, I agree with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) that the most reluctant member of this coalition of the willing appears to be President Trump. Does the Defence Secretary agree that it is particularly disappointing that he is unable to give an update on seizing the \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets? There is slow progress on that, but it is perhaps our strongest potential lever in exerting pressure on Russia to deliver a just peace.

John Healey: I do not entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The declaration that the President of the United States has made about making the European-led arrangements for security guarantees, in his words, "very secure" is important and significant. Those discussions continue. The shape of any potential and possible deployment to support and secure a long-term peace will depend hugely on the nature of the peace agreement itself. It is for those reasons that it is not possible to set out in public at this stage the details, but we continue those discussions on the nature of the support that can be given to Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire and a

peace agreement, and on the sort of pressure that may be required to make sure that those serious negotiations can take place.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I want to share with the House the deepest solidarity from the Ukraine Appeal and the Sunflower Ukrainian supplementary school in my constituency of Milton Keynes about the recent attacks in Kyiv and on the British Council. The British Council's vital cultural initiatives have supported peace and created community cohesion around the world. It is in that spirit that the Ukraine Appeal has created an exhibition, "Faces of Ukrainian Dream", by the children who go to its Sunflower school. That exhibition will be touring Milton Keynes, including Bletchley Park. Will the Defence Secretary join me in expressing our solidarity to the Ukrainian families in Milton Keynes and across the UK, and those still in Ukraine? Slava Ukraini.

John Healey: I will indeed express that solidarity, and not just with those Ukrainian families and children; I also pay tribute to the people of Milton Keynes who have opened their homes to house the families of those Ukrainian children. It is often the children and the families who will feel the threat and the grief most fiercely, and the fact that they have expressed such strong solidarity with those British Council workers in the face of that attack is something that we all appreciate, and I would be grateful on behalf of the House if my hon. Friend passed that on.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House share my disgust at the sight of the killer in the Kremlin having a red carpet rolled out for him that might as well have been stained with the blood of all those who have died in a conflict that is down entirely to him, and to him alone. However, when we talk about meaningful security guarantees, it is perhaps worth remembering that the only reason why, when Germany was divided at the end of the second world war, that was a stable division was that both sides knew that anyone crossing a line would be initiating an international conflict. Surely any security guarantee that does not automatically guarantee the involvement of other states in the defence of Ukraine will not be worth the paper on which it is written.

John Healey: The purpose of the "coalition of the willing" force that we are leading the work to plan for is about actively securing the Ukrainian skies, actively making the Ukrainian seas safe, and providing a presence that will help to reassure, as well as helping to build up the Ukrainians to deter and defend for themselves. It starts from the first premise that in the circumstances of a peace agreement, for the medium and the long term, the strongest defence and the strongest deterrence is the nature and strength of the Ukraine armed forces themselves. That is our purpose, and that would be part of our mission.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend and his whole team for the incredible efforts that they are making on this issue. Over the weekend, Russia launched yet more devastating airstrikes on Kyiv, killing 23 people including

a two-year-old child. July was the deadliest month of the conflict since its early stages, with more than 280 civilians killed and more than 1,300 injured. Russia has once again shown its blatant disregard for human life, targeting, abducting, indoctrinating and even weaponising children. What further steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that Ukraine has the means to defend itself from these heinous crimes?

John Healey: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the campaigning that she is doing, and not just on Ukraine generally but, in particular, to draw attention to the systematic programme that we have seen from Putin and his troops in abducting Ukrainian children and trying to indoctrinate them into the Russian way of life. I have had discussions with Secretary Umerov, when he was Defence Minister and now when he is Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council. He is leading the negotiations on behalf of President Zelensky, and some of the early discussions potentially with the Russian side are about prisoner of war swaps and about the return of those Ukrainian children.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I welcome the Norwegian investment in Glasgow's shipyards. The Norwegians understand the importance of European security. The Norwegians understand the importance of territorial integrity. The Norwegians understand the importance of the high north. I pay credit to those at RM Condor, in my constituency, for their work in that particular area. They know that Donetsk is Ukrainian, that Luhansk is Ukrainian, and that Crimea is Ukrainian.

The United States ambassador to NATO said recently that no "chunks" that had not been "earned on the battlefield" should be given over to Russia. When the Secretary of State meets his US counterpart in a couple of weeks, will he make it clear that no chunks of Ukraine are earned by aggressors on the battlefield, and that Ukraine's territorial integrity is testament regardless of our political allegiance here?

John Healey: The Ukrainians are fighting for their territorial integrity. The Ukrainians are doing the fighting, and it is for the Ukrainians to decide when to stop fighting and the terms on which they do so. Our job in the UK, and my job as Defence Secretary, is to ensure that we give them the maximum support possible in the fight, and we will give the maximum support possible as they go into the negotiations. Let me add that the hon. Gentleman's declaration—and I hope he can speak on behalf of his party—that he fully supports that biggest ever British warship export deal is welcome in the House.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I want to start by paying tribute to Andriy Parubiy, the former Ukrainian Speaker, who was brutally assassinated in his home city of Lviv. He played a key role in the Maidan protests, which freed Ukraine of Russian interference.

I really thank my right hon. Friend for raising the issue of the British Council attack in Kyiv. A man was injured, and we need to remember that the British Council is not just any body; it is an arm's length body of the FCDO. It takes British culture and values, and English language teaching, around the world. In the

[Alex Sobel]

same attack, the EU delegation building was also attacked. We have heard tonight from Bulgaria that Ursula von der Leyen's plane was jammed by Russia and had difficulty landing—it had to use paper maps to land.

I am afraid to say that we are hearing more and more on the streets that this war is a matter for Ukraine and Russia, but I think everybody in this Chamber knows that if Ukraine falls, it will not end there. This is a war for all of us, and Ukraine is fighting for all of us. I would like my right hon. Friend to reassure me that we are making it very clear that we know that Putin's aggression will not stop at Ukraine if Ukraine fails, that the Ukrainians are fighting for all of us, and that we will give them all the support they need to ensure that we are all free in Europe.

John Healey: My hon. Friend speaks plainly and strongly. I recognise the work that he has done on Ukraine, just as President Zelensky did last month when he awarded my hon. Friend the Ukrainian Order of Merit for his support.

My hon. Friend is right to remind the House of the recent assassination of Andriy Parubiy, which is a reminder of the brutality of the invasion. Andriy was not just a leader in the Maidan uprising; he was an ex-Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament. In many ways, his assassination brings home just how serious this war is for us in this House.

Finally, my hon. Friend makes the point that if Putin prevails in Ukraine, he will not stop at Ukraine. That is one of the reasons why the British public, the British House of Commons and the British Government remain so steadfast in our support for Ukraine.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): It is 17 days since President Trump rolled out the red carpet for Putin—during which time, as the Secretary of State said, Russia has stepped up its bombardment of Ukraine with drones and missiles. I thank him for his remarks about Andriy Parubiy, the former Speaker of the Rada. I knew him well and admired him hugely. The last time I met him was when we entertained him in this House as a visiting Speaker. It is a mark of Putin's hatred of democracy that he regarded the Speaker of a democratic Parliament as an appropriate target.

Does the Secretary of State agree that, at the present time, Putin shows no interest in a ceasefire? Will the right hon. Gentleman do whatever he can to persuade President Trump that the only way that Putin can be made to consider a ceasefire is by stepping up the pressure on Russia through extra sanctions, and by giving ever more support to Ukraine?

John Healey: I think the whole House appreciates the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about Andriy Parubiy and the relationship that he had with him. On the question of pressure on Putin to come to the negotiating table, that is a matter for the nations that stand with Ukraine, and we are determined to play our role. It is also a matter that is recognised by the US and the US President. He wants Putin to come to the table. He wants Putin to start to act in the way that he says—interested in peace and ready to talk about peace—but at the moment, he is not yet showing signs of doing so.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): To secure peace in the long term for Ukraine we need to support its defence industrial base and therefore the financial sector that underpins it, but I am concerned that UK Export Finance red tape could be limiting UK-Ukraine defence partnerships. I also believe that we could launch new joint defence innovation funds. Will my right hon. Friend carefully consider these ideas and work with me to discuss how we can support Ukraine's defence financing system?

John Healey: The short answer is yes. The slightly longer answer is that we are already working hard with Ukraine on some of these questions of joint ventures and joint industrial partnerships. Indeed, when President Zelensky visited Downing Street in June, our Prime Minister declared that this area of reinforcing our industrial connections and joint enterprise will help Ukraine in the fight now and help develop Ukrainian industry, but could also bring benefits to us and our armed forces in the future.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I congratulate the Secretary of State and all those involved on the Type 26 frigate deal, which is great news for all and for economic growth. I reiterate our continuing support for Ukraine, and also for this Government and the Secretary of State in working with other world leaders in trying to secure a ceasefire. I suppose we should not be surprised by Putin's appalling continuation of the bombing of Ukraine. May I urge the Secretary of State to work with other world leaders to use the leverage, which I think we still have, of the \$300 billion-worth of frozen central bank assets that could help in the negotiations with Putin?

John Healey: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I note his view on the frozen Russian assets, and I welcome his declaration of support for Ukraine and his condemnation of Vladimir Putin. The all-party nature of the support for Ukraine in this House is very important, and it is particularly welcome that he is here and makes that clear for the Reform party.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Russia's aggression directly threatens our security here at home. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the push for peace matters not just for the Ukrainian people, but for the security of us all, and that we must invest in the defence industry in constituencies such as Wolverhampton North East to deter Russian aggression and stand in solidarity with Ukraine?

John Healey: I do, indeed. If for a moment this House considers a situation in which Putin prevails in Ukraine, it is not hard to see how that makes Europe less secure. A strong Ukraine is essential for a secure UK and a secure Europe in the future. My hon. Friend urges us to do more to reinforce the British defence industrial base. The record increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war that this Government are now committed to investing will be an important part of that, and I hope she will welcome the defence industrial strategy when we publish it shortly.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given the red carpet treatment afforded to Putin, will the Secretary of State remind our principal ally that it is our co-signatory to the Budapest memorandum?

John Healey: The US is well aware that it is a co-signatory. Everyone involved in trying to support Ukraine through this war, and more importantly also considering the route to securing a long-term and just peace, is acutely aware of not repeating the mistakes of the Budapest memorandum.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for the Government's unwavering support for Ukraine. Given recent reports that Starlink was disabled during a major Ukrainian counter-offensive, highlighting the dangers of relying on a single privately owned satellite system, will the Secretary of State outline what steps the Government are taking with their European allies to ensure that Ukraine has a resilient and sovereign communication system that cannot be switched off at the whim of one individual?

John Healey: Without going into the details in public, I can say to my hon. Friend that, across a range of capabilities where the Ukrainians are requiring our support and our military aid, we are looking to provide that.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Ukraine needs a just peace. It also needs financial support to rebuild. The EU has said that it will allow frozen Russian assets to be used in higher risk investments to generate more money. What discussions has the Secretary of State had on supporting the EU's latest effort to use Russia's assets to provide vital funding for Ukraine?

John Healey: I have had none of those discussions myself, but the Government have had them with the European Union and with other allies that must be part of any effective plan to make use of the frozen Russian assets. The hon. Lady will be aware of the way we are already making use of the interest on those frozen assets, putting them to good use to make sure we can support Ukraine to continue its fight.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): A Ukrainian constituent who has just returned from a visit to Ukraine told me today:

"Russia is systematically destroying our border regions and key infrastructure: medical, educational, civil, governmental and business. The scale of the problem goes far beyond housing or temporary displacement—it is about the viability of life across large parts of Ukraine. This is part of a wider strategy aimed at rendering Ukraine's borderlands uninhabitable. Any recovery strategy will require years of investment, security guarantees and sustained international support."

In the light of that, I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, which demonstrates that British support for Ukraine is unwavering. Can he confirm that we are using every tool at our disposal to ensure that the cynical Russian policy described by my constituent will ultimately be overcome?

John Healey: I can confirm that we are doing all we can. If my hon. Friend or his constituent identifies areas where we are not doing that, I would welcome his tackling me on doing so.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The House should be grateful to the Secretary of State for giving this statement today, because it underlines how the Government are determined to keep this issue at the top of the British political agenda. He gave quite

an optimistic assessment of how we, the Ukrainians and her allies, are doing in Ukraine, only inasmuch as Russia cannot win this war. The risk—something I hope he will emphasise to President Trump—is that the west is losing the peace, and that by losing the peace we are losing our own security. In the words of his own strategic defence review, we need to mobilise the British people to have a national conversation as to why we need to step up our efforts. Are we really giving Ukraine enough? I do not think we are.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman has deep experience, so I take his views very seriously. I would just say to him that we are doing more this year than we have ever done before. We recognise that the UK on its own is limited and that we can play a really important role in stepping up the collective leadership, as we are doing through the UDCG and the coalition of the willing. In that way, Britain can play a co-ordinating role to contribute to the support that Ukraine needs. We do so with allies, and when we do so with allies, we make more of an impact.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Clyde is a wide river that straddles the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) and mine, so I join my colleague in welcoming the deal with Norway that was concluded at the weekend. Not only will it secure a bright future for the 100-plus apprentices at BAE Systems on the Clyde, it will secure the future of shipbuilding on the Clyde, including at the Scottish Government-owned Ferguson Marine, which is a subcontractor to BAE Systems. There are perhaps 10 billion reasons why the Scottish Government should welcome the deal. The Secretary of State mentioned the diminution of Putin's strength. Does he agree that the deal will help to further that diminution, particularly in the high north?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is exactly right. This will not just set new standards within NATO of interoperability and interchangeability, with effectively a combined Norwegian-UK anti-submarine force; it means that more frigates—a total of 13 anti-submarine frigates between the two nations—will be available to reinforce the northern flank of NATO to provide the sort of deterrence required to keep the Russian threat in check.

My hon. Friend must be very proud of her Scotstoun yard. I hope that she will recognise, as I do, that this deal will secure the future of 4,000 jobs in the UK for many years, 2,000 of which are in Scotland.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Admiral Sir Tony Radakin is a fine example of public service, so I humbly agree with the Defence Secretary about the retiring Chief of the Defence Staff. When the CDS appeared before the Defence Committee in June, he said of NATO that

"The crucial thing is whether we are deterring Russia and whether we can face down the threats of Russia".

He answered his own rhetorical question that we are, "absolutely".

Following the strike in Kyiv that damaged the British Council and the EU's diplomatic mission last week, can the Defence Secretary set out how the UK and NATO are deterring further symbolic attacks like this one?

John Healey: Without wishing to speak for him, I suspect that one of the things Admiral Radakin will not miss in stepping down as CDS is appearing before the Defence Committee, although I am sure he will still contribute to public debate on these matters. The hon. Gentleman makes a general point about the attempt to step up our support for Ukraine. We will always try to respond to what Ukraine says it most needs. As we go into next week's UDCG meeting, which I will be hosting with Minister Pistorius, that is exactly what we will try to do.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and his leadership on this issue. As the pressure on Ukraine to agree a ceasefire builds, Russia too escalates its campaign of aerial attack on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure. In the liberated city of Kherson, Russian first-person drone operators are turning state killing into a grotesque spectacle that is publicly broadcast and has been christened a "human safari".

The provision and conversion of Ukrainian Soviet-era missiles into the Gravehawk system represents both real material aid and an accomplishment of British military engineering. Crucially, it helps to reduce dependency on any single supply chain and technology for aerial defence. Will the Defence Secretary give the House an assurance that all steps are being taken to increase both the quantity and the diversity of air defence systems for Ukraine?

John Healey: We are doing what we can to increase the diversity and quantity of air defence systems. I am proud of what we have achieved with Gravehawk, which is a good example of two things: first, innovation, and secondly, a combination of Ukraine and UK minds working together. When we do that, we can respond rapidly and in a way that meets Ukraine's needs, but that also points the way to a different future in the way we develop the systems that we need in our own forces for the future.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I should declare an interest in that my eldest son today started work at Rosyth royal dockyard, a key part of British military infrastructure for more than 100 years. Over the summer, we saw Scotland's First Minister John Swinney meet with Ukrainian military personnel at the Edinburgh military tattoo. Incredibly, were those brave men and women to be injured in the line of duty, NHS medical aid sent from Scotland could not be used to treat them because of a prohibition put in place by the Scottish Government, who continue to refuse to fund warfighting capability in Scotland. With defence reserved to this place, Secretary of State, how is it possible that the devolved Administration in Holyrood can damage British interests and security in this manner?

John Healey: The hon. Member poses those questions to me, but they are clearly not for me but for the Scottish nationalist Government to answer. I would love to see an end to the antagonism to investment in Scotland—investment which supports Scottish jobs in the wider defence industry and supports our UK security, in which Scotland plays such a vital part. It ought to be something that the Scottish Government embrace and support, rather than resist and oppose.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): People in my constituency know the importance of standing with Ukraine in its fight, and in a recent survey I did, 87% of them said that they support this Government's continued iron-clad support for Ukraine, which after three-and-a-half years is an impressively high figure. Does the Defence Secretary agree that the push for peace in Ukraine matters not just for Ukrainians, whose country has been attacked for over a decade by Russian forces, but for our future security in Britain, and that we must therefore invest in the defence industry in regions such as the east midlands to deter future Russian aggression?

John Healey: The answer is yes, and I ask my hon. Friend pass on to his constituents my appreciation for their support. At a level of support for Ukraine of 87%, the constituents in Rushcliffe are an exemplification of the British spirit that recognises that Ukraine is fighting for the same sorts of freedoms that we value and for its own future in the way that we in this country have done in the past.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement. I look forward very much to his statements in this Chamber, because he invariably brings us good news, and today he has done so again with the order of five frigates for Norway worth £10 billion. As a farmer, I am minded that while someone sows the seed, someone else garners the harvest, and the person who garners the harvest is the person who gets the plaudits, so congratulations to the Minister for that.

What discussion has the Secretary of State had with our American allies to ensure that the good of Ukraine is at the heart of any approach and that any minerals deal is secondary to our ensuring that the battle was not fought in vain and that lives were not lost in vain? Can he ensure that Putin and the Russian army will be held accountable for their war crimes and their reign of terror, and that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will continue always to stand with Ukraine?

John Healey: I think this House appreciates the hon. Member's declaration on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland that they stand steadfast with Ukraine. The support that the UK Government—the previous Government and this Government—are giving to Ukraine to document in the most difficult circumstances of an ongoing war the evidence that will be required to bring the Russian forces and Russian leaders to account after the fighting is over is an important part of the contribution that we can make. Funding, resources, and expert and legal advice is part of the ongoing aid that we are providing to Ukraine for that purpose.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and reiteration that we will always support the people of Ukraine. Given Russia's despicable attack against civilian targets in Kyiv, costing the lives of over 20 civilians including children and damaging a British Council building, it is quite clear that Vladimir Putin has very little interest in any legitimate peace process. Given that reports differ about how committed countries are to deploying troops in Ukraine to enforce any potential peace agreement, can the Secretary of State set out how the UK is

working with our allies to convince them to back security guarantees and peace in Ukraine, and will he state that there is nothing that Vladimir Putin can do now to deter our support for Ukraine?

John Healey: There is indeed nothing that Putin can do to deter our support for Ukraine—our support while it fights, but also our preparation for the moment of peace that we hope will come. My hon. Friend invites me to set out how we are developing that. We have had multiple meetings of our military leaders and planners over the summer through the coalition of the willing. I will host this week a meeting of Defence Ministers from the coalition of the willing. It will be designed to make sure that we maintain our military plans and step up the commitments to contribute at the point at which we can get a peace agreement in place. There will be a role for countries like ours to support Ukraine, both in securing that peace for the long term and in regenerating their own armed forces to deter Russia in future.

Transnational Repression in the UK

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Alex Sobel will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions will be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement, which must be brief questions, not full speeches. Can I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee member and not the Government Front Bench? Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

9.11 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I was thinking that I might have had a quiet first day back after recess, but I have now been in the Chamber for six hours and 20 minutes, so I am clearly working hard for my constituents yet again. I am also working hard on behalf of the Joint Committee on Human Rights for which I give this statement on the seventh report of the 2024-25 Session, “Transnational repression in the UK”.

The Committee believes that transnational repression is a serious and under-recognised threat. The report argues:

“Its impacts extend far beyond those directly targeted, creating a broader ‘chilling effect’ on entire communities and undermining fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association.”

The Committee received credible evidence that a number of states have engaged in acts of transnational repression on UK soil. The report highlights China, Russia and Iran as the three most flagrant transnational repression perpetrators in the United Kingdom. Transnational repression is generally understood to refer to certain state-directed crimes or actions against individuals that take place outside the territory of the perpetrating state. Transnational repression can take many forms: it could include harassment, online disinformation campaigns, surveillance, stalking and physical violence, in addition to threats to family members, attempts to force individuals to return to their country of origin and assassination attempts.

The Committee launched its inquiry into transnational repression in response to increasing reports of foreign Governments moving beyond their borders to persecute people here in the United Kingdom. In the last year, the number of state threat investigations run by MI5 has increased by 48%.

There have been several recent high-profile transnational repression cases, including the issuance of bounties against Hong Kong pro-democracy activists and Iran’s intimidation of UK-based journalists. MI5 and counter-terrorism police have dealt with more than 20 threat-to-life cases relating to Iran since the start of 2022. The Government have recently set out a strategic framework to address transnational repression following a review of the UK’s transnational repression approach by the defending democracy taskforce.

[Alex Sobel]

The Committee received 181 written evidence submissions, 91 of which we were able to publish. Many submissions were from people with personal experience of transnational repression. The Committee also held four oral evidence sessions, where we heard from legal experts, academics, human rights advocates, journalists and—most importantly—victims of transnational repression themselves. I express my gratitude to all those who contributed to the inquiry for their bravery in coming forward; in particular, those victims of transnational repression who put themselves at personal risk by coming and appearing in public before the Committee.

There is currently no universally accepted definition of transnational repression, and the UK Government have chosen not to adopt a formal definition, opting instead to describe it as

“certain foreign state-directed crimes against individuals.”

Without a clear definition of what constitutes transnational repression, it is difficult to collate reliable data on the scale and nature of transnational repression-related activities. It appears that the Home Office does not currently collect or require police forces to collect data on transnational repression incidents taking place in the UK. The report recommends that the Government adopt a formal definition of transnational repression and establish data collection and monitoring mechanisms.

The Committee report welcomes the introduction of the foreign influence registration scheme—FIRS—as a tool to help strengthen the UK’s ability to tackle transnational repression. The designation of Iran and Russia as countries listed on the enhanced tier of FIRS was consistent with the evidence presented to the Committee regarding the threat posed by transnational repression operating from these states. The report argues that China’s omission from the enhanced tier risks undermining the credibility and coherence of FIRS and recommends that China be specified under the enhanced tier of FIRS.

Looking to support for victims, transnational repression victims felt that the overall police response to transnational repression has been inconsistent. Many affected individuals described limited awareness of transnational repression among frontline officers and a lack of clear referral pathways. Some victims had even been advised to avoid political activity or to self-censor, while others had been incorrectly referred to hate crime or diversity and equality officers. Counter-terrorism policing and the College of Policing have launched guidance and awareness modules on foreign interference, and the powers introduced in the National Security Act 2023. This training is now available for all 45 territorial police forces in the UK. However, the training is mandatory only for counter-terrorism officers. The report recommends that serious consideration should be given to making transnational repression training mandatory for all police officers.

At present, victims of transnational repression are advised to report incidents through standard policing channels, for example by calling 999 or 101 or by attending their local police station. However, victims felt that early signs of transnational repression could be more effectively identified through a dedicated helpline, where those answering calls would have received training on how to recognise and respond to transnational repression

threats appropriately. The report recommends that the Government establish a reporting hotline for transnational repression victims.

Regarding diplomatic policy, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office uses tools to target transnational repression that largely align with those used to address other foreign policy challenges. These include private engagement with foreign Governments, issuing a *démarche* and terminating privileges and immunities, in addition to reducing official or ministerial contact, denying diplomatic visas, imposing sanctions or asking for diplomats to be withdrawn or expelled.

The Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020 give the Secretary of State the power to designate individuals for the purpose of imposing sanctions on them. The Secretary of State has to consider that the designation is appropriate, and must have reasonable grounds to suspect that the person is or has been involved in an activity which, if carried out by a state, would amount to a serious violation of a person’s right to life, their right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or their right to be free from slavery. Activities in the UK are covered if they are carried out by someone who is not a UK national.

Some transnational repression conduct may fall under the 2020 Regulations if it amounts to a serious violation of the right to life or the right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. However, much transnational repression conduct, including even violence, intimidation, harassment, illegal deportations, abductions and Interpol and extradition abuse, would fall outside the scope of the regulations. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Government review the scope of the UK’s sanctions framework to assess the feasibility of introducing specific transnational repression sanctions.

The UK should also adopt a more proactive approach to sanctions, particularly in cases where UK nationals and residents are directly affected. The report also recommends that the UK should ensure that diplomatic responses, such as the expulsion of officials, public *démarches* and the imposition of sanctions, are not only available in principle but actively and visibly deployed in response to serious incidents. With that, I recommend this report to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not usually get called first, so thank you very much for that. Can I first of all thank the Chair of the Committee and the Committee for all that they do in relation to this issue? I know that the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) has been incredibly committed to it. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, and for us it is important to speak on behalf of many human rights groups, particularly the Iranian Government in exile. Maryam Rajavi is the chair and has a 10-point plan for Iran. Have the Chairman and the Committee had the opportunity to gauge the transnational repression against people from Iran who live here in exile? I am personally aware of some of the repression and spying that they experience.

Alex Sobel: I thank the hon. Member for his questions. I have worked with him, as he knows, on the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. Religious belief is one of the reasons why we see transnational repression, and China is a particular example when it comes to subjecting citizens to it for their religious belief. We took evidence from a senior member of the Iranian diaspora, Mr Abedini, as part of the evidence, who was very nearly killed—not in the UK but in Turkey, which still is transnational repression because he was not in Iran. He was only saved because the gun jammed on the third shot when he was attacked. As I said, we know that Iran is increasing its attacks. Individual members—myself and the Chair, as the hon. Member referred to—work closely with many Iranian groups based here, in France and in other places. Much of our evidence was from those from the Iranian community.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I thank my fellow Committee member for representing our inquiry so well today and the Security Minister, who is in his place, for engaging with our inquiry. I recently hosted a meeting of the Bracknell Hong Kong community in my constituency. I was saddened but unfortunately not surprised to hear from them that some members of that community chose not to come to the meeting with their local MP because of their concerns about the political repercussions it may have for them and their families. That goes to show the chilling effect that transnational repression can have, not just on individuals when they are targeted by states but on whole communities. Does my hon. Friend agree, and is it not a central part of our report, that it cannot be right in our democratic system, in our democratic country, that any individual or community should ever feel they are not able to engage in that democracy? Fundamentally, that is at the heart of what makes our country so fantastic.

Alex Sobel: I thank my hon. Friend for his role in this inquiry and the great role he plays on the Committee. I will start by talking about the absolutely brilliant evidence we received from Chloe Cheung from Hong Kong, who is from Leeds. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards), who represents her, was just here. She speaks to exactly that point. Because of her activities in Leeds—being visible, demonstrating, helping set up Hongkongers in Leeds—she had a million-dollar bounty put on her head at the age of 80. It is incumbent on us to ensure the safety of the Hong Kong community. One of the shortcomings we found in the evidence was the fact that Chloe was advised just to call 999 or 101 when she was threatened. She was even followed by two people who she suspects were either interested in the bounty or from the state authorities. We need to do much more to protect democracy activists and just ordinary Hongkongers who live here, going about their daily lives. I hope the Minister has heard that, and he will also have read our report and seen the evidence from Chloe. We look forward to the Met, West Yorkshire police and others in upscaling their support for people like Chloe.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It strikes me that this is an excellent report that has been presented to us by the joint Committee this evening.

The report deals with SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation. I appreciate that the hon. Member was not able to get to that in his allotted 10 minutes, so I would like to ask a little more about anti-SLAPP legislation. During the last Government—I think it was in February 2024—a private Member's Bill was brought forward to try to introduce anti-SLAPP legislation, but that legislation fell at the end of the last Government. I understand that some provisions were introduced as part of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, but does he feel that more needs to be done on anti-SLAPP legislation and how soon should this House and the Government be doing it?

Alex Sobel: I thank the hon. Member for his question on SLAPPs. In our inquiry, we heard from those who were precluded from reporting on certain types of transnational repression through the use of SLAPPs, which were relevant to the inquiry and to exposing transnational repression in the United Kingdom. Although we have not put forward an amendment or a legislative mechanism, that is certainly in the scope of the report.

PETITION

Bank Facilities in Moffat

9.25 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of constituents who are users of the Bank of Scotland Moffat branch.

Earlier this year, out of the blue, the Bank of Scotland announced the closure of all five of its branches in my constituency, along with many others across Scotland, leading, in my view, to that bank giving up on rural communities. Moffat was particularly affected because it is 23 miles from the next nearest branch in Dumfries, has a high elderly and vulnerable population, is a tourist town that attracts many visitors, and has a large number of businesses that rely on cash.

The petition states:

The petition of users of the Bank of Scotland Moffat Branch,

Declares that residents of Moffat and Upper Annandale and visitors to the area will be left without banking services and access to cash by the proposed closure of the local Bank of Scotland branch in Moffat, thereby causing significant concern and worry for the local community, particularly the elderly and vulnerable, and local businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry, who rely on these banking services; further that the petition organised locally by Evelyn Atkins calling on the Bank of Scotland to reverse the closure decision has garnered over 3,000 signatures from the local community and visitors to the town.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to call on the Bank of Scotland to keep its Moffat Branch open and to ensure that the residents of Moffat and Upper Annandale have proper access to cash and banking facilities.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003104]

Lisbon Maru Memorial

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Anna McMorris.*)

9.27 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her time and attention on the debate.

On 1 October 1942, an unmarked Japanese freighter called the Lisbon Maru was carrying over 1,800 British and allied prisoners of war—hundreds were from the Royal Scots regiment. The prisoners had been captured after the fall of Hong Kong and were destined for internment in Japan. Conditions for prisoners on this ship, and many freighters like it, were brutal and unsanitary. They became known as “hell ships” because of the suffering of those on board.

For many, including the freighter, that was their final voyage. On that day, the Lisbon Maru was torpedoed by a submarine in the east China sea. Although the Japanese troops on board the vessel were rescued, the POWs were locked in the ship’s hold. As the vessel sank, many were trapped, and those who escaped were shot by guards who remained board, or from nearby Japanese vessels. Many others were gunned down in the water as they desperately tried to survive.

Amid that horror, a glimmer of humanity emerged: Chinese fishermen from nearby islands risked their lives to rescue hundreds of survivors, and gave them shelter in their homes. Their efforts speak to a spirit that we know well, one that reminds us of our own Dunkirk evacuations, showing common humanity in the face of unimaginable horror.

This tragedy was not known to me until this year, when a constituent reached out. For Gerry Borge, his father John and uncle Eddie’s extraordinary experience on board the Lisbon Maru and their miraculous survival was a story he needed to share. John and Eddie were unfortunately recaptured and imprisoned for the remainder of the war, but they finally returned home, unlike so many others.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. She has put forward this story with so much passion and interest in the people, and I congratulate her on that. Again, I remember and pay tribute to the victory over Japan. I commemorated it at an event just last week, and so this is a timely debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her passion for establishing a fitting tribute. I will support her as she tries to achieve that goal. Does she agree that the tragedy, resulting in the deaths of more than 800 prisoners—many of whom were from Scotland and, in particular, areas such as West Lothian—makes a memorial seem appropriate as we understand the loss to families throughout Scotland that took place as a result of the sinking of the Lisbon Maru? It would be appropriate to do something like that now.

Kirsteen Sullivan: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and one that I will come on to. I agree wholeheartedly with his sentiment.

Gerry wrote to me in a plea to shine a light on the tragedy when the Lisbon Maru sank, which impacted many families. I spoke to him last week in my office and

the message he wanted me to convey this evening is the timeless one that, even during the horrors of war, the actions of the Chinese fishermen exemplify the human instinct to reach out and to help our fellow human beings.

Many who experienced conflict, especially in the Pacific theatre, never felt able to share their stories, yet each town and village in this country will have its own relationship with conflict and a loss to remember. Honouring our history and the conflicts that have often defined it is something I believe Britain has done well over the years. The dedication of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the monuments that we erect are a powerful legacy of the sacrifices made and the lives cut short. However, that is also a promise: wherever one dies in conflict around the globe, they will be remembered back home for their heroism, their service and the legacy that they leave.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this debate. A few days ago, in my office, I met relatives of people who died on the Suez Maru, which was lost in similar circumstances, with about 550 prisoners of war on it, a great number of whom were machinegunned in the water by members of the imperial Japanese navy. The fight of the relatives I met was not for a memorial; it was for an answer from the Government about why a war crimes trial did not take place. All these years later, it is an emotive subject for them, and one of the relatives was crying in my office. That is a reminder that although years have passed—that ship was lost in 1943—people can still feel raw and emotional. It is right that we remember such losses.

Kirsteen Sullivan: I thank my hon. Friend for making that powerful and important point: people did not come home from war and people came home from war changed, not the same person who left. We owe them a debt of gratitude and we owe it to them never to forget the sacrifices they made and the legacy that they left for us in securing our freedom.

The deaths of the servicemen in the tragedy of the Lisbon Maru, including the 373 Royal Scots who perished, are a reminder of Scotland’s historic contribution to the war effort. It will be the 83rd anniversary of the tragedy a month from now, but the commemorations have already begun. A few months ago, Gerry and several relatives of those who were prisoners of war attended an unveiling ceremony of a new memorial on Qingbang island, south-east of Shanghai. It is greatly welcomed that the plight and the story of those servicemen is recognised around the world, but it is important that we remember it at home as well.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward the debate and the fact that we were able to have a debate in the House specifically about VJ Day. It is an issue that the events in the far east and some of the horrors that happened there are not known as well as they should be. I was not aware of this specific incident until I heard the hon. Lady mention it previously, so I commend her. Does she agree that we must continue to bring out all the facts about the events in the far east, where Scotland played a particular role, so that people understand the contribution and the sacrifices that were made?

Kirsteen Sullivan: I thank the right hon. Member for that point, which he made very well. Indeed, my grandfather served in Burma, yet that story is not really known in our family as it was a story not told at the time. It is important to bring those stories into the light and to hear about the sacrifices, which are quite unimaginable to many people of our generation. It is important that those stories continue to be told.

The National Memorial Arboretum has a dedicated memorial to the Lisbon Maru tragedy, and it graciously hosts the families for a memorial ceremony every year, for which I know the relatives and the country are grateful. People have memorials in their communities to commemorate the personal loss of war and provide a focal point for remembrance. In a detached and inhumane conflict that seems far away, the consequences are felt by the empty seats around the dinner table at home.

From the conflict of the second world war, the world developed humanitarian law and more humane treatment of prisoners, which has underpinned our international community for decades. It is important that we recommit ourselves to learn those lessons and, as we have heard throughout this evening, that we continuously strive to win the peace. The best way to remind ourselves and teach our young people is to show that the tragedies of war are universal and felt everywhere. A new memorial to the Lisbon Maru would be an excellent place to learn just that: the bravery of those men who suffered as prisoners of war and of the fishermen, but also the horrors of war that must not be repeated.

My constituency is no stranger to powerful memorials. The Bathgate hills host a memorial to those who died in the Korean war of the 1950s. It is a beautiful, peaceful and sobering place to reflect on those killed, captured and maimed very far from home. Its presence encourages us to spark conversations with new generations about the lessons of the past, and the sacrifices that were made for their future.

The Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), has been a welcome advocate in my constituency, not just with the new VALOUR guarantees set out by this Government, but his personal support for a local memorial to the women in wartime who worked in hazardous conditions in a munitions factory. While the dedicated work of Gerry and the Lisbon Maru Memorial Association will ensure that the legacy lives on, I ask the Minister to consider supporting a new national memorial closer to home for the families of the Royal Scots, commemorating those who survived, those who died and their rescuers. A memorial in Scotland will provide a space for families like Gerry's to share their stories and remember together.

Finally, I thank Gerry for sharing his family's personal story with me—a story of two young men, far from home, facing inconceivable horrors—and for allowing me to record it in this place.

9.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) on securing this debate on the potential merits of Government support for a memorial to the Lisbon Maru. In particular, I congratulate her on the very moving and evocative way in which she told the story of this tragedy

and the sheer humanity exhibited by those who came to the rescue. Let me put on record our tribute to her constituent Gerry for recording his family's story—it must have been painful, but it was so incredibly important. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) and the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for adding their reflections to this debate, and all hon. Members who have stayed to listen to it this evening.

I begin my own reflections by acknowledging and honouring the service and suffering of British and Commonwealth prisoners of war in the Pacific theatre during the second world war. As we have heard today, this issue has impacted on many lives very deeply, including the families of the many Scottish servicemen who tragically lost their lives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow has said, every constituency has a story to tell, so it is right that we remember all those who died, those who suffered appalling injuries and those who were tortured and imprisoned during this conflict. It is right that we thank them and recognise that they suffered deeply for our shared freedoms.

I recently had the privilege of representing the UK Government at the VJ Day 80th anniversary service at Edinburgh castle, organised by the Royal British Legion Scotland. I was deeply moved to spend time with families recounting the stories of their own loved ones who had served in world war two across all theatres, and I will never forget the stories they told and the lessons they imparted on the power of forgiveness, service and sacrifice. Similarly, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland met Margaret Landels and George McLeod, both world war two veterans, during his recent visit to Lady Haig's Poppy Factory for VE Day.

Both of those significant national occasions are reminders of the price paid for our freedoms, and they highlight the importance of standing alongside our allies, particularly, as we heard earlier from the Secretary of State for Defence, in continuing our support for Ukraine. The UK will always support Ukraine's sovereignty, freedom and right to peace. I had cause to reflect on that personally when I attended the third anniversary commemoration of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine at the Scottish national war memorial. The memorial at Edinburgh castle honours all Scottish service personnel who have died in the service of their country and acts as a truly poignant symbol of Scotland's long-standing tradition of contributing to the UK's national defence.

Scots in the armed forces, their families and their communities are rightly proud of Scotland's deep-rooted military history. Scots have a very long tradition of defending the UK's interests around the world. But beyond remembering our fallen heroes, we have a duty to ensure that veterans and their families today receive the support and care that they deserve, no matter where they live in the UK. That is why this Government have taken significant steps to deliver on our promise to renew the nation's contract with those who serve and have served. I am proud that this Government launched Op VALOUR, a transformative initiative backed by a £50 million commitment to veterans' support. We also launched a £75 million LGBT financial redress scheme. Through Op Ascend, we are helping veterans to thrive in their post-service careers, providing them with opportunities to succeed in the civilian workforce.

[Kirsty McNeill]

Let me turn to the specific subject of today's debate. The UK Government deeply regret the loss of life that occurred on the Lisbon Maru and the resulting distress caused by the decision not to pursue a case against those involved. The Government of Japan have acknowledged and shown contrition for their wartime actions on numerous occasions over the past several decades, including from past Prime Ministers and Emperors. Since the second world war, the UK and Japan have continued to work hard to promote our shared democratic values and respect for human rights, in the hope that we will never, ever see a repeat of these events anywhere in the world. I saw the closeness of our modern partnership when I visited Japan only last month.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, there is rightly a memorial located at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, which commemorates all those who were taken captive and those who perished. On 2 October every year there is now an annual gathering at the memorial to remember and honour those affected by this tragedy. I will also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Lisbon Maru Memorial Association for its dedicated work in preserving the history of the events surrounding the sinking of the Lisbon Maru and honouring all those who were aboard her.

As heritage is a devolved policy area in Scotland, any funding of such memorials remains the preserve of public subscription driven by individuals and organisations. I therefore encourage the Scottish Government to consider how they can best support efforts to commemorate those in Scotland affected by the tragic events of the Lisbon Maru, ensuring that the memory of the 183 servicemen from the Royal Scots regiment who lost their lives is truly honoured. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans and People engages regularly with the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, who advocates for veterans living in Scotland and influences policymakers on matters affecting veterans. All our Governments must continue to work together on how we appropriately honour and remember the past.

In closing, let us remember that our commitment to veterans is not just a promise; it is an ongoing, deep obligation. It is our responsibility to honour their service, acknowledge their sacrifices and—most of all—preserve their memories for future generations. Together, we will continue to build a future in which every single veteran receives the care, support and opportunities that they rightfully deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

9.45 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 1 September 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

British Steel

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The Government committed to updating Parliament on British Steel every four sitting weeks for the duration of the period of special measures being applied under the Steel Industry Special Measures Act 2025.

The Government priority remains to maintain the safe operation of the blast furnaces at British Steel. To that end, Government officials are continuing to provide on-site support to continue steel production, ensure that health and safety issues are being remedied, stabilise operations and improve the steady state of the business.

This month, I am pleased to confirm that British Steel will be welcoming its first cohort of apprentices in over 3 years. The programme will offer apprentices a high-quality training experience blending technical knowledge and practical skills, while helping the business to develop its next generation of engineers and technical experts.

Work continues to develop an impact assessment, which will be published in due course following Regulatory Policy Committee scrutiny. We are also continuing work on regulations under section 7 of the Act, to introduce a compensation scheme for steel undertakings that have received a notice under the Act.

On funding, the position remains that all Government funding for British Steel will be drawn from existing budgets, within the spending envelope set out at spring statement 2025. To date, we have provided approximately £180 million for working capital, covering items such as raw materials, salaries, and addressing unpaid bills, including for SMEs in the supply chain. This will be reflected in the Department for Business and Trade's accounts for 2025-26.

As I have stated previously, our long-term aspiration for British Steel will require private investment to enable modernisation and decarbonisation, support jobs, safeguard taxpayers' money and retain steelmaking in Scunthorpe. We are continuing discussions with Jingye on options to achieve that objective.

The Government commitment to the steel sector goes beyond our intervention at British Steel and we continue to see tangible benefits resulting from the wide-ranging actions we have taken. Since early August, UK steelmakers have been able to export more construction grade steel to the EU tariff-free, following a major win secured at the UK-EU summit earlier in the year to restore our country-specific steel quota to historic levels. This bespoke agreement provides a significant boost to producers including British Steel, cutting costs and providing more certainty when exporting to one of our largest trading partners.

This builds on a series of recent milestones delivered under the plan for change, including targeted action to reduce electricity costs, strengthen procurement rules and bolster our trade defence measures. Looking ahead,

we will be publishing a steel strategy later this year, setting out our long-term vision for a revitalised and sustainable industry and the actions needed to get there.

This is a pro-steel Government that are taking decisive steps to restore our steel industry after years of neglect. We are working to secure good jobs in Scunthorpe and other steelmaking communities for many years to come.

[HCWS889]

Liberty Speciality Steels UK: Contingent Liability

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): I have laid before Parliament a departmental minute setting out the particulars of a new contingent liability associated with Liberty Speciality Steels UK.

Speciality Steels UK Ltd, part of Liberty Steel Group, and the third largest steel manufacturing company—by capacity—in the UK was issued with a winding up order by the High Court on 21 August, following a petition from its creditors. SSUK employs 1,400 people across four sites in Rotherham, Stocksbridge, Wednesbury and Brinsworth. The company has now entered liquidation and the official receiver, an officer of the Insolvency Service, has been appointed as liquidator by the court.

The Department for Business and Trade has provided the OR with a letter of comfort and a letter of indemnity in respect of:

Carrying out the proper performance and duties expected as the official receiver and liquidator of the company; and

Investigating the cause of failure and identifying any asset recoveries against the company, current/former directors of the company, and any other parties; and

The winding-down of the company's business and affairs and distributing assets of the company in the ordinary course as the official receiver's duties as liquidator.

The sudden nature of the announcement of SSUK entering into insolvency on 21 August and the urgency of the need to ensure that the OR can immediately formulate and implement a plan to address site risks, means we have sought to expedite the approval process. It has not been possible to observe the usual 14 Parliamentary sitting day waiting period for this contingent liability, since it only materialised when the company entered liquidation on 21 August when Parliament was not sitting.

On the 19 August, the permanent secretary for the Department for Business and Trade wrote to the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Business and Trade Committee, outlining our intention to provide funding for the official receiver to allow it to fulfil its statutory duties—noting the contingent liability that would be created for HMG—and asking for any objection to be notified within five working days. I can confirm that neither the PAC nor the BTC have raised any objections to the issuing of this overall funding and indemnity.

It is not possible at this stage to accurately quantify the value of the overall funding requirement with relation to the letter of comfort and letter of indemnity. The OR will assess the likely scale of any liability to Government, and costs will be reported to Parliament once a more accurate quantum is known.

HM Treasury has approved this proposal. The Department will consider any concerns raised by a Member of the House regarding this contingent liability and indemnity. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply process.

[HCWS898]

Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with India

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): On 24 July 2025, the Government signed the UK-India trade deal. This deal will unlock economic growth in every corner of the UK, put money back into working people's pockets, and delivers on the plan for change. It is expected to increase bilateral trade by £25.5 billion, increase UK GDP by £4.8 billion, and boost wages by £2.2 billion every year. We are showing the world that we stand for free, fair, and open trade. In an increasingly unstable and volatile world, this deal provides businesses with confidence as they grow and expand.

This agreement drops the average Indian tariff on UK products from 15% to 3%, with tariff duties falling by around £400 million from entry into force, rising to £900 million after staging. This is alongside securing unprecedented preferential access to India's federal procurement market, locking in guaranteed market access for UK service suppliers, and making trade quicker, cheaper, and easier through improved customs and digital processes.

This agreement will unlock new opportunities for businesses in every corner of the UK, including an expected £190 million boost for the west midlands and Scotland and £210 million for the north-west of England. The deal also aligns with our industrial strategy, supporting the UK's high growth sectors.

And as India grows, so will the opportunities for the UK, giving businesses a competitive edge with the fastest-growing economy in the G20.

The UK Government have published a Command Paper titled "Informational Copy of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of India and associated documents, including the Impact Assessment and draft Explanatory Memorandum". Copies of these have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. Further information on the trade agreement has also been published on gov.uk.

The Government have commenced the necessary pre-ratification steps. On 24 July, the UK Government formally commissioned the Trade and Agriculture Commission as well as the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland to provide independent advice. Informed by this advice, the Government will then lay its own report under section 42 of the Agriculture Act 2020. After the TAC and section 42 reports have been laid before Parliament, the Government will begin the processes under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 in order to ratify the agreement. All needed legislation to implement the agreement will follow standard procedures. In parallel, negotiations for the double contribution convention will be finalised, which will then also be subject to the CRAg process.

I look forward to working closely with the business and trade and international agreements committees on the scrutiny of this agreement and updating the House further in due course.

[HCWS892]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Indoor Cricket Domes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): The Government are deeply committed to supporting the growth of grassroots sport across the UK. High-quality, inclusive facilities provide opportunities for connection and cohesion, as well as supporting people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in sport and physical activity wherever they live, helping to drive forward this Government's plan for change.

As part of this ongoing commitment, on 25 August, the Government announced £1.5 million investment into two indoor cricket domes in Luton and Farington in Lancashire.

Luton and Preston are currently poorly served by cricket facilities. The aim is to increase opportunities for access to cricket and wider sport opportunities for underserved communities, in line with our broader strategic objectives for grassroots facilities investment. The cricket domes will offer significant benefit to under-represented groups, and increase the overall number of opportunities for physical activity by providing a covered outdoor environment which enables all-weather, all-year-round training and match play.

As we look forward to future sporting events in the UK, including next year's women's T20 cricket world cup, we will continue to prioritise grassroots clubs and facilities, getting more people involved in sport and physical activity.

This £1.5 million investment is in addition to the £400 million for grassroots facilities which the Government announced in June. The longer-term investment will prioritise underserved places, and through working closely with sporting bodies—including the England and Wales Cricket Board, devolved Government, and local leaders—the Government will establish what each community needs and then set out further plans in due course.

[HCWS890]

DEFENCE

Geelong Treaty: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): I am today laying a departmental minute before Parliament describing a contingent liability that His Majesty's Government will take on relating to the United Kingdom's participation in the AUKUS security partnership with the United States of America and Australia. His Majesty's Government will hold this liability following entry into force of the Geelong treaty between the UK and Australia, which I have recently signed along with the Australian Deputy Prime Minister.

As set out in the strategic defence review, AUKUS is an enhanced security partnership that will strengthen security in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic, along with growing the UK economy. The first major initiative of AUKUS is our historic decision to support Australia acquiring conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines. The treaty builds on the strong foundation

of trilateral co-operation between Australia, the UK and the United States, advancing the shared objectives of the AUKUS partnership. It will enable the development of SSN-AUKUS and resilient trilateral supply chains.

As part of the co-ordinated approach to our respective SSN-AUKUS build programmes, Australia and the UK have decided to provide an appropriate indemnity to each other related to the supply of material, equipment, information and services transferred or to be transferred on a Government-to-Government basis in connection with SSN-AUKUS.

This contingent liability will not be incurred until entry into force of the treaty, which has also been laid before Parliament today. In accordance with usual practice for contingent liabilities, it will therefore not be incurred until at least 14 parliamentary sitting days have elapsed from the date on which the departmental minute is laid before Parliament.

[HCWS895]

Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces Annual Report 2024: MOD Response

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am pleased to place in the Library of the House today the MOD's formal response to the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces annual report for 2024 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

The ombudsman's report assessed the service complaints system and the work of her office in 2024. The response sets out MOD's comments to the report and our view on the two new recommendations she has made.

The MOD values the strong independent oversight that the ombudsman brings to the service complaints system.

Part of the improvements we intend to make will be the establishment of an Armed Forces Commissioner in 2026, with greater and more far-reaching powers than currently possessed by the ombudsman.

Additionally, the Ministry of Defence has committed to the creation of a new tri-service complaints team to take the most serious complaints alleging bullying, harassment and discrimination out of the chain of command for the first time.

We will continue to build upon this, as part of our Government commitment to renew the nation's contract with those who serve.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-09-01/HCWS891/>

[HCWS891]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Sizewell C Funded Decommissioning Programme: Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I am pleased to have laid a departmental minute describing the contingent liabilities arising from the signing of the funded decommissioning programme and Government support package for Sizewell C. Once operational, Sizewell C

will deliver clean power for the equivalent of 6 million homes and support 10,000 jobs, representing a major boost for energy security, jobs and economic growth.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present to Parliament a minute, giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

Following the Government final investment decision on Sizewell C, and subject to satisfaction of the relevant conditions precedent, both the funded decommissioning programme and Government support package will come into force at the time of revenue commencement. This is when the revenue collection contract between Sizewell C and the revenue collection counterparty is entered into, giving effect to the regulated asset base mechanism under which Sizewell C will be funded.

Context and rationale

The funded decommissioning programme sets out the operator's intended approach to decommissioning of Sizewell C, including how costs will be met and the corresponding cost estimates. A funded decommissioning programme is required in statute as per the Energy Act 2008. The objective of the regime is, as per the funded decommissioning programme guidance 2011, to ensure that the risk of recourse to public taxpayer funds for the decommissioning of new nuclear assets is remote.

The Government support package respond to "high impact, low probability" risks that either investors or the supply chain cannot take or cannot price at a level that is good value for money for UK taxpayers or consumers, or it is not otherwise appropriate for consumers to take through the regulated asset base. The Government support package documents have been published on gov.uk.

Details of contingent liabilities

Funded decommissioning programme

The funded decommissioning programme at Sizewell C will be funded via the regulated asset base. The regulated asset base contains a series of protections that aim to minimise the risk that public funds will be required to meet decommissioning costs. However, in certain remote circumstances whereby all the protections afforded by Sizewell C's economic licence fall away or a shortfall in the fund materialises, public funds could be used to contribute towards decommissioning costs and this liability would crystallise.

Based on best estimates by the Government Actuary Department, the maximum potential exposure from the liability is £12 billion—in 2022 terms. This has been estimated on a worse-case scenario whereby the Government were required to meet the full costs of decommissioning the Sizewell C power plant. The figure is based on the publicly available estimates contained in Sizewell C's decommissioning and waste management plan. Due to the safeguards built into the funded decommissioning programme's structure, it is highly unlikely that these full costs would ever crystallise.

Government support package

There are four contingent liabilities associated with the Government support package. Risks have been quantified based on best estimates of the costs that the package could be called upon to cover.

For three of the four limbs, the total maximum exposure is estimated at the maximum regulated asset base value. Further detail on each limb is provided below:

The contingent financing agreement allows the Secretary of State to provide additional finance or discontinue the project and pay investors compensation under the discontinuation and compensation agreement, in case of the project higher regulatory threshold being reached and shareholders choosing not to provide additional finance. We are not able to accurately quantify the maximum exposure level due to uncertainty over the point at which the agreement would be triggered.

The discontinuation and compensation agreement provides for the project to be discontinued in certain remote circumstances, in which case the Secretary of State will pay compensation to debt and equity, capped at the value of the regulated asset base.

The nuclear administration and statutory transfers agreement gives the means to introduce a form of special administration regime in respect of relevant licensee nuclear companies as per the Nuclear Energy Financing Act 2022.

The supplemental compensation agreement provides “top-up” insurance for certain circumstances on top of the insurances that Sizewell C is required to maintain through the commercial insurance markets. Under the SCA, the Secretaries of State would be liable for 95% of an uncapped amount for claims, with shareholders liable for 5%.

Due to the risks and market sensitivities around the Sizewell C equity raise and final investment decision, this notification could not be sent prior to the final investment decision being taken. Due to summer and conference recess timings, there will not be 14 sitting days prior to the liability being undertaken on 1 October. I am therefore announcing this liability today in order to allow as much parliamentary sitting time as possible prior to conference recess for the liabilities to be scrutinised.

The Treasury has approved this proposal for the contingent liabilities in principle. My Department will keep Parliament informed of any changes to this contingent liability as appropriate.

[HCWS893]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Medical Evacuation of Children: Gaza

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Today I want to update the House on the evacuation of children in urgent need of medical care from Gaza to receive specialist treatment in NHS hospitals across the UK. This was announced by the Prime Minister on 25 July, and a further update was published on gov.uk on 22 August.

No one who has watched the intolerable humanitarian crisis unfolding nightly on our TV screens can fail to be distressed by the devastating consequences for the people of Gaza. They are exhausted, scared and hungry. And they are dying. As of now, there are also no fully functioning health facilities and the few that remain open are operating under the most extreme and dangerous conditions. Water, fuel and medical supplies are all in short supply. Missile strikes are a constant hazard. It is a soul-destroying situation that compels us to act.

That is why a cross-Government taskforce, on the orders of the Prime Minister, are working urgently to get some of the critically ill and injured children medically

evacuated from Gaza. We expect the children and their immediate family members to arrive in the UK over the course of the autumn where they will receive first-class care, from first-class medics in surroundings that are safe and welcoming. This is a UK-wide process, and I am grateful to the Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for their willingness to participate.

The UK Government are partnering with the World Health Organisation, which works on the ground and plays a critical role in supporting medical evacuations from Gaza. Participation in the UK Government evacuation is solely through the WHO supported process, and the UK Government cannot consider direct requests for assistance. The WHO will provide a list of potential patients assessed as priority cases by Gazan medical specialists, for an expert NHS clinical leaders team to review. Gazan children needing highly specialist medical care will then be matched with locations where capacity exists within the NHS to treat them.

Mindful that for these gravely weak and vulnerable children this is a potentially hazardous journey, children will only be transferred to the UK where it is clinically safe to do so and in the interests of each individual patient. As such, we will ensure medical assessments are undertaken before they travel.

On arrival in the UK, patients and their immediate family members will be granted access to the NHS, housing and other services for an initial two years. Should these individuals and their families wish to remain in the UK beyond that, they can apply for further permission to stay under existing routes within the immigration rules.

Robust security checks will be undertaken on all individuals who enter the UK as part of this process. Biometrics will be collected as part of the visa application process and prior to the final decision on the terms on which they will be granted entry to the UK.

The Government are working with both the NHS and the relevant local authorities to make sure both the children and their immediate families receive the help and support they need for the duration of their time in the UK. These are the innocent victims caught in the crosshairs of a bloody and brutal conflict. The least we in Britain can do is play our part and do our utmost to help them.

I expect to provide a further update to the House when the first cohort of children have arrived in the UK.

[HCWS899]

Public Health Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I would like to inform the House of several updates from the Department of Health and Social Care over the summer recess.

Licensing of non-surgical cosmetic procedures in England

On 7 August the Government published our response to the 2023 consultation on the licensing of non-surgical cosmetic procedures in England. The response confirms the Government's commitment to introduce legal restrictions to ensure that cosmetic procedures that are

deemed to pose the highest level of risk to the public, such as the liquid Brazilian butt lift, are classed as Care Quality Commission regulated activities that can be performed only by specified regulated healthcare professionals.

The response also signals the Government's commitment to developing and implementing a local authority licensing scheme for lower-risk, non-surgical cosmetic procedures using the powers granted through section 180 of the Health and Care Act 2022, and to introducing age restrictions for those undergoing cosmetic procedures.

The proposals will be developed through further stakeholder engagement and public consultation before being taken forward through secondary legislation and the requisite parliamentary processes.

Voluntary guidelines for commercial baby food and drink

On 22 August the Government published new voluntary guidelines for commercial baby food and drink as part of our ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children ever.

These guidelines challenge baby food manufacturers to reduce levels of salt and sugar and to improve product labelling. Businesses have 18 months to meet the guidelines, and we will monitor progress.

Data from the national diet and nutrition survey shows that more than two thirds of children aged 18 months to three years are eating too much sugar. This increases the risk of weight gain and dental decay in the crucial early years of development.

Reducing salt and sugar in products means that parents and carers across England will be able to buy healthier food and drinks for their children. Clearer labelling guidelines will help parents understand what food they are buying, and support healthier choices.

Chickenpox vaccination programme for children

On 29 August the Government announced that we will be introducing a vaccine to protect against chickenpox into the routine childhood immunisation schedule from January 2026.

Eligible children will receive the MMRV vaccine, which protects against measles, mumps, rubella and chickenpox, at routine GP vaccination appointments.

The vaccine will help reduce cases of chickenpox and protect children from serious complications that can cause hospitalisation and potentially death.

Eligibility for vaccination will be based on a child's age on 1 January 2026, with further details to be announced later this year.

The vaccination programme supports the Government's ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children and ensure that young people thrive as part of our 10-year health plan.

[HCWS897]

NRS Healthcare: Insolvency

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I would like to inform the House about an important issue concerning NRS Healthcare—also known as Nottingham Rehab Ltd—a supplier of integrated community equipment services, which became insolvent on 1st August 2025.

NRS Healthcare provided essential services and equipment such as wheelchairs, hoists, and technology that supported disabled and older people to live independently at home. This helped avoid admissions to hospitals or care homes and assisted people in returning home after leaving hospital.

Local authorities have statutory duties under the Care Act 2014 and the Children and Families Act 2014 to arrange for the provision of disability aids and community equipment to meet the assessed needs of individuals in their area. While some local authorities provide these services themselves, many have contracts with external suppliers, such as NRS Healthcare. Customers of these services also include the NHS, private customers, pharmacies, and other adult social care and healthcare settings.

Before their insolvency, 44 local authorities had contracts with NRS Healthcare and relied on their services. NRS Healthcare supplied around 50% of hospitals with equipment used in adult social care across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Since the company filed for insolvency, the court has appointed an official receiver as the liquidator, supported by special managers, who are overseeing the wind-down of operations, managing the company's assets, and ensuring that statutory duties and obligations to creditors and people who draw on these services are met. The official receiver is an independent officer of the court required by law to carry out these duties.

As part of the liquidation process, the Government have made available short-term funding to the official receiver to cover the essential operating costs of NRS Healthcare and its affiliated companies. This funding has ensured that trading was able to continue for a limited time, to minimise disruption by providing crucial time for local authorities to put alternative supply in place. The use of this funding, should it be necessary, will be subject to robust scrutiny and governance by the Government and the insolvency office holders. The final cost to HM Government will be known when the insolvency process is complete. Costs will be reported in the DHSC annual report and accounts.

The Government have also provided the official receiver with a legal indemnity to protect them against financial loss or legal claims incurred while carrying out their duties. This indemnity is unlimited and will remain in place until the official receiver's services are no longer required. The indemnity is a standard mechanism in high-risk or complex insolvencies where appointees are expected to act in the national interest without undue risk to the appointees. Crystallisation is expected to be limited.

Without the Government providing the above support, there was a risk that the official receiver would have had no choice but to close services immediately following their appointment, in line with their statutory duties. This could have had an immediate and significant impact on hospital flow and the safety of people in the community who relied on NRS Healthcare's services.

These measures were therefore essential to enable the official receiver to discharge their duties for the benefits of creditors and protect public spending by avoiding additional hospital admissions or preventing discharge to care settings, while minimising risk to vulnerable people who previously relied on NRS Healthcare's services.

If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure. The Treasury has approved this arrangement.

My officials in the Department of Health and Social Care are continuing to monitor the situation closely and will continue to do so until its conclusion.

We would like to acknowledge and thank all colleagues, particularly those in HMT, UKGI, MHCLG, NHS England, and Partners in Care and Health—a sector support programme funded by DHSC—for their efforts throughout this challenging period. Their support leading up to, and following the insolvency in brokering discussions, sharing vital information, and helping local authorities prepare and respond has been invaluable in minimising disruption and protecting those who rely on these essential services.

[HCWS896]

PRIME MINISTER

Young Futures Hubs

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of Government change.

I am today announcing that delivery responsibility for the cross-Government Young Futures hubs will move from the Department for Education to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. This will bring ownership in line with overarching youth policy and delivery.

This change is effective immediately.

[HCWS894]

Petitions

Monday 1 September 2025

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Rural Post Offices

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glastonbury and Somerton,

Declares that rural post offices are under threat; further declares that the loss of Somerton's dedicated post office in 2022, combined with the loss of a post office in Butleigh, Charlton Adam and Charlton Mackerell has been devastating for the local community; further notes the recent separate petition from the owners of Somerton stores, which garnered over 800 signatures within two weeks highlighting the overwhelming support for a new post office; further recognises the immense benefit that post offices and postmasters have on rural communities; further acknowledges the prohibitive costs many potential postmasters face when attempting to open a post office; further welcomes the forthcoming green paper but believes the Post Office must work with rural communities to ensure a sustainable future for all.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to safeguard the future of post offices in rural areas.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sarah Dyke, *Official Report*, 15 July 2025; Vol. 771, c. 268.]

[P003093]

Observations by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):

I thank the petitioners for raising the issue regarding the future of post offices in rural areas.

The Government recognise the unique importance of post offices in rural and remote communities. The "Future of Post Office" Green Paper, which was published on 14 July 2025, therefore includes proposals to ensure fair access to important services across all parts of the UK.

Presently, the Government protects the sustainability of the post office network, and the rural network in particular, by providing an annual network subsidy. This ensures Post Office Ltd maintains a minimum number of branches and a geographical spread of branches in line with the Government-set access criteria. This financial year we are providing £83 million of subsidy to support Post Office provision in communities across the UK. That is up from the £50 million previously provided and is in addition to the uplift that we provided in the last financial year. The access criteria ensures that, however the network changes, across the country 99% of the population live within three miles of their nearest post office.

While the potential location of a post office outlet remains an operational matter for the Post Office, we understand that Post Office Ltd is currently in discussions

with potential operators in Butleigh and Somerton. Once the Post Office has a proposal confirmed, it will update the local community accordingly.

In the meantime, local residents from Butleigh can continue to access Post Office services from West End post office and Glastonbury post office, both of which are approximately 4 miles from the Butleigh branch. The alternative access to Post Office services for Somerton residents are Langport Road drop and collect branch and Long Sutton post office, which are 0.2 miles and 2.6 miles respectively from the Somerton branch.

With respect to prohibitive costs when opening a post office, it is important that the Post Office has an attractive offer to potential new postmasters. Increasing postmaster remuneration is an essential part of this, and I welcome the fact that the Post Office has already started to increase postmaster remuneration with a £20 million uplift in the 2024-25 financial year and a total planned uplift of £66 million so far during financial year 2025-26.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Waste Provision on Lea Hall Road, in the Garretts Green Ward in Birmingham, Hodge Hill and Solihull

The petition of residents of the Garretts Green Ward, Birmingham.

Declares that residents in Garretts Green who reside on top of a grass verge need to have access to a general waste bin; further that Birmingham Council must remove the red tape that is stopping the existence of general waste bins on Lea Hall Road, in the Garretts Green area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Birmingham Council to take immediate action to ensure that all residents on Lea Hall Road, in the Garretts Green Ward have access to general waste bins, and that these bins are collected by Birmingham City Council.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Byrne, *Official Report*, 3 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 279.]

[P003077]

Observations by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):

Local authorities are legally required to deliver waste collection services to households in their area. DEFRA has issued guidance

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ensuring-good-waste-collection-services-for-households>

for local authorities on factors to consider when delivering household waste collection services to ensure they meet local need and deliver value for money for the taxpayer. The guidance does not mandate what container type should be used.

Local authorities are independent bodies and are accountable to their electorate rather than to Ministers or Government Departments. If citizens have concerns about their local authority, they should try to discuss these with their council in the first instance. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman is charged by Parliament with investigating complaints of injustice arising from maladministration by local authorities and is free of charge.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Reform of Planning System

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that the planning system should put people and nature before profit.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reform the Planning and Infrastructure Bill so it delivers for both workers and wildlife, redefining affordable housing based on local incomes, ensuring developers deliver on their housing promises, protects irreplaceable habitats like chalk streams and upholds local democracy in the planning system.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chris Hinchliff, *Official Report*, 5 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 569.]

[P003081]

Observations by the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

The hon. Member for North East Hertfordshire has proposed various reforms to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which I will address in turn.

With regard to development and the environment, the Government remain firmly of the view that we can do better than the status quo, which too often sees both sustainable house building and nature recovery stall. Instead of environmental protections being seen as barriers to growth, we are determined to unlock a win-win for the economy and for nature.

The current approach to discharging environmental obligations is too often delaying and deterring development and placing unnecessary burdens on house builders and local authorities. It requires house builders to pay for localised and often costly mitigation measures, only to maintain the environmental status quo. By not taking a holistic view across larger geographies, mitigation measures often fail to secure the best outcomes for the environment.

The nature restoration fund provided for by part 3 of the Bill will end this sub-optimal arrangement. By facilitating a more strategic approach to the discharge of environmental obligations, it will streamline the delivery of new homes and infrastructure and result in improved environmental outcomes being delivered more efficiently.

Following the introduction of the Bill, we took very seriously the concerns expressed by those who were not yet convinced that the provisions in part 3 provided the necessary certainty that the nature restoration fund will deliver in practice the potential environmental benefits it offers and who questioned whether the safeguards in the Bill were sufficiently robust.

With a view to ensuring that everyone has confidence that the nature restoration fund delivers the improved outcomes for nature that are at the core of the model, we continued to engage with expert stakeholders, including environmental organisations and house builders, as well as the Office for Environmental Protection.

Having done so, the Government developed and tabled a comprehensive set of amendments for consideration during the Lords Committee stage of the Bill. As part of that exercise, we also took the opportunity to address wider issues raised during parliamentary debates as to how the nature restoration fund will operate going forward.

The targeted package of amendments we have tabled will provide confidence that part 3 of the Bill, and the nature restoration fund it provides for, will work in the way we have always maintained they would. The amendments make explicit what was previously implicit in respect of what Natural England will do when preparing an environmental delivery plan for submission to the Secretary of State. For example:

Natural England must consider the best available scientific evidence, we would always have expected them to do so but this has now been made explicit on the face of the Bill.

Natural England must consider whether network measures will make a greater contribution than normal measures, they would have done this anyway in our view but it has now been made explicit on the face of the Bill.

Natural England will set out how conservation measures will be sequenced - again this was already the intention and it is taking place in initial work on draft EDPs but it has now been made explicit on the face of the Bill.

We have made it even clearer how Natural England will monitor and report on the effectiveness of their conservation measures and when back-up and remedial measures—which were already part of the Bill may be used as a result.

As before, Natural England will provide the Secretary of State with its opinion on how the conservation measures will enable the EDP to pass the overall improvement test, clearly this would have happened in practice.

Importantly, none of the amendments will affect the process by which house builders interact with an EDP, namely by paying a levy to discharge specific environmental obligations through it, or undermine the strategic approach that the model provides for. By making the implicit, explicit, we are simply giving further confidence and assurance without changing the model or undermining the impact of these reforms.

Taken together, we are confident the package of amendments will provide reassurance that the nature restoration fund will restore, not harm nature, while at the same time ensuring house builders benefit from the same streamlined process to discharge their environmental obligations and get Britain building.

Irreplaceable habitats are just that, irreplaceable. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill does not make changes to the existing protections in place for irreplaceable habitats under the national planning policy framework. Chalk streams are not only vital ecosystems, but a symbol of our national heritage and their conservation and restoration are pressing objectives for the Government.

Chalk streams are already recognised by decision makers in the planning system as valued landscapes and sites of biodiversity value. These wildlife-rich habitats provide key ecosystem services and benefits for natural capital, and should be identified and safeguarded through local plans. Local nature recovery strategies, which are being rolled out across England, will help decision makers to identify and protect them as areas of importance for nature. Moreover, as sensitive waterbodies, our guidance is clear that developers should be assessing and mitigating impacts to water quality in these areas. The measures introduced through the Bill will not weaken existing protections for these valuable areas for nature within the planning system. The Government are considering how we best safeguard chalk streams from a range of threats, including adverse effects relating to new development, as part of our wider work to bring forward a new suite of national policies for decision-making.

The Government are committed to the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation. At the spending review, we announced £39 billion for a successor to the Affordable Homes Programme over 10 years from 2026-27 to 2035-36. Our new Social and Affordable Homes Programme will give registered providers a decade of certainty over the capital funding they will have available to build new, more ambitious housing development projects. Given the priority this Government accord to social rented housing, at least 60% of homes delivered through the programme will be for social rent. Rents for social rent homes are set using a formula that takes account of relative local incomes.

The NPPF is clear that local authorities should assess the size, type, and tenure of housing needed for different groups and reflect this in their planning policies. The revised NPPF published on 12 December 2024 gives local planning authorities greater flexibility to deliver the right mix of affordable homes to respond to housing need in their areas, while also making clear that they should address the particular needs of those who require social rent homes. To reflect this Government's priorities, the revised framework places greater emphasis on the delivery of social rent homes and includes a separate definition of social rent so that it is not referred to as just one of a number of types of affordable housing for rent.

We know that slow build-out is of great frustration to many local planning authorities and communities that rightly expect homes, infrastructure and services that have been promised as part of a planning approval to be delivered as quickly as possible. We are determined to close the gap between the amount of land allocated and permissioned and the number of homes being completed. In May, the Government published a planning reform working paper setting out a series of proposals to speed up homes being built. These include the possibility of introducing, as a measure of last resort, a delayed homes penalty to address instances where build out is falling significantly behind the agreed schedule without a reasonable justification.

Alongside that working paper, we launched a technical consultation on implementing measures to improve the transparency of build rates from new residential development, which includes proposals to implement provisions in section 113 of the LURA on the power to decline to determine applications. Subject to the outcome of the consultation, the Government intend bring forward the regulations to implement these measures at the earliest practical opportunity with the new build-out reporting framework coming into force from 2026.

Planning is principally a local activity, and the Government recognise the vital role that planning committees play in ensuring that decisions about what to build and where are shaped by local communities and reflect the views of local residents. However, in providing essential local democratic oversight of planning decisions, we must ensure planning committees operate as effectively as possible, focusing on those applications which require member input and not revisiting the same decisions.

At present, every council has its own scheme of delegation to identify the circumstances in which planning decisions are taken by the planning committee rather than delegated to officers. Most local planning authorities delegate a significant proportion of applications to

such officers, such that 96% of planning decisions in England are already not made by committees. However, there is significant variation across the country and this creates risk and uncertainty in the system. As such, the government believe there is a robust case for introducing a national scheme of delegation.

The Government recently consulted on proposals to modernise planning committees including a national scheme of delegation splitting planning applications into two tiers. Tier A covers those types of minor and technical planning applications that must be delegated to officers—although we ask in the consultation whether there should be a mechanism to bring a tier A application to committee in exceptional circumstances. Tier B covers types of applications where there is a presumption of delegation to officers but where a planning committee can make the decision if both the chair of the planning committee and chief planner agree. This will include all significant new housing and commercial developments and will allow the local democratic oversight of the most controversial applications where warranted. We believe this is a sensible and proportionate change designed to improve certainty and decision-making within the planning system.

JUSTICE

Anti-stab and anti-slash protective gear in prisons

The petition of residents of the constituency of Washington and Gateshead South

Declares that the government and prison authorities should make anti-stab and anti-slash protective gear mandatory for all prison officers. There is also a separate online petition on this issue, which has generated over 32,000 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that all prison officers are equipped with mandatory anti-stab and anti-slash protective gear to keep them safe from violent prisoners.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mrs Sharon Hodgson, Official Report, 18 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 543.]

[P003083]

Observations from Lord Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reoffending, Ministry of Justice

Staff must be able to expect a safe and decent work environment. We will not tolerate any violence against prison officers and prisoners who are violent towards staff will face the full consequences of their actions. To protect our brave and hard-working prison officers, we commissioned a rapid review of the use of protective body armour—also known as stab-proof vests—in our prisons. Following that review, on 3 June, the Lord Chancellor announced that we will be mandating PBA for use in separation centres, close supervision centres and segregation units in the long-term high-security estate. These units hold some of our most dangerous and challenging prisoners.

We are working to ensure that stab-and-slash-resistant PBA will be made and issued as quickly as possible. We expect to issue them to staff by autumn 2025.

In addition, the Government are exploring further options to protect our dedicated prison officers from harm.

TRANSPORT

Accessibility at High Brooms Station

The petition of residents of the constituency of Tunbridge Wells in Kent,

Declares that an online petition on the matter of improving accessibility at High Brooms station has generated a lot of interest; notes that under the previous Government's Access for All scheme, plans were drawn up for High Brooms featuring three new lifts, a footbridge, and several other critical improvements; and further declares that now the current Government has committed extra capital funding for transport, these plans must be implemented.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that High Brooms Station receives the funding required to improve accessibility.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mike Martin, *Official Report*, 15 July 2025; Vol. 771, c. 267.]

[P003092]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):

I would like to thank the petitioners from Tunbridge Wells for raising this important issue regarding accessibility at High Brooms station.

Accessibility is an integral part of our rail reform programme, and I am committed to enabling all passengers to travel easily, confidently, and with dignity. We want to make it as easy and accessible as possible for everyone to get around, and I am proud that the Government's Access for All programme has already delivered step-free accessible routes at over 260 stations across the country.

In May 2024, the previous Government agreed to the publication of a list of 50 stations selected for initial feasibility work for potential future Access for All funding. I can confirm that High Brooms station was included in this list. Network Rail has recently completed these feasibility assessments, and we expect to provide an update shortly on which of these stations will be progressing to the design phase.

In the meantime, please be assured that whenever the rail industry installs, replaces, or renews station infrastructure, this work must meet current accessibility standards. The Office of Rail and Road monitors compliance, and enforcement action can be taken where those standards are not upheld.

Given the wider funding pressures around accessibility, I would also encourage local stakeholders to explore alternative sources of funding, such as developer contributions through section 106 agreements. This would accelerate accessibility improvements at these locations.

The Department will continue to look for further opportunities to make our railway more accessible for all passengers. I would like to thank petitioners for their continued patience and interest in this matter, and I will provide a further update soon.

Operation Brock

The petition of residents of the constituency of Ashford in Kent,

Declares that the deployment of Operation Brock by Kent County Council and the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum to queue freight lorries on the M20 causes severe disruption for residents and local businesses; further that although reassurances had been given that Operation Brock would only be deployed in emergencies, it has been used regularly as a precautionary measure; and further that a better, long-term solution needs to be found.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Transport Select Committee to launch an inquiry into the decisions taken by Kent County Council and the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum to regularly deploy Operation Brock, and into what work is being undertaken to find a long-term alternative.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sojan Joseph, *Official Report*, 16 July 2025; Vol. 771, c. 389.]

[P003095]

Observations The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

Operation Brock is just one of the traffic management measures that the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum uses to manage traffic across the county. The Port of Dover and Eurotunnel are key strategic gateways for the UK, both for vital supply chains and to facilitate family holidays and other journeys for business and leisure to France and the wider continent. It is important for the county, and the country as a whole, that during peak periods traffic is managed effectively to avoid widespread disruption across Kent and to keep travel time for freight, passengers and local traffic at an absolute minimum.

KMRF is operationally independent from central Government, and the decision to deploy Operation Brock is based on lessons from previous disruption, expected traffic volumes, and the need to manage any disruption that would otherwise pose a greater safety risk to road users if Operation Brock was not in place.

I fully acknowledge the inconvenience caused to local residents, businesses, hauliers and passengers in Kent when Operation Brock is deployed. However, it is currently the most effective mechanism to filter freight through one strategic road artery and avoid freight and passenger queues spreading across the county, resulting in considerably more disruption for Kent residents.

KMRF keeps all traffic management measures under constant review to ensure they are both effective and proportionate. While the KMRF operates independently, my officials remain in close and constructive engagement with Kent partners to identify improvements and minimise the impact on road users. I am pleased to report that the last two years have seen significant reductions in the use of Operation Brock, and I am keen to see this continue.

We are working towards improvements in traffic forecasting using better data, AI, and learning from recent experiences, and we expect that Operation Brock could be used less on a precautionary basis in future. We are also exploring options which may make it possible to remove the use of Operation Brock, except in extremis.

Parking enforcement at Castle Bromwich Infant School

The petition of residents in the Castle Bromwich ward of the Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North Constituency

Declares that the scale of parking violations around Castle Bromwich Infant School has worsened significantly in the last 12 months, with cars parked illegally over drives, pavements, and double yellow lines.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Solihull borough council to increase the frequency of parking enforcement around the school at drop-off and pick-up times, and to reinstall a road sign on Hurst Lane North to deter cars from parking illegally.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Byrne, *Official Report*, 21 July 2025; Vol. 771, c. 664.]

[P003101]

Observations by The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

Responsibility for traffic management on local roads rests with the relevant local authority, as they are best placed to consider how local needs can most effectively be met. It is therefore a matter for individual authorities to decide on the nature and scope of parking policies and to balance the needs of residents, emergency services, local businesses and those who work in and visit the areas.

Under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide appropriate traffic management schemes for the roads they manage. They are free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation.

There are a number of measures that local authorities can introduce outside schools to promote the safety of pupils. Local authorities can put in place “School Keep Clear” markings which are legally enforceable when used in conjunction with an upright road sign, as prescribed in the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016, as amended.

Current legislation permit the police, or local authorities with civil enforcement powers, to carry out enforcement via issue of a penalty charge notice. There are two levels of penalty charges with the higher level applying to the more serious contraventions, which includes parking on zig-zag markings. It is for each authority to decide how they will carry out their enforcement duties.

Under Part 6 of the Traffic Management Act 2004, local authorities with existing civil parking enforcement powers can issue PCNs for contraventions of moving traffic restrictions. Examples of such restrictions include ignoring “no entry” signs, performing banned turns, access restrictions for certain vehicle classes and unlawful entry into box junctions. The police retain powers to enforce such restrictions and any police action would take precedence.

Local authorities wanting to undertake civil enforcement of moving traffic contraventions must apply to the Secretary of State for an order to be made designating the council as the enforcement authority in their area. Only then can enforcement begin in practice. Once local authorities have been granted a designation order for moving traffic enforcement, they can begin enforcing school street restrictions.

School streets are signed using existing “no motor vehicles” or “pedestrian and cycle zone” signs. These are already available to local authorities and clearly indicate that, during the times of operation, the road is closed to motor vehicles. They allow for a range of exceptions to be provided, for example for blue badge holders, or resident permit holders. The Department’s view is that existing signs work well, and there are therefore no plans to introduce alternatives. When a scheme is introduced, local authorities should work with schools and residents to make sure it is publicised in advance and drivers are fully aware of the changes and can adjust their journeys accordingly.

In November 2024 the Department published guidance for local authorities on implementing school streets, which includes advice on signing the restrictions, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-streets-how-to-set-up-and-manage-a-scheme/school-streets-how-to-set-up-and-manage-a-scheme>

Written Corrections

Monday 1 September 2025

Ministerial Corrections

JUSTICE

Justice Questions

The following is an extract from Justice Questions on 3 June 2025.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Recently, I attended a service marking 40 years since William Heenan was murdered by the IRA for being a Protestant. While we honoured his memory, the self-proclaimed “First Minister for all” in Northern Ireland was visiting the newly erected statue of IRA terrorist Bobby Sands, glorifying the movement responsible for the cold-blooded murder of men such as William. Will the Minister agree to meet me and innocent victims from Northern Ireland regarding the review and improvement of the glorification of terrorism legislation that applies to Northern Ireland?

Shabana Mahmood: As I think the hon. Lady will be aware, that is primarily a policy area for our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office, but I will make sure that we raise those issues with them.

[Official Report, 3 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 167.]

Written correction submitted by the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. Member for Birmingham Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood):

Shabana Mahmood: As I think the hon. Lady will be aware, that is primarily a policy area for our colleagues in the **Home Office**, but I will make sure that we raise those issues with them.

Trial by Jury: Proposed Restrictions

The following extract is from the debate on Trial by Jury: Proposed Restrictions on 9 July 2025.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): What Sir Brian’s comprehensive report demonstrates is the terrible state that our once envied criminal justice system was left in by the shadow Lord Chancellor and his colleagues. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree with Sir Brian that digging ourselves out of the hole in which they left us will require more investment, greater efficiency and structural change? Is that the debt that we owe to victims of crime in particular, to ensure that they get justice? It is up to this Government to put right the wrongs that have been done over the past 14 years.

Sarah Sackman: As ever, my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee, gives a considered response and he is absolutely right. There needs to be a recognition of the scale of the problem and two things are required: investment and reform. When hon. Members read the report, they will see that Sir Brian is very clear that we need investment. This Government are already beginning to make that investment, through the additional Crown court sitting days that we have laid on this year; running the system at system max; additional funding for legal aid lawyers and criminal legal aid; and £92 million to keep the sector going, **on both the defence and the**

prosecutorial sides. We are making that investment but, critically, as Sir Brian makes absolutely clear, that alone will not be enough...

[Official Report, 9 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 951.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. and learned Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman):

Sarah Sackman: As ever, my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee, gives a considered response and he is absolutely right. There needs to be a recognition of the scale of the problem and two things are required: investment and reform. When hon. Members read the report, they will see that Sir Brian is very clear that we need investment. This Government are already beginning to make that investment, through the additional Crown court sitting days that we have laid on this year; running the system at system max; additional funding for legal aid lawyers and criminal legal aid; and £92 million to keep the sector going. We are making that investment but, critically, as Sir Brian makes absolutely clear, that alone will not be enough...

CABINET OFFICE

Plan for Change: Tracking Dashboard

The following extract is from Cabinet Office questions on 10 July 2025.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): The Government are clearly very happy to claim that all is rosy after their first year in power, yet on the ground in my constituency and around the country, the opposite story is being told. The Government’s policies are hitting my constituents hard—whether it is the impact of increased national insurance contributions on local charities, the prospect of more red tape for landlords, or moving the goalposts for the most vulnerable. Given the Government’s amazing claims, why are they so reticent to share the plan for change metrics in one place, so that the good people up and down the United Kingdom can see the reality of this Labour Government in hard facts?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady seems to want more delivery stats, so let me help her out. As my right hon. Friend, the Minister without Portfolio, said, we have had the highest growth of any G7 economy in the first quarter of this year, cuts in interest rates and an expansion of the warm home discount, which will mean that 6 million households will benefit from better insulated houses. I do not claim, in reading out these statistics, that everything is perfect—far from it—but I do believe that we have had change in the past year: change in the investment pattern of the country; change in real wages; and change in our trading position. That is change well worth having.

[Official Report, 10 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 1104.]

Written correction submitted by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Pat McFadden):

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady seems to want more delivery stats, so let me help her out. As my right hon. Friend, the Minister without Portfolio, said, we have

had the highest growth of any G7 economy in the first quarter of this year, cuts in interest rates and an expansion of the warm home discount, which will mean that 6 million households **will benefit from lower energy bills this winter**. I do not claim, in reading out these statistics, that everything is perfect—far from it—but I do believe that we have had change in the past year: change in the investment pattern of the country; change in real wages; and change in our trading position. That is change well worth having.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Women's State Pension Age: Financial Redress

The following extract is from the debate on Women's State Pension Age: Financial Redress on 3 July 2025.

Torsten Bell: An important consideration in the Government making this decision was that evidence showed that sending people unsolicited letters is unlikely to affect what they know. That is why letters are sent only as part of wider communication campaigns. This evidence was not properly considered by the ombudsman. Another consideration was that the great majority of 1950s-born women were aware of the state pension age changing, if not of a change in their specific state pension age, as several hon. Members have pointed out. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford mentioned the statistic of 43%, referring to the 2024 rather than 2023 survey. However, as she will know, that refers to all women, including some women as young as 16; if we look at the cohort of women born in the 1950s, the figure is far, far higher. On those and other grounds, we rejected the ombudsman's approach to injustice and remedy.

[*Official Report*, 3 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 513.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell):

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend the Member for Salford mentioned the statistic of 43%, referring to the **2004** rather than **2003** survey. However, as she will know, that refers to all women, including some women as young as 16; if we look at the cohort of women **closest to those** born in the 1950s, the figure is **far** higher. On those and other grounds, we rejected the ombudsman's approach to injustice and remedy.

Other Corrections

ANTONIA BANCE

Black Country Day

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Black Country Day on 22 July 2025.

Antonia Bance:...The other investment that I want to talk about relates to a wonderful, timely announcement being made today by colleagues at the Department for Transport. They have announced the third round of the advanced fuels fund; I am delighted to say that Sumo Engineering in my constituency will get £4.5 million for its CLEARSKIES initiative, a demonstration project that will help to produce sustainable aviation fuel.

[*Official Report*, 22 July 2025; Vol. 771, c. 252WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance):

Antonia Bance:...The other investment that I want to talk about relates to a wonderful, timely announcement being made today by colleagues at the Department for Transport. They have announced the third round of the advanced fuels fund; I am delighted to say that Sumo Engineering in my constituency will get **£4.2 million** for its CLEARSKIES initiative, a demonstration project that will help to produce sustainable aviation fuel.

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**not later than
Monday 8 September 2025**

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