

Thursday
8 January 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 January 2026

The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

Abbreviation	Affiliation
Alliance	Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Con	Conservative Party
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
Green	Green Party of England and Wales
Ind	Independent*
Lab	Labour Party
Lab/Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
PC	Plaid Cymru
Reform	Reform UK
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUV	Traditional Unionist Voice
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

*The term “Independent” may denote—

Members who have been elected as Independent candidates without affiliation to a political party; or

Members who have been elected after standing for a political party but no longer have the party Whip in the House of Commons.

House of Commons

Thursday 8 January 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rail Fares

1. **Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help reduce rail fares.
[907102]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): This Government are committed to bringing the cost of living down, while supporting opportunity and aspiration across the whole of the UK. From March, regulated rail fares will be frozen for the first time in 30 years, meaning that over 1 billion journeys can be made in the coming year for the same price as this year. On top of that, the great British rail sale has returned, offering discounts on over 3 million tickets, making rail travel more affordable for everyone.

Chris Hinchliff: The fact that this Labour Government have frozen rail fares for the first time in 30 years is hugely welcome, but for many of my constituents, recent years have felt like death by a thousand costs, and they desperately need to see rail fares come down even further. Would the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the amendment that I have tabled to the Railways Bill, which sets out an option for going even further and securing permanent reductions in rail fares for every traveller?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is completely right to raise the issue of affordability for the travelling public. After the relentless fare hikes under the last Government—ticket prices went up by 60%—I think the announcement by this Labour Government will be welcomed by millions of people who are using our trains this year. I will certainly ask the Rail Minister to sit down with my hon. Friend to discuss his amendment. I can assure him that as we set up Great British Railways, affordability will be a key priority for that new organisation, alongside balancing costs for taxpayers.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): While keeping fares down is welcome, as is simplification, the Secretary of State will be aware that London North Eastern Railway introduced what it called a simplified

system a few months ago, which has actually resulted in a number of increases, and that is causing considerable concern to my constituents and others. Does the Department intend to review LNER's ticketing process in due course?

Heidi Alexander: Many of the cheapest fares on LNER are still available. In the long-distance fare trials, the vast majority of people will benefit from the simplified ticketing system. Of course, as these trials take place, we will want to review this process and ensure that we are providing good value for money for as many of the travelling public as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): But it is not just LNER, is it? We have also heard worrying accounts about Greater Anglia and c2c, shortly after they have been nationalised. The Government say that fare simplification is one of their key objectives; fair enough, but there are increasing numbers of accounts of discounted tickets being removed in the name of fare simplification. How will the Secretary of State prevent the fare simplification process from turning into just the removal of discounts?

Heidi Alexander: As we extend contactless ticketing, passengers will benefit from simpler, more flexible travel, and the majority of single tickets will be the same price or even lower. We do not want this positive change to have any perverse impacts, so we will monitor it as it beds in.

Local Bus Services

2. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[907104]

6. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[907110]

10. **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[907115]

11. **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[907116]

13. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[907118]

15. **Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services in rural areas.
[907121]

16. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[907123]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. You wait for one bus question, and seven arrive at the same

time! We are transforming local bus services through our Bus Services Act 2025, which empowers local authorities to deliver better services in a way that works for local people. To back this up with investment, we are putting £3 billion into supporting local leaders and bus operators across the country in improving bus services for millions of passengers.

Mr Dhesi: Many of my Slough constituents have been complaining for years about cuts to their bus services, so the Minister will appreciate why I lobbied so hard for a large increase in funding for public transport in our town. I want to place on record my immense gratitude for the huge amount—over £2.3 million—of funding for bus services in Slough, but does the Minister agree that the local council must now use that funding wisely to reduce bus fares and increase the number of bus routes available to long-suffering passengers?

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his tireless work in campaigning for better bus services and funding for his constituents. I was delighted to confirm the over £3 billion of funding from 2026-27, including £5.1 million for Slough borough council. Local leaders should work to ensure that local authority bus grant funding is used to expand services, improve reliability and reduce fares for local people, and I support my hon. Friend in pressing his local council to do just that.

Perran Moon: The recent Pretty Poverty report highlighted just how vital buses are to the daily lives of Cornish people, and given the massive lack of investment in public transport by the Conservative Government, it is no wonder that Cornwall suffers from one of the highest figures for car ownership per capita in the country. With First Bus, one of our main operators, pulling out of Cornwall next month, constituents fear that essential routes will disappear. Will the Minister meet me and Cornish colleagues to discuss how the integrated national transport strategy will ensure long-term funding for Cornwall's bus network?

Simon Lightwood: I have met Go Ahead, which is working with the council to pick up services that otherwise would have been lost. The Government are providing long-term investment for bus services, totalling £30.2 million for Cornwall, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about bus services in Cornwall.

Luke Myer: I have raised many times in this place the state of our bus services in rural east Cleveland. I am grateful to the Government for the powers and funding that have come to Tees Valley for public transport, but we are still not seeing the benefits in east Cleveland. On 20 March, Tees Valley combined authority will vote on the next stage of bus funding. Does the Minister agree that it should prioritise our rural villages, which have been left behind for far too long?

Simon Lightwood: The Tees Valley Mayor has all the powers and funding from the Labour Government to fix the buses, so it is disappointing, if not surprising, that he is choosing not to do so. In the meantime, I applaud my hon. Friend's efforts to ensure that east Cleveland is not forgotten, and I support his call to ensure that the available funding is used to better connect its villages.

Amanda Martin: Buses in Portsmouth are not meeting the accessibility requirements of visually impaired passengers, and my constituents report that bus colour displays are unsuitable, audio and visual stop announcements are not functioning, and drivers are not calling out stops or identifying visually impaired passengers at bus stops. My team has contacted the council, which has not provided a clear timeline for improving driver training or facilities. What is the Department doing to work with councils and service providers on improving accessibility?

Simon Lightwood: I am concerned to hear that. Disabled passengers much be able to use the buses as easily as non-disabled passengers, and from October, most local bus services must provide on-board audible and visual announcements. Our Bus Services Act 2025 will require authorities to publish a bus network accessibility plan, and mandate that all drivers complete disability assistance training. I too will write to my hon. Friend's local council.

David Williams: Happy new year, Mr Speaker. In Stoke-on-Trent, the Labour-led council has already delivered lower fares and new and improved routes, such as the 9A, which links the communities of Mill Hill, Chell and Bradeley with Hanley and Tunstall. Will the Minister please outline how the multi-year settlement, including the amazing additional £72 million for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, will allow councils to lock in those gains and provide longer-term certainty for our passengers?

Simon Lightwood: The multi-year allocations that we are providing to local authorities will give passengers greater certainty about their local bus services, allowing local leaders better to decide how they want local bus provision to look for years to come. It is great news for local people that Labour-run Stoke-on-Trent council is cutting fares and improving routes, and I would urge Reform-led Staffordshire council to take a leaf out of the book of its Labour-led neighbour, and put Government funding to good use.

Julia Buckley: I welcome the additional £13 million in the multi-annual commitment for bus funding for Shropshire through the local authority bus grant. That will greatly improve connectivity for my constituents in Shrewsbury, who have missed out over the last decade, in which our bus services were depleted by 65%. Ministers will be delighted to hear that in Shrewsbury we recently launched a successful night bus trial, offering evening services right through to midnight, thanks to the support of local partners such as Shrewsbury BID, councils and the police. What further steps will the Department take to ensure that such services can be maintained and expanded in wonderful rural communities like Shrewsbury?

Simon Lightwood: The Government recently allocated Shropshire £13 million of bus funding from 2026-27, and for the first time the formula used to calculate allocations now includes consideration of rural areas. In addition, our Bus Services Act 2025 gives local leaders the tools to deliver the bus services on which communities can rely.

Jessica Toale: The subject of improving local bus routes, particularly those that connect the town centre, station and airport, frequently comes up in my conversations

with Bournemouth West residents. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council has received £6 million from the Government to sustain and improve bus services, but despite that, it is threatening to cut vital routes, such as the No.36, on which lots of elderly and vulnerable residents rely. Will the Minister join me in condemning that decision, and call on the council to protect the vital routes on which residents rely?

Simon Lightwood: Government funding to improve bus services for passengers should do just that, and should protect vital services. It is frankly shocking that Lib Dem-led Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council is cutting support for local bus services. I encourage the council to listen to my hon. Friend and ensure that the £17 million allocated to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole over the next three years delivers improved bus networks for her community.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): In my rural north Yorkshire constituency, community bus providers—such as Stokesley Community Care, Hambleton Community Action, Reeth and District Community Transport and the Little White Bus—provide a vital lifeline for elderly residents, taking them to doctors' appointments, and to social events to combat loneliness. Will the Minister join me in thanking and commending all the volunteers who make those services viable, and ensure that community bus providers remain uppermost in the Government's mind as they think about bus policy, and perhaps about D1 licences, this year?

Simon Lightwood: The community bus network does a fantastic job, and I join the right hon. Gentleman in commending the work of those organisations across the country.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Young people in my constituency have already seen the promised Aldridge train station scrapped by Labour, so will the Minister join me in calling on Mayor Parker to back young people by introducing a £1 bus fare cap for under 22s, like the one that Conservative Mayor Ben Houchen has already delivered in Teesside?

Simon Lightwood: As I have already mentioned, the Government have provided over £3 billion of funding across the country. Importantly, we are giving local leaders the power to take back control of their buses and decide how they operate, because they are closer to their communities and understand their needs better than someone here in Parliament.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The bus grant announced for the west was portrayed by the Government as a win, but in reality it was a real-terms cut. The three-year bus grant settlement announced by the Labour mayor last month is down 35% on the previous three-year allocation, and will result in real-terms cuts. How can the Government call that a win?

Simon Lightwood: The local authority bus grant allocations have been calculated using a fair and transparent approach that considers population size, levels of deprivation, the extent of existing bus services and, importantly, rurality. We are continuing to work to end the unfairness of the competitive "Hunger Games" style allocations of the previous Government.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Straight after questions, I have a meeting with the managing director of Stagecoach in my region. I have worked closely with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox) to mitigate the impact of increased prices for young people travelling to school from villages like Horrabridge and Yelverton. We have had success on fare zone changes, with decreased fares for some, but—because of rural services—not all. When will my constituents see the benefits of the Bus Services Act, which the Minister has referred to, and what needs to happen locally for those benefits to be realised?

Simon Lightwood: I have already mentioned the fantastic benefits of the Bus Services Act. It gives local leaders the tools that they need to take back control of their bus services, and to shape them around their communities, through improved enhanced partnerships, franchising or local authority operated bus companies.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I receive regular correspondence from constituents raising concerns about unreliable bus services. These are especially problematic in areas like Croxley Green, where residents are already suffering because of limited bus routes and late-running services. Given that many people rely on buses to travel throughout my constituency, what steps are the Department taking to ensure that the residents of South West Hertfordshire have access to a reliable transport network?

Simon Lightwood: The Bus Services Act empowers local leaders to choose the model that works best for their area. It includes a measure on socially necessary local services. Under that new measure, local transport authorities with an enhanced partnership will be required to identify local services that are considered socially necessary. They will need to put in place requirements that must be followed before any services can be changed or cancelled.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: There is room for one more on the bus. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his answers to the seven questions on the Order Paper about buses. The Holy Bible refers to seven as the perfect number. If we are to improve local bus services, we need to improve the type of buses that are manufactured, make them energy efficient, and provide an hourly service. What discussions has the Minister had with Wrightbus in Northern Ireland about the production of more electric buses? Will he acknowledge the superior quality of those buses, and the company's capacity to deliver high-quality buses, which are best of British, at a good price?

Simon Lightwood: There are 14 questions now, Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that I launched the bus manufacturers expert panel, which is working with mayoral combined authorities, manufacturers and operators to ensure that British manufacturers have the best possible chance of success in the United Kingdom and abroad.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Government.

Yesterday, the Minister for nature, the hon. Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), told the House that there was no national bus fare cap under the last Conservative Government. That is not surprising, as the Prime Minister keeps gaslighting the public by saying exactly the same thing. Does the Minister accept that he must ensure that his colleagues correct the record, since there was a national £2 bus fare cap under the last Conservative Government? The Conservative manifesto committed to a £2 fare cap for the duration of this Parliament. This Government are taking the public for fools, as they increased the fare cap by 50%, which is hammering hard-working people up and down the country, costing them hundreds of pounds every single year.

Simon Lightwood: It takes real brass neck for the right hon. Gentleman to pipe up on this issue. It was his party that oversaw 300 million miles of bus cuts. In one year alone in which he was a Transport Minister, 2,000 routes were cut across England. This Government have introduced legislation to protect the lifeline routes that were cut on his party's watch, preserved cheap bus travel for passengers, and legislated to bring back better buses.

Passenger Rail Services

3. **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve railway services for passengers. [907105]

5. **Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve railway services for passengers. [907108]

9. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail services. [907114]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): Good morning, Mr Speaker. Following a decade of decline, we are starting to see train reliability stabilise. We are working with the rail industry on a performance restoration framework, with five clear areas of focus, in order to return performance to acceptable levels. More broadly, we are nationalising the railways to put passengers first. Great British Railways will have a statutory duty to promote the interests of passengers in decision making to improve performance, reliability and passenger experience.

Claire Young: The west of England growth strategy identifies the Severn estuary growth zone as having the potential to create more than 15,000 jobs. It is important that the half-hourly rail services on the Severn Beach line are maintained to support them. Similarly, the half-hourly trains serving Yate support both jobs and access to college, and will enable hourly services at the new Charfield station, when it opens. Will the Minister give an early commitment to extending those half-hourly rail services to support growth and remove uncertainty for students before the exam season?

Keir Mather: The hon. Lady is right to identify the importance of rail connectivity to economic growth in her part of the country. I reassure her that there are no plans to reduce the half-hourly service between Bristol and Gloucester, and I acknowledge the point she raises about Yate station, where performance has recently fallen behind Great Western Railway performance as a whole. I also reassure her that the Rail Minister is meeting with the managing directors of all train operators to address any instances of poor performance, so that we can level up the passenger experience, create economic opportunities and ensure that young people in her constituency can access the economic opportunities that they need.

Cameron Thomas: Good morning, Mr Speaker. In the early days after the election, I did not always cover myself in glory with the type of language I used to describe the state of GWR services between Paddington and Gloucestershire. Nevertheless, a year down the line, I still regularly have to stand in a corridor or aisle for hours on end, if I am able to board at all, and I know that my constituents have the same issues. Can the Minister tell me when we can expect things to get better?

Keir Mather: The hon. Member is a champion for his constituents, and nobody should have to face the sort of conditions that he describes. That is why I am pleased to say that the Railways Bill, which is soon to enter Committee, will create an independent passenger watchdog that will ensure minimum consumer standards for passengers on the railway, so that their travel can be an affordable, reliable, pleasant experience that matches how we would like our Great British Railways system to run.

Dave Robertson: People across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages are looking forward to seeing the number of trains from Lichfield city to Birmingham double as a result of the midlands rail hub project, which this Government are pressing ahead with, after it sat on a shelf under the previous lot for far too long. I am really eager to see those additional trains delivered as quickly as possible, including a later evening service to Lichfield, which we are currently missing. Can the Minister confirm that bringing the line back into public ownership under Great British Railways will help us to drive these changes faster?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is right to champion his constituents' right to frequent and reliable public transport. Great British Railways will bring the fragmented rail responsibilities into a single body. It will provide clear leadership to plan and run the railway for the long term, simplifying journeys, reducing delays and improving timetables to deliver better value for passengers and taxpayers. We continue to work with partners on options to achieve the benefits of the midlands rail hub as soon as possible.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I met East Midlands Railways to give the new ticketless travel app it is trialling a go. It is exciting new tech that will ensure passengers always pay the best price for travel. EMR says that that system should save passengers money and, with capped prices, will mean cheaper fares. Does the Minister agree that alongside the freezing of rail fares, innovation such as this could make a real difference to passengers' experience and to their pockets?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is right to champion the principle of innovation in the rail network to make the travelling experience better for the public. As she rightly notes, innovations such as digital pay-as-you-go mean that passengers can get the very best price for their journey. Innovation will be at the heart of Great British Railways as it works to deliver a better railway for all.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Rumours are swirling around the northern mayoralities that the Government are about to row back on Northern Powerhouse Rail. Is this going to be another U-turn from the Government, or can the Minister take this opportunity to put those rumours to rest by saying from the Dispatch Box that the scope, funding and timeframe for Northern Powerhouse Rail are not going to be changed?

Keir Mather: I am perplexed at the Opposition's new-found support for passengers on the rail network. Fares in our system rose by 60% from 2010 to 2014 under the last Government, including for residents in the north of England. This Government are committed to levelling up our railway across the United Kingdom, including in the north of England. We will put passenger experience and affordable fares for those passengers at the very heart of what Great British Railways seeks to do.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's decision to embrace our 10-year-long campaign for a rail fares freeze. However, I am sure the Secretary of State would agree that passengers have had to bear above-inflation fare increases for two decades prior to that, yet experience trains that are late and overcrowded, and lack the right onboard amenities such as luggage storage, functioning toilets and effective wi-fi. Does the Secretary of State support the idea of a 21st-century railway passenger charter that would guarantee the better passenger experience our passengers deserve?

Keir Mather: The Lib Dem spokesperson is right to identify the fact that passengers deserve access to a rail network that serves their needs, which is why accessibility will sit at the heart of Great British Railways. It will have a legislative requirement, with the licensing watchdog ensuring that accessibility is always considered—there will be an accessibility duty within the Railways Bill. On fares, the Bill and the rail fare freeze will save passengers £600 million in 2026-27; contrast that with the period from 2010 to 2014, in which fares rose by 60%. If the Lib Dem spokesperson is interested in the rights of passengers and affordability on the railway, he should have supported the Railways Bill on Second Reading.

E-scooters

4. **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle the illegal use of e-scooters on public roads and pavements. [907107]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): People using private e-scooters on the road or the pavement face criminal prosecution, having points added to their licence, and having their e-scooter seized. The Government have committed to legislate for micromobility vehicles, including e-scooters, when parliamentary time allows. This will help the police crack down on those using them unlawfully or irresponsibly.

Tom Hayes: In Dorset, we have just seen record numbers of e-scooter seizures. The police and crime commissioner, David Sidwick, and I are prioritising tackling this issue, because not only is it a form of antisocial behaviour, but it is an ideal way for drug dealers to get around. Residents in Littledown and Iford are particularly concerned. I am pleased to hear the Minister say that if parliamentary time allows, he will bring forward a Bill. Can he say whether that Bill might include mandatory registration and identification plates for e-scooters, among other things?

Simon Lightwood: As part of any future legislation, any regulations—including potentially requiring registration or licence plates—will be publicly consulted on before they come into force.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): There are 1 million privately owned scooters, which are illegal to use on public roads. I declare an interest, having bought one a few years ago in the expectation that I would be able to ride it legally by now, but that is permitted only under state-licensed schemes. Why have the Government extended trials that began six years ago by a further two years, rather than getting on with allowing people to use their e-scooters with proportionate regulation to deliver the benefits of micromobility, particularly in areas such as North West Norfolk that have limited public transport?

Simon Lightwood: The extension of our e-scooter trials will deepen our understanding of e-scooter safety, their impacts on disabled people and pedestrians, and how they can be better integrated with the wider transport systems in communities with different populations and geographies. Extending the trials will give the certainty needed by industry to continue investing in our trials and more time to learn how best to regulate e-scooters.

Economic Growth: Transport System

7. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure that the transport system supports economic growth. [907112]

12. **Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help ensure that the transport system supports economic growth. [907117]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Transport is a key enabler of economic growth. That is why we are investing £92 billion to maintain and modernise our roads and railways, to deliver major projects such as HS2 and East West Rail, and to support leaders in our towns and cities to improve local public transport networks. This will strengthen connectivity, unlock productivity and support a thriving UK economy.

Dr Gardner: My constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South and the villages is home to internationally recognised visitor attractions, including the iconic World of Wedgwood and the stunning grade-II listed Trentham Estate and its gardens, yet public transport access to those sites remains limited. Two local railway stations, Barlaston and Wedgwood, continue to be placed under a lengthy temporary closure of 19 years. Will the Secretary of State support the reopening of the Stoke-on-Trent South railway stations to better connect communities with jobs, skills and tourism opportunities to boost economic growth in my constituency?

Heidi Alexander: I appreciate what a fearsome and impatient advocate my hon. Friend is for her constituency, and I am sure she will leave no stone unturned in exploring potential funding options with local partners to reopen some of those stations. I will gladly ask the Rail Minister to sit down with her to discuss the art of the possible.

Sally Jameson: Junction 3 of the M18 in Doncaster is one of the biggest bottlenecks to growth in our region, so will the Minister meet me to discuss the possibility of its inclusion in the road investment strategy and how the Department can further support the mayoral combined authority and the council to make sure we get this sorted out?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to ask the Roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), to meet my hon. Friend, who has campaigned hard to secure a viable future for Doncaster Sheffield airport, and I also appreciate the importance of this junction. We have given a significant amount of funding to the South Yorkshire mayoral combined authority to determine what its local investment priorities are. I encourage her to continue discussions with the Mayor of South Yorkshire to that effect.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Being able to commute to work easily is vital for economic growth, but my constituents using Ash Vale station have to climb the equivalent of two storeys of stairs, making it virtually impossible for people in wheelchairs, older people or young parents with prams to get up and get on to the main line to London. There is an excellent proposal under Access for All on the Secretary of State's desk. When will my constituents find out whether there will be a happy new year for them?

Heidi Alexander: The right hon. Gentleman has raised the question of accessibility at this station with me at Transport questions, and he is right to say that it is one of the schemes being considered as part of the Access for All programme. He is also right to say that decisions about that scheme are literally on my desk at the moment. He does not have too long to wait until we make an announcement about which schemes we will be taking forward, both for further design work and to construction.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): My constituency is the highest contributor to the Exchequer of any constituency outside London, and most of the people who pay those huge taxes commute into London on South Western Railway, which is London's least reliable train network. A major cause of that poor

performance is an outdated signalling system at Clapham Junction. It is way out of date, and in November alone it accounted for 7% of all cancellations. Will the Secretary of State set out what plans exist to go beyond piecemeal repairs to a root and branch reconstruction of the signalling at Clapham Junction?

Heidi Alexander: I am fully aware of how important South Western Railway is to the hon. Lady's constituency and to the economic performance of the south-east as a whole. I can give her good news: we have appointed a new integrated managing director of South Western, who is responsible for both the infrastructure and the train operations. I will be sure to write to the hon. Lady with more details about potential improvements to the signalling system, so that we can see the greater levels of reliability and punctuality that I know her constituents want to see.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Reliable transport links are vital to the prosperity of Blackpool. Although it is the most deprived town in the UK, we rely heavily on tourism, yet because of the Office of Rail and Road's restrictions, Avanti announced before Christmas that it has slashed our direct routes to and from London by over 50%. There is now a direct service from Blackpool to London only at 7 in the morning, and then a return at half-past 6 and half-past 8 in the evening. This is not good enough, and it will damage our local economy. Will the Secretary of State please arrange for me to meet the Rail Minister to see how we can solve this issue? It will dramatically damage our local economy, and we need to get it sorted.

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to ask the Rail Minister to meet my hon. Friend. I fully appreciate the importance of direct services to London, and we will make sure that we look at the detail of what has happened in this situation and see whether any mitigations can be put in place.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Communities near Cambridge, such as the towns and villages of West Suffolk, need better transport connections, especially given the new housing developments. The wider east needs the Ely-Haughley upgrade, and we need a dualled line from Cambridge to Newmarket and a new rail link to Haverhill. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how developments and transport policies can be better aligned in the east of England?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss these issues. I am aware of the significance of the Ely-Haughley junction improvements. It was not possible to fund that scheme in the spending review, but it is part of the longer-term pipeline that we are looking at, not least because of the important freight links to the port in Felixstowe that could be improved. I would be happy to have a further conversation on the wider issues.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Could the Secretary of State enlighten the House as to how reversing the last Conservative Government's 5p a litre fuel duty cut will help the transport system to

support economic growth? Is it not the truth that, come September, this will be known as Labour's back to school tax?

Heidi Alexander: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are freezing fuel duty until August this year. We need to get the balance right in terms of securing income for the public finances, but I also point out that we are investing a record amount in highways maintenance—£1.6 billion last year, which is £500 million more than was spent the year before, under his Government. We will double investment in roads maintenance by the end of this Parliament, and that is what people using our roads want to see.

Rail Services: Harrogate and Knaresborough

8. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps she is taking to help improve rail services in Harrogate and Knaresborough constituency. [907113]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): This Government know how important local rail links are in supporting work, leisure and aspiration, which is why we are overhauling the railways through the creation of Great British Railways. A scheme to improve performance at York station and across the local area remains under review following the spending review, and we are working closely with Network Rail and key stakeholders to understand how it can best be delivered in the future.

Tom Gordon: Constituents of mine who rely on the Leeds to York via Harrogate line face regular disruption, because part of the route is single track. Given the indefinite pause of the York area capacity scheme, which means that the Harrogate to York trains still have to go on to the fast east coast main line, we will continue to see delays. Will the Government think again about this pause, which is indefinite, and what alternative plans will they set out in the meantime to address capacity constraints and improve the reliability of services for my constituents?

Keir Mather: As a near neighbour of the hon. Member, I know the line that he describes. The Harrogate line interventions have not been funded in this spending review period, but that does not preclude doubling the single line between Knaresborough and York as part of a future local or national infrastructure pipeline. Platform extensions and electrification have previously been developed to a strategic outline business case level of maturity. Based on current and future demand forecasts, the work did not consider dualling the line, but I am happy to continue engaging with the hon. Member on this very important question.

Local Transport Authority Funding Settlements: Buses

14. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress she has made on providing long-term funding settlements to local transport authorities for bus services. [907119]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Government published the long-term, multi-year allocations for local transport authorities

under the local authority bus grant in December last year, giving local authorities both the funding and the certainty they need to plan for the long term. This is part of more than £3 billion that we are investing over the next three years to improve services for passengers around the country, including the £30.2 million allocated to Cornwall council.

Jayne Kirkham: I thank the Minister for that answer. I was very pleased to hear that he has already spoken to Go South West, which is working to fill the gaps left by our private bus provider's recently withdrawn services. Those buses were vital for getting students to university and our two large further education colleges, because it can take hours to get to college and apprenticeship placements in Cornwall. I therefore ask the Minister if I could join the meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) that he agreed to earlier, particularly to discuss buses to get those aged 16 and over to school and further education in Cornwall.

Simon Lightwood: Access to opportunity, including education, is of course a top priority for this Government. Our Bus Services Act 2025 and the multi-year funding allocations, including over £30 million for Cornwall, will help improve vital connections. I very much welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend, which I believe will be next week.

Public Transport: Runcorn and Helsby

17. **Sarah Pochin** (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of public transport services in the Runcorn and Helsby constituency. [907124]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. This Government are delivering a record £1.6 billion for Liverpool city region, £46 million for Cheshire West and Chester council and an additional £64.4 million for Liverpool city region through the local authority bus grant for 2026-27 to 2028-29 to deliver improvements to public transport for the benefit of local people. My Department continues to work closely with local authority officers across the country to ensure that this funding is put to the best possible use for local communities.

Sarah Pochin: I thank the Minister for her response. Given that the 2016 funding agreement for the construction and operation of the Mersey Gateway bridge requires a review of the tolling arrangements this year, will the Minister commit today to ensuring that MPs representing directly affected constituencies, such as Runcorn and Helsby, are formally involved in that review, so that the concerns of local residents are properly heard?

Lilian Greenwood: I am very glad that the hon. Member was able to meet the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), in October to discuss the tolls on the Mersey Gateway crossing. As she will know, the charges are the responsibility of Halton borough council, and thanks to additional funding provided by our Department, residents of Halton, for

an annual fee of £12, can make 900 free crossings a year. Any changes to the toll arrangements are a matter for the local council.

Transport for London: Commuter Services

18. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Mayor of London on the extension of the management of commuter services by Transport for London. [907125]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I am pleased to see the hon. Gentleman in his place. I assure him that I am in regular contact with the Mayor of London on a range of matters, and he and I discussed the proposed devolution of Great Northern inner services to Transport for London when we last met in November. My officials have been in close contact with TfL and Greater London Authority officials on this matter, and following TfL's business case submission, the Department is assessing the potential benefits, including for housing growth.

Bob Blackman: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. She will well know, as a former deputy mayor for transport in London, that the confusing picture of the use of the underground and of Overground services has been a problem for Londoners and for the mayor. However, it would be very controversial to introduce such a measure for all the Overground services and National Rail services for commuters into London. Are the ongoing conversations about the entirety of the network, or are they limited to just one service?

Heidi Alexander: The discussions at the moment are limited to the potential transfer of services that form part of the Great Northern inner network. This is a fiendishly complicated thing to do, but I do recognise the benefits of bringing certain commuter lines into London Overground and making them part of that network, as long as there is agreement with the local authorities representing those further along the line. We will continue those discussions with the Mayor of London and Transport for London to bring reliable, high-quality public transport services to the people of London.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Commuter services are extensively disrupted in Putney by the six-year closure of Hammersmith bridge. I will be holding a bus crisis taskforce again tomorrow to look at the impact that the closure of the bridge is having not just on bus services, but on active travel and commuting through Putney. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she supports the reopening of Hammersmith bridge to vehicles, and when the next meeting of the Hammersmith bridge taskforce will be? It last met on 30 January last year.

Heidi Alexander: I recognise how disruptive the closure of Hammersmith bridge has been to people in my hon. Friend's part of London. I understand that the Minister for Roads, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), will be convening a further meeting of the Hammersmith bridge taskforce in the near future to discuss next steps for the project. Officials will be in touch with key local stakeholders to arrange that in due course.

Illegally Modified E-bikes

19. **Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with delivery platforms to help reduce the use of illegally modified e-bikes. [907126]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): E-bikes are only road-legal when they comply with the requirements of the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycle Regulations 1983. The legislation applies to all cyclists, including delivery riders. The Department has previously written to delivery platforms on this subject. A copy of that letter is in the Library of the House.

Dr Arthur: I thank the Minister for her response and for her written statement this morning on pavement parking. The illegal use of e-bikes by delivery companies is a matter of real concern for people in Edinburgh South West. I wrote to the Just Eat delivery company this week, and it said in its reply that it could act only if I could tell them the rider's name or the delivery order number. That is absolutely preposterous. It could proactively use its app to monitor rider behaviour. I fear that it is both exploiting the riders and exploiting the use of illegal e-bikes. If it will not act and be a responsible company, will the Government take action?

Lilian Greenwood: I absolutely agree that delivery companies should be working to ensure that their drivers and riders remain safe and do not pose a danger to others. The Government's road safety charter, the first in a decade, includes plans to pilot a national work-related road safety charter for businesses that require people to drive or ride for them. I will be making a statement on the strategy in this House later today. Clearly, we encourage delivery apps to sign up to that.

Topical Questions

T1. [907127] **Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Yesterday marked a turning point for road safety in Britain. Our new road safety strategy, the first for 10 years, will save lives and end years of complacency. Our targets are ambitious: reducing those killed or seriously injured on our roads by 65% by 2035, and by 70% for children under 16. That means stricter penalties for dangerous drivers; clamping down on illegal number plates and those driving without insurance; and new measures to support those most at risk, such as younger and older drivers. Today we are also outlining plans to restrict pavement parking, which will make our roads safer and more accessible to everyone. Every life lost on our roads is not only tragic, but preventable. I am proud that the steps we are taking will mean more people in more places can travel more safely.

Mr Snowden: Earlier, one of the Ministers dodged a very straightforward but important question, so will the Secretary of State now set the record straight? Do the Government have any plans that would change the scope, funding or timelines for Northern Powerhouse Rail—yes or no?

Heidi Alexander: It is a simple fact that communities in the north of England have had to put up with second-rate transport systems for far too long. I can guarantee that this Government are fully committed to Northern Powerhouse Rail. I understand that the hon. Gentleman is impatient for announcements. He may have to wait a few days or weeks longer to find out exactly what the Government's plans are, but I can assure him that we are making progress.

T2. [907129] **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Traffic jams at junction 1 of the M5 are a nightmare for residents, businesses and West Bromwich Albion FC fans. We have already had a traffic light upgrade, which has improved things slightly, and the Government have now given Sandwell council yellow box enforcement powers, which I hope will ease things further. What more can the Government do to modernise our roads, ease the jams and get Britain moving?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I commend my hon. Friend for securing those improvements. This Government are committed to modernising our roads and getting Britain moving, which is why we have already announced that we will be investing £25 billion on the strategic road network over the next five years. We will be setting out our plans for the third road investment strategy shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): At oral questions in September, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) asked the Minister to apologise for failing to bring down the driving test backlog, which Labour had promised to do. The Minister told the House then that there were “early signs of improvement”. Can he tell the House now whether driving test times have increased or decreased since Labour came to power 18 months ago?

Simon Lightwood: The Secretary of State announced various new measures at the Transport Committee to continue to bring down the waiting times for learner drivers. *[Interruption.]* Look, what I would say to the right hon. Gentleman is that his party did virtually nothing to help the situation, and it is this Labour party that is making the structural changes and the real effort to bring down waiting times once and for all.

Mr Holden: The Minister has still not properly answered the question and, frankly, should be embarrassed by that answer. Labour promised to reduce average waiting times to seven weeks—*[Interruption.]* Wait for it. Instead, we are now seeing waits of up to 22 weeks—almost a month longer for a driving test than at the general election. The desperate headline-grabbing announcements about calling in the Army, which in reality will increase capacity by less than half of 1%, and for one year only, will simply not cut the mustard for the hundreds of thousands of people waiting for driving tests up and down the country. Can the Minister tell the House when he expects average test waiting times to fall below the levels that Labour inherited at the general election?

Simon Lightwood: Once again we see the brass neck of the right hon. Gentleman. The National Audit Office, in a report published in December, was very clear that

“DfT had limited involvement in helping DVSA tackle driving test waiting times up to mid-2024”—

I wonder what happened in 2024. Prior to that, the Department for Transport largely left the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to try to resolve the matter itself—

Mr Holden: And they've gone up!

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Holden, you are getting very excited. Hale and Pace are not setting a good example. Come on.

T4. [907131] **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): Although I welcome recent efforts to get a grip on the outrageous driving test backlog, more needs to be done. I urge the Secretary of State and the DVSA to take further steps to safeguard the online booking system from profiteering by restricting driving schools from booking tests in bulk and by removing the test swapping features to stop reselling at huge mark-ups.

Simon Lightwood: I agree that waiting times have been too high for too long, which is why this Government are taking the decisive action that I have talked about. We are reforming the booking system so that only genuine learner drivers can book and manage tests, and we are making changes to crack down on bots and resellers. Members will have seen the announcement yesterday of the road safety strategy. Importantly, the minimum learning period is expected to improve safety and raise pass rates by up to 7%—for every 1% saved there, there are an extra 40,000 test bookings.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ollly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Across the country, people enjoy traffic-free walking, cycling and wheeling on disused railways such as the Tissington trail in Derbyshire, the Mawddach trail in Gwynedd or the Deeside way in Aberdeenshire. What steps will the Secretary of State take to make it easier for local government and communities to gain access to the 8,000 miles of disused railway that we still have, which creates such a good opportunity for family-friendly cycling trails, as part of a national network?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The disused part of the rail network is currently in the custody of National Highways. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that many of those trails provide excellent opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling; indeed, I have spent many happy times cycling on the Tissington and Monsal trails in Derbyshire. We will continue to work through Active Travel England and with local authorities to encourage them to make great use of those greenways.

T6. [907133] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Will the Minister give his backing to the brilliant volunteers of Friends of the Barton Line in their quest to reduce the number of unnecessary cancellations on the Barton line by East Midlands Railway?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I have travelled on that line and I know the challenges. The Friends of the Barton Line do incredible work to raise issues relating to passenger experience, and East Midlands Railway is working to improve train performance on this route. I will support my hon. Friend and the Friends of the Barton Line to improve the service further.

T3. [907130] **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Beyond the legitimate environmental concerns about Luton airport expansion, can the Government explain how an already unreliable Thameslink and packed road network will cope with the 13 million extra passengers a year, as well as a new theme park and massive top-down housing development?

Heidi Alexander: When planning permission was granted for the expansion of Luton airport, careful consideration was given to how people would access the airport, by road and by rail, and Luton also has the DART link. When it comes to the accessibility of the new Universal theme park, we are investing in rail networks such as East West Rail at Stewartby.

T7. [907134] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): My constituency is one of few places in the country that is overflown by flight paths for two airports: London City and Heathrow. Mr Baxter, a constituent of mine, continually writes to me on noise pollution, which is a real issue in the area. I would be very interested to know whether the Department has made an assessment of areas affected by multiple flight paths and what it is considering to manage the impact of that.

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of aviation noise. It is one of the reasons why the Department is pursuing an ambitious programme of airspace modernisation, which aims to deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys, both for passengers and communities such as the one she represents.

T5. [907132] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): London tube fares are due to rise by 5.8% this year. Despite that, my constituents, train drivers and station staff are frustrated by ongoing disruption with the tube services to my constituency. The Piccadilly line was out of action for weeks due to leaves on the line before Christmas, and the past 24 hours have seen a further extension of cancellations. What further pressure can the Secretary of State bring to bear on the Mayor of London to ensure a punctual and reliable service so that my constituents can get to work or school and go about their business?

Heidi Alexander: I remember from my time as deputy Mayor of London the perennial problem of leaves on the line, particularly on the Piccadilly line. I am happy to raise the hon. Member's comments with the transport commissioner, Andy Lord.

T8. [907135] **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): The West Yorkshire combined authority has secured multi-million-pound funding to improve walking, wheeling and cycling across the region. The investments are already benefiting communities within my constituency. How will

the Government build on that progress so that more people in constituencies such as mine can choose walking, wheeling and cycling for everyday journeys?

Lilian Greenwood: The Government are committed to supporting walking, wheeling and cycling. In addition to the £626 million funding announced on 10 December, we have consulted on the third cycling and walking investment strategy. The consultation closed on 15 December, and we expect the strategy to follow by this spring. I am personally committed to making it as ambitious as possible so that many more people can enjoy the benefits of active travel, including in rural and semi-rural areas such as my hon. Friend's constituency.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It is not enough just to freeze rail fares; they should be cut, as the Scottish Government have done in Scotland. It is fair to say that English rail commuters should enjoy the lower level of cancellations enjoyed by rail commuters in Scotland. That is why ScotRail, with its public ownership, has the highest customer satisfaction of any rail operator in the United Kingdom. Would the Secretary of State like to facilitate a meeting with the Scottish Government to find out how to optimally run a rail operator?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I have regular meetings with my Scottish counterpart, Fiona Hyslop. I can also assure him, as I have for other Members already today, that affordability will be a key priority as we set up Great British Railways and create a railway in England that puts passengers before profit. It will be a railway run by the public and for the public.

T9. [907136] **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Constituents who responded to my commuter survey made it clear that the rail service from Coleshill and Water Orton to Birmingham is just not good enough. I called for CrossCountry to reinstate its 7.35 train from Water Orton and to introduce a new later service, and I am delighted that this has been done, but overcrowding is still a problem. Does the Minister agree that urgent action must be taken to improve the capacity of the route so that my constituents can travel to and from Birmingham reliably and comfortably?

Keir Mather: I welcome the fact that CrossCountry has increased calls at Water Orton, although I know that many commuters find that there is still standing room only on those peak services. Some changes can be made to help; for example, the capacity for standard-class passengers was increased by removing a dedicated first-class area on CrossCountry's Class 170 trains. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to advance the issue further.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I wonder whether the Secretary of State could update the House on the plans to connect Tonbridge to Gatwick through the rail network. As she knows, there have traditionally been links in that direction and it requires only a very minor change to the timetable to make it work. If she wanted, she could even connect it to the rest of the kingdom of Kent at the same time.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for fulfilling his role as spokesperson for the kingdom of Kent. I am keen to maximise the number of

people who are using the rail network to get to Gatwick airport. We have granted planning consent for Gatwick to bring its second runway into use in future and I want to continue discussions with Network Rail and the train operating company there, as it comes into public ownership, about how we can look at direct routes to Gatwick and increase capacity on the rail network to that airport.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Government have given mayoral authorities greater devolved powers to develop local transport infrastructure projects. Will the Secretary of State ensure that such powers provide the opportunity to speed up joint planning and decision making so that much-needed transport infrastructure, such as the West Yorkshire mass transit scheme, can be accelerated to meet the needs of communities and local economies?

Keir Mather: The Government fully support the Mayor of West Yorkshire's ambition to deliver mass transit in the region. People in West Yorkshire have waited too long for better transport infrastructure and too many promises from the previous Government have been broken. We are determined to put that right.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The latest cost projection by Labour-run Bradford council for building a pedestrian bridge between Silsden and Steeton over a busy dual carriageway is now a whopping £24 million, and the proposed design looks like some bizarre Scalextric track. Will the Secretary of State meet me to get those ridiculous cost projections under control?

Heidi Alexander: I am happy to ask the Local Transport Minister to meet the hon. Gentleman. It sounds to me as if this is a locally managed project, and we would not interfere in that, but I am happy for a further conversation to take place.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Accessing airports via public transport is hugely important for sustainable aviation. With Govia Thameslink Railway's Thameslink franchise coming under public ownership through Great British Railways later this spring, will the Minister meet me to discuss the benefits that that could bring for accessing Luton airport?

Heidi Alexander: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that. I also assure her that I have raised the importance of public transport accessibility with the leadership of Luton airport, as well as the integration of the National Rail network and the Direct Air-Rail Transit link. I am happy to discuss that matter further with her.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The Government talk about affordable transport for passengers in the UK, but on the Isle of Wight we are at the mercy of privatised, unregulated ferry companies that charge extortionate prices for unreliable services. If those companies refuse to lower prices and improve services, will the Minister intervene, given that he would not accept that for any other community in the United Kingdom?

Keir Mather: I know just how hard the hon. Member works to represent constituents on the Isle of Wight. He knows that the Government are committed to supporting a locally led solution to the challenge. Crucial to that is the appointment of a chair to the cross-Solent group, and he and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) will be pleased to know that I will have information on that announcement very shortly.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier, Ministers talked about the benefits of bus services. In London we have been at the forefront of improved bus services, but unfortunately some aspects of that, such as low-traffic neighbourhoods, have had an impact on main routes, and now the No. 38 bus route is under threat of curtailment. Is the Department for Transport doing any strategic work on how we see those interactions, so that it can advise mayors and others in local areas on how to manage the interaction between different transport uses on our roads to ensure that buses run fast and deliver for the people who really rely on them?

Heidi Alexander: I know that the Roads and Buses Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), would be happy to meet with my hon. Friend to discuss that issue in more detail. As far as we are concerned, best practice when establishing schemes such as low-traffic neighbourhoods requires consultation with bus operators about projected impacts on bus routes, bus frequencies and bus journey times.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Before Christmas, Colyford in Devon was subject to the death of a member of the community who had herself said that someone would be killed on that road. How will the Government's road safety strategy help to prevent road deaths like the one that happened in Colyford last month?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and extend my condolences to his constituent. It is vitally important that local authorities use the powers they have to introduce measures to improve road safety. We will be issuing new guidance on the deployment of speed cameras and red light cameras and on the introduction of lower speed limits to support local authorities in exercising those duties.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): The illegal and antisocial use of e-bikes and e-scooters is causing huge concern for residents in my constituency of Shipley. Just last week in Roberts Park in Saltaire, it caused thousands of pounds of damage to the much-loved cricket ground. How are the Government ensuring that the police have the powers they need to seize illegal e-bikes and e-scooters, including from domestic settings?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the problems caused by the antisocial use of e-bikes, and indeed of illegal e-bikes. Police already have the powers they need to seize any non-compliant e-bikes and we encourage them to use those powers, as I know they are in parts of the country.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): One of my Woking constituents is a nurse at Great Ormond Street hospital. Due to her long hours and shift patterns, she is unable

to use a return ticket to go to and from work, which means she has to spend more money to give vital care to children. Will the Transport Secretary agree to look into this to ensure that my constituent and other key NHS staff and workers are able to spend less money to support us by having a longer return journey ticket?

Heidi Alexander: If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me with the specifics of his constituent's travel patterns, I will look into it and come back to him. I appreciate that, for key public sector workers, the affordability of the public transport system is key.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): A train station serving Magor and Undy will take cars off the badly congested M4 and open doors to new opportunities for local people. It is also excellent value for money, because the track and so much infrastructure is already there. I am delighted that the Government made funding available for the long-awaited Burns stations, which include Magor. Can the Minister give an update on progress towards delivering this all-important station?

Heidi Alexander: We are working closely with the Welsh Government and the Welsh rail board to determine the best prioritisation of the £445 million that we made available for the Welsh rail network at the spending review. I caught up with the Welsh Transport Minister, Ken Skates, a couple of weeks ago at the refurbishment launch of Cardiff station. I will be talking to him more about this in the coming weeks and will update my hon. Friend as soon as more information is available.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): As a Yorkshireman, I love a bargain, so I welcome the great British rail sale, but members of the Young Liberals have told me that they cannot use their railcards when purchasing rail sale tickets. Can the Minister justify a rail sale that excludes young people, and will she look to fix it?

Heidi Alexander: Millions and millions of people will benefit from this Government's rail sale, which is running this week. That is in addition to the over 1 billion journeys that will be captured by the fares freeze, which we have introduced for the first time in 30 years after relentless fare hikes under the previous Government.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): As temperatures have plummeted across the country this week, road conditions have deteriorated. Sadly, the Conservative council in Dudley removed 500 grit bins before the winter, creating dangerous conditions for all and making day-to-day errands simply impossible. Will my hon. Friend work with me to hold Dudley council to account and ensure that Dudley's roads are safe all year round?

Simon Lightwood: I will indeed. It is for local highway authorities to determine the most appropriate measures to achieve the gritting of roads based on local circumstances. We continue to offer support by maintaining a national emergency salt reserve.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for wheelchair users, I warmly welcome the Department's announcement this week that it is consulting on its review of the law on

powered mobility devices. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are now consulting on changing the current maximum weight limit for powered mobility devices? Currently, those with the heaviest wheelchairs break the law when they use their devices on the pavement.

Simon Lightwood: Certainly. The 40-year-old laws on powered mobility devices will be brought up to date to better support those who use electric wheelchairs and mobility scooters. I can confirm that weight limits form part of the consultation, along with size, speed and usage rules, to better reflect modern technology.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Many constituents tell me how fed up they are with the long waiting times for driving tests. By the time they secure a practical test, their theory certificate has expired, forcing them to pay again. What steps will the Minister take to help people who cannot afford to pay for another test?

Simon Lightwood: By law, theory tests certificates are valid for two years, for road safety reasons, to ensure that road safety knowledge and hazard perception skills are up to date when the individual takes their practical test. The Government have no plans to change that. My focus remains on driving down test waiting times once and for all, so that we are never in this situation.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I am delighted to inform the Secretary of State that the long-awaited footbridge with lifts has finally been installed at Stowmarket station and is due to be commissioned very soon—

Mr Speaker: But!

Peter Prinsley: But indeed. *[Laughter.]* There remain several hazardous crossings on the busy east-west line between Ipswich and Cambridge, including at Thurston, where pedestrians are obliged to walk across the track. Does the Secretary of State agree that we must support all initiatives to improve the safety of such crossings?

Heidi Alexander: I do agree. I am pleased to hear that progress has been made in one location, but our ambition to improve safety in and around the rail network does not stop there.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Sixty-six years ago this week, the last regular passenger train called at Middlewich railway station, drawing to a close 92 years of passenger rail travel from the town. A number of students from Middlewich high school have written to me to ask whether the Government would consider reopening the station, and Enterprise Cheshire and Warrington undertook considerable work under the Restoring Your Railway scheme. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the merits of bringing back railway services to the largest town in Cheshire without a station, and restore that vital connection to Manchester, Crewe and beyond?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. How can I resist the invitation to do so when he has been contacted by the next generation about the importance of improving our rail network? I look forward to our discussion.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Consider this a pincer movement from South Norfolk to talk about Wymondham railway station and Access for All. I have already had a productive meeting with the Minister for Rail this week. Will the Secretary of State help me to bang some heads together with Network Rail to ensure that we shorten the sidings so that Wyndham station can provide easy access for all?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has spoken to me and the Minister for Rail about Wymondham accessibility issues. I thank him for his hugely pragmatic and practical approach to working out how we can fund an affordable scheme there. I will say more about the Access for All programme in the coming weeks, and I will be sure to stay in touch with him on that particular issue.

Business of the House

10.43 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 12 January includes:

MONDAY 12 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House of the Finance (No. 2) Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 13 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House of the Finance (No. 2) Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 14 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

THURSDAY 15 JANUARY—General debate on new towns, followed by a general debate on financial support for small businesses and individuals during the covid-19 pandemic. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 January includes:

MONDAY 19 JANUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Sentencing Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Holocaust Memorial Bill.

TUESDAY 20 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 (Remedial) Order 2025.

John Lamont: Mr Speaker, may I begin by wishing you, the Leader of the House, right hon. and hon. Members and all staff of the House a very happy new year? I appreciate that the Leader of the House may still be recovering from the excesses of the festive season, so I will try not to add unduly to his discomfort, but I will start with a simple request: will he give a clear commitment that the Government will stop making significant policy announcements when Parliament is not sitting?

I know that you take this issue very seriously, Mr Speaker, but we had another significant announcement made not to Parliament but to the media. While Conservative Members welcome the partial U-turn of the vindictive and cruel family farm tax, it was utterly wrong for the Government to sneak out such a major policy shift just a few days before Christmas, when the House was not sitting and Members could not properly scrutinise Ministers about their change of course.

We then saw Labour Members rush to social media to claim that they had

“always thought it was the wrong policy”,

and had been

“working hard behind the scenes”

to persuade Ministers to change it. I have to say to the House that that will simply not wash with farmers. Farmers are not daft. They will remember right hon. and hon. Members on the Labour Benches trooping

through the Lobby to vote down Conservative attempts to stop the dreadful family farm tax. They will remember Labour MPs clapping like seals from the Back Benches every time the Prime Minister insisted that the tax was the right thing to do.

There was, however, one exception: the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours). He did the right thing. He knows the difference between right and wrong. He stood up for farmers and businesses in his constituency and voted against this disastrous policy because he knew that Labour had promised before the election not to introduce such a tax, and he knew that that pledge had been broken. Now that events have proved him correct, when will the Whip be restored to him? If the Government now accept that the policy was wrong, will they accept that punishing those who opposed it was wrong, too?

The turn of the year is traditionally a time for reflection and resolution. Before Christmas, the Leader of the House informed us that he does not make new year's resolutions—may I ask him please to think again?

In truth, 2025 was a year defined by U-turns. What will the Leader of the House do to ensure that the Government are better led, more stable and more honest with the public in the year ahead? In 2025, we had U-turns on: inheritance tax on farmers and small businesses; a statutory inquiry into grooming gangs; winter fuel payments; the two-child benefit cap; income tax; welfare reform, national insurance; and compensation for WASPI women. The Prime Minister warmly welcomed el-Fattah back to Britain only to claim that he regrets it. The Deputy Prime Minister forced to resign over her tax affairs. The US ambassador Peter Mandelson was sacked for his links to a notorious paedophile, and the Homelessness Minister quit after making her tenants homeless.

On issue after issue, the Government have lurched from announcement to reversal, creating uncertainty for families, for businesses and for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. With all that chaos and uncertainty at the very top of Government, does the Leader of the House believe that the Prime Minister will still be in his job this time next year? If the Prime Minister's beloved Arsenal stay top of the table and win the league this year, will he be enjoying that as Prime Minister or as a punter?

There has been speculation that His Royal Highness the King will open the new Session of Parliament on 12 May. Can the Leader of the House confirm that and when Parliament will prorogue?

Finally, the pub and hospitality sector face a bleak “dry” January, but this winter is particularly bad because of the policy decisions taken by this Labour Government to hike their taxes. Hundreds of pubs, restaurants and hotels across the country have now banned Labour MPs from their premises. One publican said:

“Everyone is fed up because the Labour government hasn't listened and instead has taxed us more.”

Why do the Labour Government not understand the important role that local pubs and hotels play in our economy?

The country is ready to call time on the Prime Minister. It is last orders for his Labour Government. After just 18 months in power, the Prime Minister's leadership is stale. He is like a flat pint—even the regulars have had enough. Will the Leader of the House commit to make

representations to the Chancellor to lessen the tax burden on this industry, and will he tell us if he has been banned from his local pub?

Sir Alan Campbell: I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everyone across the House a happy new year. I congratulate parliamentarians past and present who were recognised in the new year's honours. It is right and proper that people who make an exemplary contribution to public service are recognised, like so many others across our country.

I was saddened to hear about the passing of Sir Patrick Duffy at the age of 105. He was a committed Member of Parliament for Colne Valley between 1963 and 1966 and then for Sheffield Attercliffe between 1970 and 1992, and he served as Minister for the Navy. He is the longest-lived MP in British history, and I send my condolences to his friends and family.

I must say that it is a shame that the shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is not here today. I understand that he has been described in *Tatler* as “the last upper-class” Tory MP and the “truest renaissance man in parliament”. He does always bring some class to our proceedings, but I am delighted to be responding to his more than capable deputy today.

This week the Government have published the road safety strategy. The strategy makes our roads safer and will cut road deaths by 65% by 2035. We will save thousands of lives on our nation's roads and are taking decisive action to make our roads safer for everyone. We will tackle drink driving, improve training for young drivers and introduce mandatory eye tests for older motorists. This is another example of the Government responding to the concerns raised by Members across the House, including at Business questions, and the Transport Minister will say more in her statement later today.

But that is not all: thousands more free breakfast clubs will open in the coming months, 3,000 more neighbourhood police officers will be on our streets by March, almost 120 community diagnostic centres will be open seven days a week across the country by April as we bring down waiting lists and renew our NHS, and new rights for renters and workers will come into effect in the spring. That is why, after 14 years of decline and drift under the previous Government, our aim is that 2026 is the year of renewal, when it becomes real, visible and felt.

The shadow deputy Leader of the House asked about announcements. He knows my view, because he has quoted it back to me, that wherever possible announcements should be made in this House first, but the reality was we were very aware of the concern among the farming community. We have listened to the farming community, and at the earliest opportunity we wanted to inform them of our plans. I have to say, contrary to the impression he has given today, that the announcement has been warmly welcomed by farmers. We will have an opportunity to debate this matter more fully because I have just announced that we will debate the Finance (No. 2) Bill shortly. On whipping, I am delighted to say that whipping is a matter for the Chief Whip, no longer for me.

In terms of Government being better led and more stable, it is not in our gift alone to decide that, because that was decided by the country at the last general

election, when they were very clear that they voted for a stable, well-led Government, and that is what we are delivering. We have said that the King's Speech will be in spring 2026. That will obviously depend somewhat on the progress of business.

Finally, the hon. Member raised the issue of hospitality. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that we are listening and actively looking at further measures to help the hospitality industry and pubs, whether they are in rural or urban areas. But we are not going to take any lessons from the Conservatives, because a record number of pub closed during their 14 years, and they did nothing to help the situation, which is why we have a job to do, and we are getting on with it.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker. Delays in the court system mean that one of my constituents has been in prison on remand awaiting trial for over a year. She is in New Hall Prison, 200 miles away from her mother, who is disabled and cannot make that journey. She has requested a transfer to Bronzefield Prison, so her mother can visit. Today, Heba Muraisi is close to death because she has been on a hunger strike protest for 67 days. I plead with the Leader of the House to let common sense and humanity prevail, to urgently intervene to agree the transfer, and to consider allowing her release on bail to her family home in my constituency—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have to be very careful. You are getting into the details, and I cannot afford that. Have you finished?

Barry Gardiner: I respect your ruling, Mr Speaker. I will leave it at that.

Sir Alan Campbell: If my hon. Friend gives me the details of the case—I am talking about where the person concerned is currently—I will raise that with the Justice Secretary. On the wider point, we continually assess prisoners' wellbeing and will always take appropriate action, including taking prisoners to hospital if their situation requires that. If he raises the issue with me, I will not only draw it to the attention of the Justice Secretary but make sure he gets the assurances that he and the family need.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and everybody in the House. To respond briefly to something the shadow Deputy Leader of the House said: I sincerely hope that Arsenal do not win the league.

Over Christmas, some people have had the unfortunate experience of finding themselves in their local hospital, and they will have been met by a packed emergency department and possibly treated in the corridor. New statistics from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine this week show that over 1.5 million people had to wait longer than 12 hours in emergency departments last year, with over 16,000 excess deaths as a result of those long waits.

At my local hospital, St Helier, the situation is worse than the national average, with over 80%—the vast majority—of people remaining in the emergency department for

[Bobby Dean]

longer than is deemed medically necessary. This is, of course, down to a multitude of reasons, including the inadequacy of social care, bed capacity in hospitals, which we know is worse in the UK than in comparable economies, and the condition of the estate. The many delays in the new hospital programme mean that my local hospital is having to close wards and do repairs and maintenance, which is exacerbating the problem.

When corridor care first came up in my inbox, I was shocked by it. I understood how tragic the situation was and how undignified it was for patients and families, but I hoped it was a temporary, urgent measure that would resolve itself in time. That is not proving to be the case, so can the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the matter of corridor care and how we can hasten its end immediately?

Sir Alan Campbell: First, I pay tribute to the staff who are currently working across our NHS and who worked throughout the holiday period, in what is still a challenging situation, despite the progress that this Government are making. We are committed to investing in the NHS not just for today but for the future, to improve waiting times and access to care. Spending will increase by £29 billion in real terms by 2028-29. We are committed to cutting waiting lists, which have fallen for the first time in years, and we are investing £450 million in our urgent and emergency care plan.

The Secretary of State understands the scale of the challenge that we inherited and the challenge going forward. However, I will draw the hon. Gentleman's comments to his attention, because the Secretary of State is not short in coming forward to this House to update it about the challenges but also the progress we are making in the NHS.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Happy new year to you and to the House, Mr Speaker.

High street banks have left many towns high and dry, leaving whole communities and businesses without even basic banking facilities. The roll-out of banking hubs is welcome, but our ambition should be for every town to have a bank, including Chadderton and Royton, where postmasters at the post office are ready and willing to take on that challenge. May we have a debate in Government time on banking hubs, to explore that further?

Sir Alan Campbell: I appreciate the issue of high street banks, which has been raised with me on a number of occasions. The Government are making progress with the roll-out of 350 banking hubs, but we have been clear that that is not the end of our ambition and that we intend it to go further. This sort of issue resonates across the House, and should my hon. Friend seek an Adjournment debate on the matter, he may get from the Minister our further plans going forward.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

At this time of year, sadly we often have to report on deaths, including those of Martin Chivers and Terry Yorath. Indeed, Kevin Keegan is facing a fight against stomach cancer. I am sure the whole House will wish their families a long life, and Kevin Keegan a swift recovery.

In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, there will be a statement next Thursday from the Justice Committee on drugs in prison and what action needs to be taken. The Leader of the House did not announce whether the Backbench Business Committee will be getting time on 22 January, so we have not allocated any business for that day as yet. If we are given Thursday 29 January, there will be a full day's debate on Holocaust Memorial Day.

On Tuesday in Westminster Hall next week there will be a debate on a statutory duty of care for universities, and on Thursday a debate on the impact of food inflation on the cost of living, followed by a debate on the impact of gambling harms on children and young people. On Tuesday 20 January in Westminster Hall, there will be a debate on the role of the NHS in preventing homicides and domestic violence, and on Thursday 22 January a debate on transport connectivity in the midlands and north Wales, followed by a debate on the International Day of Education.

The whole House will be well aware of the outrageous crimes of David Carrick and Cliff Mitchell. This morning a report has been published about the Metropolitan police and the way it has recruited police officers and staff. Between 2018 and 2023, because of the need to recruit more police officers, normal vetting procedures were completely ignored and 5,073 individuals were recruited without vetting. Some 4,528 had no special branch approval, and 431 had no Ministry of Defence approval. Even more scandalously, 114 of those who were vetted and refused were allowed on appeal to join the Metropolitan police. The estimate is that 1,200 officers and staff who would have been refused were recruited to the Metropolitan police.

The vast majority of police officers—the overwhelming majority—do a brilliant job on our behalf and keep us safe. However, this is a clear scandal where vetting was not carried out, and it creates a crisis of confidence in the police. It also casts doubt on the police themselves, who want to see the bad apples removed and indeed prevented from coming into the police force in the first place. There is concern that this may have happened in other police forces across the country, so could we have a statement from the Home Secretary—I know she has condemned the position—about what action will be taken to prevent such things from happening?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join the hon. Gentleman in sending our condolences to the friends and family of Martin Chivers, and our best wishes to Kevin Keegan for what we hope will be a swift recovery.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work and the work of the Backbench Business Committee, and for updating the House on Backbench Business debates going forward. He is right that I did not announce the business for 22 January and I have listened to what he said. I will do everything that I can to ensure that we find time for the debate which I was disappointed was postponed on Monday, and we will see if we can accommodate that.

On the serious matter that he raised about Met police recruitment, the Home Secretary has launched an investigation into the Met's recruitment and vetting processes, which will be led by the police watchdog, His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services. Abandoning vetting checks on police officers was a dereliction of the Met's duty to keep London safe. The public rightly expect officers to undergo robust checks so that the brightest and best, not the criminals, are the ones policing our streets.

On updating the House on what action needs to be taken and whether the issue goes beyond the Metropolitan police, I am sure that when the Home Secretary has the findings of that investigation she will, of course, want to update the House.

Mr Speaker: The debate was postponed on Monday because of the number of urgent questions and because the Government decided to provide statements outside the normal time. I am sure that when the Opposition applied for those urgent questions, they thought that they were important, so I am only carrying out my job and ensuring that Back Benchers have their voices heard. Let us hear one now—I call Dawn Butler.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to all of the staff.

In common with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), I have a constituent who I would like to talk to the Leader of the House about. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee mentioned today's very worrying report about the Met police. In addition, the Met informed me last year that only half of its police are on the Met's DNA database, when that should be 100%. Can that be included in the investigation? As well as a statement, can we have a debate on this issue in Government time?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will ensure that the Home Secretary has heard my hon. Friend's remarks about the extent of the investigation and I will see whether her concerns can be addressed. As I have already said, once that investigation is concluded, I am sure that the Home Secretary will want to find time to update the House and, if necessary, have a debate on the subject.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to all of your staff in the Speaker's Office.

I would like the Leader of the House to know that I am very concerned to hear that several police and community support officers, who are currently under transport policing command in the Metropolitan police, are being forcefully redeployed to a private contractor within Transport for London. That has caused a tremendous amount of upset for those concerned, including one of my constituents whose only other option is to resign. Will the Leader of the House consider having a broader debate on the structure of the Metropolitan police and its relationship with outside, private organisations?

Sir Alan Campbell: Should those issues arise from the investigation that we have just been talking about, I am sure that there will be an opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to raise those concerns. However, the way

that resources are deployed is a matter for the Mayor of London and I am sure that he is doing everything that he can to ensure that officers are deployed where they are most needed. It is an unsettling time for the people who are in that situation, but deployment is fundamentally a matter for the Mayor of London.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): A happy new year to you, Mr Speaker.

In this new year, I am looking forward to seeing how the policies that this Government have delivered in their first 18 months have a real impact on the day-to-day lives of people in Rossendale and Darwen. Despite much-needed investment, including from the Pride in Place programme, Rossendale remains the only borough in the north with no commuter rail link. The fragmented nature of Lancashire politics has held that back for years, but the local government reorganisation that this Government are delivering now finally gives us the chance to give this project a fresh start. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how devolution can enable projects, such as the Rawtenstall rail link, to deliver vital transport to local areas?

Sir Alan Campbell: The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will deliver on the Government's commitment to widen and deepen devolution across England and give communities stronger tools to shape their local areas. We are committed to delivering and improving the infrastructure that communities need, as outlined in our 10-year infrastructure strategy. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this matter at the upcoming Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government oral questions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Why not Mark Francois?

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Can we have an urgent debate on the need to proceed with the local elections in May? In July 1945 we held a general election, even though we were still involved in fighting the second world war in the far east. If we can have a general election in wartime, why can we not have local elections in peacetime four months from today, including in Labour-led Basildon, Southend and Thurrock? What is Labour frightened of—other than losing, of course?

Hon. Members: Not you!

Sir Alan Campbell: As my hon. Friends are saying, it is certainly not the Conservative party. We have made absolutely clear our reasons for this decision; more time is needed in some areas to reorganise local government. Many of these requests come not from Government, but from local areas themselves.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): A happy new year to you and your staff, Mr Speaker.

Like many Members across this House, I receive regular alerts from the Environment Agency warning of potential flooding in my constituency. Every time the phone rings, I get the feeling of dread that this will be the time when my town floods. Every time the alert is

[*Jess Asato*]

downgraded, my constituents and I breathe a sigh of relief, as happened most recently on Monday. A major flooding event is expected every 20 years in Lowestoft, which is the only UK coastal town with no formal tidal flood defences. I know the devastation that a flood would bring, like the last time in 2013, when 152 homes and businesses were flooded. Will the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on coastal flooding?

Sir Alan Campbell: We are committed to supporting coastal communities and ensuring that coastal risk management is fit for the challenges we face now and going forward. We are making a record £10.5 billion investment in delivering the largest flood and coastal investment programme in history, but I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a debate on this matter, as a number of MPs will also be concerned. If she wishes to meet with the Minister responsible to discuss this matter, I will help her to arrange that.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): This past week, we have all been speaking about the need to respect the rule of international law, yet transnational repression in which authoritarian regimes extend their jurisdiction beyond their borders and powers is worryingly present on UK soil. My constituent Shahzad Akbar, who is a former human rights lawyer, cabinet Minister and political dissident from Pakistan, has faced repeated and violent attacks against him and efforts to intimidate him. He has suffered an acid attack in his home in front of his four-year-old daughter. Just on Christmas eve, he had a physical assault against him, resulting in a broken nose and jaw, which again happened in front of his young family. Just before new year's eve, he had a terrifying arson attack on his home. I have made the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary aware of those attacks, but does the Leader of the House agree that that cannot be allowed on British soil? Further measures are needed to protect political dissidents here in our country, and a debate on transnational repression and the Government's measures to combat it is in the interests of democracy and this House.

Sir Alan Campbell: If the hon. Lady gives me further details on that case, I will ensure that it is raised with the appropriate Department to see what else can be done to assist. The Government believe that political matters or faith matters, even though we may disagree with them, should never mean that people are threatened or attacked. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office raises these concerns regularly where necessary with countries and Governments across the world. I will ensure that she gets a response if she lets me have the details.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): During Parliament Week last year, I had the absolute privilege of going along to Seaton Delaval first school and meeting the year 3 and year 4 classes to receive a grilling—it has to be said. They asked some excellent questions. Since then, the pupils have got in touch to raise a range of issues, including the environment, vaping, schools, the NHS and social media and its impact on young people. Especially as the Leader of the House is a former teacher, does he agree how important

it is that we ensure young people have a stake in our politics and feel that their voices are heard when we discuss these important issues?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to the staff and pupils at Seaton Delaval first school for their hard work, and thank my hon. Friend for her question. It is important that young people are at the heart of decisions that affect their lives; that is why we recently published the national youth strategy, and it is why we are committed to extending the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds, but also to making sure that they are equipped with knowledge about how voting works and about their role as voters. My hon. Friend may wish to attend Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government questions on 12 January to learn more about our work to ensure that young people are equipped and empowered to participate in democracy.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): When we lost our police station in Aldridge, we were told that the choice was between bobbies and bricks. Now, under Labour's police and crime commissioner, there is a £41 million funding gap, which means that there will be 80 fewer officers on our streets next year. Can the Leader of the House explain how cutting police numbers in my constituency delivers Labour's promise to get more police into our communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: We are committed to increasing the number of police officers; the situation we were left at the time of the last election was a disgrace. We are committed to a neighbourhood policing guarantee, and are putting 13,000 more officers into neighbourhood policing roles, which is a 50% increase. As for choosing between police stations and bobbies on the beat, it is up to police and crime commissioners to make a choice about where their resources can best be deployed.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As you know, Mr Speaker, we had a good discussion at Transport questions about bus services. Many Members from across this House are passionate about that issue, because bus services are such an easy way for people to get around, and they make transport accessible, financially and otherwise. In London, bus ridership has dropped by 23%; there are a number of issues, but I am particularly concerned about the 38 bus route. Consultation is under way on curtailing that route, so that it only goes as far as Holborn in the Prime Minister's constituency. That might be good for him, but we all want to go as far as Victoria and theatreland. A number of MPs from across the House are concerned about this. Is it not time for a debate in Government time about the great stuff that the Government are doing on buses, so that Transport Ministers can learn from MPs across the country, and so that we share best practice and learn from each other?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a great champion for the part of London that she represents. She is absolutely right to raise concerns on behalf of her constituents about the No. 38 bus route. Those concerns will be shared by a number of colleagues, and I invite her to pursue an Adjournment debate to get reassurance, or certainly to inform Ministers about those concerns, and to see what can be done about the situation.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): While Reform UK welcomed the Foreign Secretary's update to the House on Monday regarding el-Fattah, will the Government give consideration to allocating time for debate on my presentation Bill, introduced yesterday, which addresses the national security risk posed by individuals who are convicted abroad of national security offences? If not, will the Home Secretary at least make a statement to the House on her assessment of the threat posed by this individual, and on whether the Government intend to deprive him of his British citizenship and deport him?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am aware that the hon. Lady has raised this matter. We will study carefully what her Bill says, but the Home Secretary has been clear about how strong the Government's stance is on these matters. I will raise this matter with the Home Secretary after this session of business questions, and will ensure that the hon. Lady gets an answer.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Constituents in the upper Rhymney valley face unacceptably high petrol prices. When I wrote to the Competition and Markets Authority about that, it referred to a forthcoming fuel finder scheme; however, that scheme has no confirmed launch date. I get that this is complicated, but will the Leader of the House please encourage Ministers to provide a statement on when that scheme will be delivered, in order to improve consumer information across the UK?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter, because the Government made it clear before the Christmas recess that we intend to introduce a fuel finder scheme. It happens in other countries, and it can happen in this country. I am not sure of the date of introduction, but I will arrange for my hon. Friend to have a meeting with the relevant Minister, so that he can express his concerns and perhaps find out from Ministers what the timescale is.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Twelve out of the 15 constituencies in Lancashire benefited from the Pride in Place scheme, I believe, but people may not be surprised to learn that Fylde, the only Conservative constituency in Lancashire, was not on the list. We will not let that deter us, however, because we have pride in our place and ambitions for it, whether that be the pier link, the Island site in St Annes, the public realm improvements we want to make in Lytham and Poulton, or reopening the derelict Kirkham baths. Can we have a statement from the Government about how those areas that have been left behind and are not in the Pride in Place scheme can attract investment to continue to improve their towns and villages?

Sir Alan Campbell: Improvement in local areas is not dependent on the Pride in Place scheme, but will be significantly helped by it. I am not entirely surprised that not that many Conservative constituencies or authorities are in the scheme, because there are not many of them left after the general election. The hon. Gentleman is doing exactly the right thing: he is raising concerns on behalf of his constituents about how best they can improve their area. My advice to him is that if he wants to hear from Ministers about our ambitions

for every area—we are ambitious for every area—he should seek an Adjournment debate, make his points there, and see what the Minister has to say.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): My constituents, like those of many Members across the House, have been horrified by the wreckage we have seen in Gaza. While there has been a ceasefire, there is still violence, and aid is struggling to get in. I thank my constituents who have raised the issue with me, and I thank Members for raising this issue, too. Can the Leader of the House assure me that this Government will do everything we can to help rebuild Gaza and ensure that aid goes in?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for continuing to raise this crucial matter. It is essential that all parties build on the foundations of the peace plan, so that we can move along a sustainable path to long-term peace. We will play a leading role in accelerating Gaza's reconstruction. This financial year, we are providing £116 million for humanitarian and other aid, including healthcare, food, clean water and sanitation. The Government continue to keep this area at the forefront of our mind. We want to ensure a better future for the people of that area.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The village of East Halton in my constituency is partly cut off at the moment because of a sinking road. Natural England is refusing permission for the local authority to move in and carry out the work because of badgers in the area. This is causing complete chaos, and tractors and heavy goods vehicles are having to use country lanes. That highlights yet again that Natural England and other agencies have the power to overrule democratically elected authorities that want to carry out work on behalf of local residents. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on the powers that these agencies have, and how we can return some of those powers to elected authorities?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are looking across planning to ensure a balance between the natural world, which people are very concerned about, and development, or in this case improvement or repair. We want perhaps more of a balance than there has been in the past. I will draw this matter to the attention of the appropriate Minister, so that they can set out for the hon. Gentleman our plans to ensure that organisations such as Natural England have proportionate influence.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Access to a local GP is vital for every community, and residents in Shenstone and Stonnall are rightly concerned about a consultation that proposes reducing services at Westgate surgery from five days a week to three. That raises concerns about the long-term future of the practice, and risks forcing patients to travel 4 miles to Lichfield to access the services they need. Can we have time in this House to debate rural healthcare services and GP access?

Sir Alan Campbell: We absolutely recognise the challenges faced by rural areas, which is why we are increasing capacity in general practices by recruiting more GPs

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

and ensuring that the necessary workforce are in place. However, my hon. Friend may wish to raise this issue directly with Ministers at Health questions on 13 January.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Cancer patients are suffering due to variations in cancer care across the country. In particular, clinical nurse specialists—a key part of cancer care—are stretched very thinly and are unable to meet patients' needs in many regions. A Breast Cancer Now survey found that a quarter of respondents had not seen a clinical nurse specialist since their diagnosis. Can we have a debate in Government time on how best to tackle variation in cancer care, and particularly the problems in accessing clinical nurse specialists?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important matter. The NHS plan, and the investment that we are putting in, will not just address the issue of where in the NHS people are, but ensure that there are more of them. Let me gently say to him—this also applies to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean)—that we all support the ends, in that we want more specialists, in cancer care and in everything else, but we also have to support the means. That means voting to put in the money, when it comes to Budgets. The Liberal Democrats cannot have it both ways.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Back Benchers in this House strengthen the hand of Ministers in tackling injustice, as was shown when the Housing Minister called in the managing director of FirstPort in real time during a debate. Labour Members are holding an informal inquiry into such issues, which are really important. A constituent of mine has seen his FirstPort service charge nearly quadruple in two years. Can there be a debate on the issue in Government time, so that Back Benchers can shine a cleansing light on the malpractice of such companies?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise those concerns on behalf of his constituents, and they will be echoed by a number of colleagues from across the House. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that those living in the leasehold sector are protected from abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents, and we will strengthen regulation of managing agents to drive up the standards of their service. We will publish the draft leasehold and commonhold reform Bill as soon as possible, and alongside that, there will be the opportunity for debate.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Hawarth village hall is a vital community asset in the centre of the Worth valley in my constituency, but it is in desperate need of repair, upgrade and maintenance. Under the last Conservative Government, over £1 million was allocated to this project back in 2021, but since then, the money has sat with Labour-run Bradford council and remains unspent, while the asset deteriorates. Can we have a debate in Government time on making sure that money that is allocated is spent in a reasonable time, so that assets do not continue to deteriorate?

Sir Alan Campbell: If the hon. Gentleman gives me details of the case, I will make sure that the matter is taken up with the appropriate Ministers. Although these

issues are to be decided locally, this is public money, so if Ministers can do anything to help resolve the situation, that would be appropriate.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Happy new year to you and your staff, Mr Speaker.

I have some pleasing news: knife attacks in Lewisham have reduced by 23% over the last year, which is to be celebrated. I thank the council, the police, our Mayor of London and all the local community organisations that have helped to achieve this and to bring more peace to our streets. However, you will probably remember, Mr Speaker, that last year, there were two deaths due to knife crime in my constituency. Any knife crime, and of course any fatality, is awful news that nobody wants to hear. Can we have a Government statement on progress since the announcement on the coalition to tackle knife crime in September 2024, and on the knife crime action plan promised in the Labour manifesto?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking everyone involved in this initiative. There is a long way to go, but important progress is being made. Tackling knife crime is a top priority for this Government, although there are still too many cases. Knife crime overall has fallen for the first time in four years, but there is a great deal more to do. The coalition to tackle knife crime has helped to shape key policies, including the ninja sword ban and the online sales review. However, I will draw her remarks to the attention of Home Office Ministers. We are bringing forward further measures in the Crime and Policing Bill to strengthen legislation on knives.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I join the Leader of the House in recognising people who were awarded honours in the new year's list, including those who live and work in Harrogate and Knaresborough such as Simon Roberts, Jane Bayliss, Professor Piers Forster, Miriam and Terence Wilcox, and Master Ali, who was awarded an MBE for services to taekwondo. I have had the pleasure of attending some taekwondo sessions, but fortunately not of participating in them, and I was a guest at one of the contests held locally last year. Martial arts and taekwondo in particular play an important role in health, wellbeing, discipline and providing an opportunity for young people. Will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Minister for further support and promotion of martial arts?

Sir Alan Campbell: Local sport plays such an important part in our local communities, and the many volunteers who get involved literally change people's lives for the better. The hon. Member is right to pay tribute to those involved and to draw to our attention the fact that many of them have quite rightly received an award. I will draw his remarks to the attention of the relevant Minister and see what more we can do, but the Government are ambitious in this regard.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Every year since 2021, the residents of Wrenbury Drive in Rochdale have turned their street into a spectacular display of Christmas lights—a real winter wonderland—all in aid of our brilliant local hospice, Springhill hospice. This year, they have raised more than £6,000, as families of all backgrounds came to marvel at what is really Rochdale's

own Blackpool illuminations. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Maria Brierley and all other Rochdaliens who make this such a fantastic event in our Christmas calendar?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Maria Brierley and everyone involved in making Rochdale's Christmas celebrations a success and in raising a significant and very welcome amount for charity. I also thank him for raising this matter. He is such a diligent and hard-working MP, who always has the interests of his constituents at the forefront of his mind, and I thank him for that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for the opportunity to ask an important question, and this week I would like to turn our attention to Nicaragua. The country has witnessed a recent severe escalation in human rights violations and religious persecution. The Nicaraguan Government have banned the Bible—the very Bible we start our business with in this Chamber each and every day—at border crossings as part of a broader crackdown on the Catholic Church that has been ongoing since 2019. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary what steps the Government will take to raise these violations with the Nicaraguan authorities, and to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is upheld?

Sir Alan Campbell: First, I wish the hon. Gentleman a happy new year, and I thank him for raising such an important question, as he always does. We do share his concern about the suppression of human rights in Nicaragua and elsewhere, including in relation to freedom of religion or belief. I will raise that with Ministers, as he asks, but he may also wish to raise it directly at Foreign Office oral questions on 20 January.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I recently met the Morley Indian community, who raised concerns with me about the proposed changes to the indefinite leave to remain rules. Many of these people are highly skilled and highly qualified, work in key sectors and claim no benefits, but they are seriously worried that their families will not qualify for ILR under the new rules, despite they themselves meeting the new higher eligibility requirements. I want to recognise that this community have enriched life in Leeds South West and Morley, and make a significant contribution to the UK. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the urgent need to clarify the new ILR rules for those that work hard and make a significant contribution to our country?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the contribution of the Indian community in his constituency, but also across our country. The changes we are making are about tightening the rules for future claimants, not a retrospective policy that would risk harming families who have made their lives here and have made such an important contribution. He may wish to raise his concerns directly with a Minister in the Westminster Hall debate on indefinite leave to remain on 2 February.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): In towns such as Dudley, bus routes are the lifeblood of the community. That is why I was disappointed when part of the 215 bus service

serving Sledmere was going to be scrapped and residents were, rightly, upset. I am delighted that that decision has been overturned after lobbying Transport for West Midlands and I thank it for its change of direction. Will my right hon. Friend welcome that reinstatement and grant time for a debate on the importance of protecting bus routes where other forms of transport are not available?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly will join my hon. Friend. I congratulate her on lobbying for the bus service to be reinstated, which I understand from what she has said has happened. We need to congratulate her and everyone else who campaigned for that. The Government believe bus services are vital to local communities. I invite her to seek an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate on bus services, where colleagues would be able to join her in appreciating the importance of those services and hear directly from Ministers.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Evri are the worst. My constituents faced misery over Christmas, with no customer service. In fact, customer service was provided only in the form of chatbots. I recently received a woeful reply after writing to Evri's CEO. There are many excellent couriers, including Rodrigo, Martin and Tony in Bournemouth, and I thank them, but they are being let down by Evri. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when private parcel operators deliver appalling customer service without minimum standards, it is workers and customers who suffer, left shouting into the void? Can he advise me on how I can secure meaningful redress for my Bournemouth East constituents?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thought for a moment that my hon. Friend had been talking to my wife about the success or otherwise of Evri. The delivery practices exposed in a recent "Panorama" programme are simply unacceptable. The Government expect all parcel operators to meet their service requirements, protect customers and support retailers at the busiest time of the year. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to shine a light on this. I hope colleagues will continue to do so until Evri, or any other operator, improves its performance.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): For years, solicitor Andrew Milne has been bullying, threatening and harassing leaseholders, including my Horwich constituents, into buying freeholds off him at massively inflated prices—sometimes as much as £25,000—yet the Solicitors Regulation Authority has done nothing to stop his outrageous behaviour, which has caused immeasurable pain and suffering to my constituents. Homeowners in Bolton West should not have to live in fear of being ripped off by crooked lawyers, so will the Leader of the House set aside Government time for a debate on the lack of action by the Solicitors Regulation Authority in cracking down on lawyers like Milne, who continue to act with impunity?

Sir Alan Campbell: This sounds like a concerning case and I am sure the whole House will join me in condemning the behaviour my hon. Friend describes. The Solicitors Regulation Authority is an independent regulator, however the Minister for Courts and Legal Services is writing to it to seek an update and assurance about what action is being taken or what action it intends to take. I will ensure that he is updated on that.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): A happy new year to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. At community meetings in Victoria, I hear from my constituents who see open drug dealing on the streets and experience aggressive harassment, but there is hope in the work that Westminster city council is doing to invest in its staff so that they can work collaboratively with the police and other local community organisations to tackle this issue head-on. Will the Leader of the House support me in my request for the Minister for Policing and Crime to join me on the streets to see some of their good work and to ensure that it continues with additional investment in neighbourhood policing going forward, so that we can keep Victoria safe?

Sir Alan Campbell: As my hon. Friend will know, we are recruiting 13,000 new police officers into neighbourhood policing roles to tackle issues and concerns such as the ones she describes. I will ensure that she gets a meeting with the relevant Minister in the Home Office, so she can make her case and give that invitation to join her herself.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): In 2020, my constituents Christine and Francis Saunders experienced the worst loss any parent can endure when their daughter, Juliet, died at only 25 years old after signs of bowel perforations were dismissed. Juliet's death was avoidable; had she received timely treatment, she would have had an 80% chance of survival. Juliet lived with Cornelia de Lange syndrome—a condition that causes learning disabilities and physical health complications—and her tragic death is not isolated. Many people with learning disabilities are routinely failed by healthcare services, and they are more than three times as likely to die prematurely from treatable causes. Will the Leader of the House make time for the Minister responsible to make an urgent statement on the steps the Government are taking to ensure that the concerns of patients with learning disabilities are treated seriously, so that no one else suffers in the way Juliet did?

Sir Alan Campbell: I want to first extend my deepest sympathies to Christine and Francis, because every avoidable death is a tragedy. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this serious matter and will ensure he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to make his case further and hear from Ministers about what further action is planned to address these concerns.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I can see Members reviewing their questions; please keep them short.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming today's announcement by the Secretary of State for Scotland of £140 million of local growth funding for Scotland, including £60.9 million for the Glasgow city region? Does he agree that this funding, together with the record Budget settlement for the Scottish Government, demonstrates that Scotland really is at the heart of this Labour Government?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in welcoming that investment. As she rightly points out, we provided the biggest funding settlement

for the Scottish Government since devolution began, proving that Scotland truly is at the heart of this Labour Government. Our mission is to improve living standards for working people, and the local growth fund is one way we are achieving that for every part of the United Kingdom.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Every parking fine from rip-off private operators hurts drivers and our city centres, and Derby is no exception. Last October, Jumpin Fun play centre closed its doors for good because families could not trust that they would be treated fairly at the nearby Copeland Street car park. I welcome the Government's recent consultation on fairer parking rules, but will my right hon. Friend encourage a timely response to the consultation so that we can put an end to the rip-off private operator parking industry?

Sir Alan Campbell: As my hon. Friend mentions, we are cracking down on unjust private parking charges through a new, stronger private parking code of practice. I will ensure that he receives an update on the timing of the response.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): On Monday, a terrible fire took the life of an elderly resident in Guisborough in my constituency; my thoughts are with her family and loved ones. This is one of three serious fires in my constituency in recent weeks. Cleveland firefighters have raised with me concerns about the funding formula for fire brigades, as they believe that deprivation such as exists in our region ought to be taken into account, as happens with the funding formulas for local government and the NHS. Will the Government look at this matter to ensure that our brave firefighters are given the resources they need to tackle blazes like this one?

Sir Alan Campbell: First, I want to extend my deepest sympathies to everyone involved in these horrific events and thank the emergency services for their response. Following the fair funding review consultation, our reforms will ensure that funding is allocated to local authorities and fire and rescue authorities taking into account the different needs of communities across the country. My hon. Friend may wish to attend oral questions to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on 12 January to ask Ministers further about this vital work.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): People living in Goldenhill and Sandyford have an absolutely brilliant residents association led by the remarkable Tom Simpson. I recently visited a Tesco Express store alongside them to hear from staff who were concerned about having to deal with regular shoplifting. Does the Leader of the House agree that while we have taken big steps forward as a Government, we have lots more to do and we must continue to do all that we can to protect and support our retail workers?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, which is why we are taking the steps we are taking and looking at what further measures we can take. Through the Crime and Policing Bill, we will end the effective immunity granted to those who shoplift goods worth less than £200. We are also supporting a specialist analysis team to crack down on organised gangs that target retailers.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I recently visited Derby athletic club and met volunteers including Ernie, who is 100 years old and has been volunteering for more than 70 years. I know that Ernie doesn't like a fuss, but will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Ernie for his incredible commitment, and will he consider how we might best celebrate the work of volunteers in grassroots sport across the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is doing just that by raising the work of volunteers, as often happens during business questions. She highlights the fantastic contribution made by people like Ernie—70 years of volunteering is very impressive indeed. Grassroots sport is at the very heart of our local communities, which is why we are investing £400 million in grassroots sport facilities, but they depend on people to make them work. Not only are those people at the heart of our local communities, but they change people's lives for the better. I absolutely join her in thanking Ernie and all other volunteers.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. For decades, remote coastal areas such as Cornwall have seen education funding inexplicably lag well behind urban areas. Under this Labour Government, the particular challenges and costs associated with delivering services in deprived remote coastal areas have begun to be recognised in some Government funding models, but not all. Will the Leader of the House help me secure a meeting with the Secretary of State for Education to discuss funding for Cornish schools?

Sir Alan Campbell: I was pleased to have a meeting with my hon. Friend earlier this week. He once again demonstrates that he is a champion for Cornwall. I am pleased to record that there is some success in the campaigning that has been done by our fantastic MPs in that part of the country. I will be happy to facilitate the meeting that he requests.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker, and happy new year to you and your office.

This year provides an opportunity to secure our vital local and national infrastructure, so I ask the Leader of the House for Government time to be allocated to discuss the impact on local residents and businesses of the Tamar bridge and Torpoint ferry tolls, including the recent proposal to increase the monthly admin fee for TamarTag holders. It has resulted in an extraordinary meeting of those responsible for the crossings to be held next week, following opposition from myself, fellow Labour MPs and other local residents.

Sir Alan Campbell: I was pleased to have a meeting with my hon. Friend this week, during which she raised this matter with me and stressed the importance of the Tamar crossings to the communities she serves. The toll levels were set by the operator and the council, and it is for them to assess the impacts for local residents and businesses. Should she apply for a Westminster Hall debate on Tamar bridge, I am sure that it would be well attended and she could highlight her concerns.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): The legendary Jock Stein famously once said that football without fans is nothing, and of course he was absolutely

correct. I invite the Leader of the House to join me in recognising the fantastic Alloa Athletic football memories group, led by John Glencross, which meets up regularly to talk about all things football. The meetings support people living with dementia and some who are experiencing loneliness and social isolation. It is an example of great camaraderie, friendship and community spirit.

Sir Alan Campbell: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking the Alloa Athletic memories group for all the work it does. I was reflecting the other day on how that part of the world has produced not only so many fantastic footballers, but players who go on to be fantastic managers, so I am sure the group has a lot to talk about.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): My constituents in Glossop and the surrounding areas are up in arms at the news that Reform-run Derbyshire county council is proposing to close their local tip. Reform does not seem to understand or care that that would force residents to take an hour-long trip to the nearest tip in Buxton, making disposal of household waste almost impossible for many. It will increase the risk of fly-tipping and litter across my constituency. Will the Leader of the House allow Government time for a debate on the importance of having accessible recycling centres and maintaining vital local services?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing his concerns to the Floor of the House, which he is right to do. Fly-tipping is a serious crime that blights communities. Local authorities are responsible for keeping public land clear of litter and refuse, so it is hugely disappointing to hear of what is happening in that part of the country. I join my hon. Friend in urging the Reform-led council to take its responsibilities seriously, use the powers it has and, most of all, listen to the residents it is meant to serve.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Guru Nanak gurdwara in West Brom recently suffered a horrible incident of anti-Sikh hate. An unidentified vandal ran past and dumped a bag of meat on the doorstep. As many Sikhs are vegetarian, that is obviously a horrible, offensive incident. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate about how we reject that type of hate, how we protect our places of worship, and how we celebrate the contribution of Sikhs and all faith communities in our areas?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these matters, and I am sorry to hear of the case she raises. Everyone should feel safe in their communities, irrespective of their race, religion or belief. This year we are investing almost £71 million to strengthen security at places of worship and other community sites, and we brought forward new legislation through the Crime and Policing Bill to address protest outside places of worship.

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Lowdham Flood Action Group, led by the formidable Peter Cross, and groups in other villages in my constituency, including Epperstone, are working hard to protect their community from flooding. At a

[Michelle Welsh]

meeting with Ministers in Lowdham, we heard concerns about liability when it comes to local flood groups taking action to protect homes. Reform-led Nottinghamshire county council is currently standing in the way of essential flood prevention in Lowdham due to perceived potential litigation. May we have a debate on what support the Government can give to such local flood groups, so that people can protect their local communities? It seems utterly ridiculous that local government red tape is allowed to put homes at risk.

Sir Alan Campbell: If my hon. Friend raises her concerns in detail, I will ensure that they are passed on to Ministers. I am also happy to facilitate a further meeting with the relevant Minister to follow up on any visit that might have taken place. Let me re-emphasise what I said a moment ago: Reform-led councils have a responsibility to their local residents. It is their job, as locally elected representatives, to do their very best to address those concerns, not to get in the way.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Before Christmas, I attended Burton addiction centre's inspirational celebration of recovery. There, we celebrated hundreds of people who are in recovery—people who had overcome huge battles with addiction to rebuild their lives. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all those who were there and the staff at the centre, and recognise the importance of residential rehab services?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Burton addiction centre on its work and, indeed, the vital addiction services across the country on their work too. This Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that anyone with addiction problems can access the help and support they need. The work in local areas is of such importance going forward.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Blackpool experiences homelessness rates that are higher than the national average, with a record number of rough sleepers recorded last year, so I was delighted to secure over £3 million to tackle that. With the current spell of extreme cold weather, conditions are especially dangerous for those sleeping rough in my constituency on the sea coast. I pay tribute to the council's outreach team and local charities, including Helping Hearts, Street Angels and Streetlife, for the work they do. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking all those who support our most vulnerable, and will he assure my constituents that the Government are committed to delivering long-term solutions so that Blackpool residents have a safe, secure and affordable place to live?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend demonstrates, once again, not just that he is an effective constituency MP but that he recognises that there is much more work that needs to be done. He is a real champion for the fine town of Blackpool. I will certainly join him in thanking charities across the country that provide invaluable services that support those experiencing homelessness. We are committed to ending homelessness and ensuring that everyone has a safe place to live. Our homelessness strategy aims to halve the number of people sleeping rough long term by 2029.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): My constituent Lisa has a severe condition that affects her nerves. She cannot stand, feed herself or use the bathroom unaided, she has a tracheotomy to help her breathe and, without the aid of a wheelchair, she can only leave her house for hospital appointments. In 2024 she was referred to AJM, a company contracted by the NHS in Staffordshire to provide wheelchairs. It took almost a year, and the intervention of my office, even to get her an appointment to be measured for a wheelchair by AJM. She was then told that it would be at least a year more before she gets the wheelchair that she needs. She has finally been given a wheelchair but it is not the correct one, and there is some uncertainty about whether she will ever get the care she needs. Will the Leader of the House ask the Government to publish a written statement on how our new wheelchair quality framework will ensure providers such as AJM are held to much higher standards than Lisa has experienced?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sorry to hear of the case that my hon. Friend raises. We understand how important it is that people can access wheelchairs to support them to live independently. As he points out, our wheelchair quality framework sets out quality standards relevant to all suppliers, regardless of Care Quality Commission registration status, and I will ensure that Ministers have heard his concerns and update him on the progress made.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Mill Hill Broadway is Barnet's busiest station, but its steep flight of stairs means that people with mobility issues struggle to use it. Sadly, its lack of accessibility has already had tragic consequences: Priscilla Tropp died after falling at the station. Step-free access at Mill Hill Broadway is essential. The previous Government promised to install lifts at the station but failed to deliver time and time again. Under this Government, progress is finally being made and detailed designs are being worked up. I urge the Department for Transport to give final approval once the design phase is complete. Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate on the importance of making our transport network more accessible?

Sir Alan Campbell: This Government are committed to improving the accessibility of Britain's railways. We have confirmed £280 million for Access for All projects over the next four years. I am pleased to hear that development is under way at Mill Hill Broadway. I have been reassured that the DfT will update my hon. Friend and key stakeholders once the review has been completed.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I have been working closely with local teacher and Labour Wymondham town councillor Lowell Doherty on the pressing issue of youth provision and wellbeing in our growing market town. Can we have a debate in Government time on youth provision, including access to affordable leisure and youth clubs, to explore how best the Labour Government can ensure that youth support keeps pace with expanding market towns?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend will know about the Government's commitment to the youth strategy going forward. We have heard his concerns. It is not

about any particular area; it is about all areas where young people get the support and access they need. I will ensure that his concerns are drawn to the attention of the relevant Minister.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to Colin Brookes, the president of Halesowen Town FC, who passed away at the end of last year doing what he loved most: watching his beloved Yeltz. After playing as a professional footballer and serving as a police officer, Colin dedicated 25 years of his life to Halesowen Town FC. He led the club through the ups and downs that all non-league clubs face. Colin was a champion not just of football, but of Halesowen and the surrounding communities. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Colin Brookes and celebrating the impact of the good people who, like him, keep our non-league clubs alive and contribute so much to our communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in recognising the legacy of Colin Brookes, and I extend my sympathies to his family and friends. Grassroots sport is an important part of our local communities. I thank Mr Brookes for his contribution not just to his local football club, but to the wider local community, and for the very positive impact that he had on the lives of people in his local area.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on tackling child poverty, and not only in the light of the Government's decision to lift the two-child cap, but to recognise the vital work of the Multibank charity? That charity supports hundreds of children in my constituency, where the first Multibank was established by Gordon Brown and Bob Garmory, who most deservedly received an OBE in the new year's honours list for his contributions to this amazing initiative.

Sir Alan Campbell: First, I congratulate Bob Garmory on his well-deserved OBE, which illustrates how vital the work my hon. Friend refers to really is. There will be ample time to debate child poverty when the legislation to remove the two-child benefit cap is considered by the House. At that time, we may see the disgraceful coalition that has been formed between the official Opposition and the Reform party not just in theory, but in practice. If they had their way, children in poverty would not get that help.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): After the chaos of their former leader being exposed as a fan of white supremacy, and with DOGE still nowhere in sight, Reform UK on Staffordshire county council are so desperate for savings that they are cutting £1 million from concessionary travel in their first budget. Does the Leader of the House agree that concessions can be a

lifeline for vulnerable people who do not drive, and the fact that Reform looked there to make their cuts says a lot about their values? Can we have a debate on the importance of concessionary travel?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely agree that concessionary travel is invaluable for many people, particularly the most vulnerable. We are beginning to see across the country what it means to have Reform in office. This Government understand how important accessible transport is and we are prioritising keeping costs down. Transport oral questions took place this morning, but I will ensure that my hon. Friend's concerns are drawn to the attention of the Department for Transport.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): At a recent constituency coffee morning that I hosted on the subject of public transport, some disabled passengers told me about the specific barriers they still face when they choose to travel by rail. Woolston station has step-free access to only one of its platforms, so those with limited mobility have to make a 20-minute round trip in the other direction in order to then travel eastward. That is, as I am sure the Leader of the House would agree, ridiculous. As we roll out Great British Railways, will he make time for a debate on how we might make all our stations accessible to all constituents and travellers, including those who live with disabilities?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are committed to improving the accessibility of British railways. We have confirmed £280 million for Access for All projects over four years. There have been a number of recent debates relating to the accessibility of our railways, but I think further such debates—perhaps Backbench Business or Adjournment debates—would be of great interest to Members across the House.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Yesterday, with Highlands and Islands airports at the centre of international events, there was no Scottish news programming on STV—the ITV channel in Scotland—because journalists were on the picket line in Aberdeen and Glasgow. Their strike centres on STV's plans to cut the cherished northern edition of news output—formerly Grampian News—and to cut 28 editorial jobs and merge them with central belt news services, which would dilute and diminish northern coverage. Does the Leader of the House agree that, when facts are so precious, it is important that we protect local journalism and value the distinct voice that it provides?

Sir Alan Campbell: I support my hon. Friend in what he says about the importance of local journalism and the distinct voice that it provides. My understanding is that Ofcom has launched a consultation on the proposed changes, and I encourage everyone with a view on this matter to respond to it.

Road Safety Strategy

12.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on our new national road safety strategy.

It is a sad truth that, by the time I finish speaking and we hear the Opposition's response, it is likely someone will have died or been seriously injured on our roads. It is an even sadder truth that that would likely have been entirely preventable. Even though we have some of the safest roads in the world, more than 1,600 people died on our roads last year, and nearly 28,000 were seriously injured.

Over the course of my lifetime, road safety has improved immeasurably—in no small part thanks to a titan of my party, Barbara Castle—but it is safe to say the last 10 years represent a lost decade. Death and serious injury numbers have plateaued despite improvements in vehicle safety. The UK has slipped from third to fourth in Europe's road safety rankings, and the human cost of too little action and too much complacency is clear: lives taken too soon, lives altered beyond recognition, and lives grieved by the families left behind.

If that was not enough, a decade without a comprehensive road safety strategy has meant that the country lost out on nearly £7 billion in economic output last year. That should not just give us pause; it should spur us to action. We would not tolerate that on our railways or in our airspace, and I am determined to ensure that we no longer tolerate it on our roads. That is why I am standing here today: to say quite simply that enough is enough.

The targets that we are setting match the full measure of our ambition. We want to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on British roads by 65% by 2035, and by 70% for children under 16. Our vision is clear: any road user—however they choose to travel—should be able to move safely on our roads. There are four main ways in which we will deliver that vision through the strategy.

First, we will put all road users at the heart of the strategy. When it comes to protecting vulnerable road users, we will be guided by the evidence. We know, for example, that young drivers between 17 and 24 are at a higher risk of death or serious injury on our roads. They account for 6% of driving licences yet are involved in 24% of fatal and serious collisions. That is why we will consult not just on a minimum learning period for learner drivers, but on a lower blood alcohol limit for novice drivers. I would also recognise the important debate on young driver safety that my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) secured last January.

Another key area is the safety of older drivers. In 2024, about 24% of all car drivers killed were aged 70 or older. While driving is rightly seen as a vital form of independence in older age, it cannot come at the expense of safety, so we will consult on mandatory eyesight tests for drivers over 70 and explore options for cognitive testing, recognising the risks of driving with conditions such as dementia.

We also will not ignore the fact that motorcyclists are 40 times more likely to be killed or seriously injured on our roads compared with car drivers, so we will reform

the motorcycle training, testing and licensing regime. That starts today with a consultation, including on removing the ability to ride on L-plates indefinitely.

Let me move to advances in technology and data. We will consult on mandating 18 new vehicle safety technologies under the GB type approval scheme—a change that could prevent more than 14,000 deaths and serious injuries over 15 years. That includes autonomous emergency braking, a proven safety technology that Meera Naran has tirelessly campaigned for as Dev's law, after the tragic loss of her son. I am delighted to see her in the Public Gallery; she has been an incredible campaigner on this issue.

To learn from collisions and prevent future harm, we will establish a data-led road safety investigation branch covering the whole of Great Britain. It will draw on data to carry out thematic investigations and make recommendations. To give those involved in collisions the best chance of survival, we will ensure that police-recorded collision data and healthcare data are shared more effectively.

The third theme is about infrastructure. Safer roads and effective speed management are essential pillars of the "safe system" approach that guides the strategy. That starts with investment. The Government are providing £24 billion between 2026 and 2030 to improve motorways and local roads, building on record funding for pothole repairs. We will also publish updated guidance on setting local speed limits and the use of speed and red light cameras, supporting local authorities to make evidence-based decisions.

Because rural roads remain among the most dangerous, with motorcyclists often navigating sharp bends, we will build on the success of Project PRIME—perceptual rider information for maximisation of enjoyment and expertise—in Scotland, which saw real safety improvements thanks to new road markings.

Finally, let me talk about enforcement. We know that most drivers are safe, and we do not want to get in their way. However, they need to feel confident that the Government have their back, so my message to the minority of drivers who are unsafe and reckless is simple: if you drive dangerously, if you drive illegally or if you make our roads less safe, you will face the consequences.

Take drink and drug-driving. We know that it was a contributory factor in 18% of road fatalities in 2023, so we will consult on lowering the drink-drive limit, which has not been changed in England and Wales since 1967. We will review penalties for drink and drug-driving offences and explore the use of alcohol interlock devices. New powers will be considered to suspend licences for those suspected of the most serious offences.

We also propose tougher penalties for those who drive without insurance—I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) for his persistent advocacy on this issue. We will also look at penalty points for failing to wear a seatbelt and failing to ensure that child passengers are wearing theirs, too.

Thanks to the tireless campaigning of my hon. Friends the Members for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) and for Rochdale (Paul Waugh), we are tackling illegal number plates. We will increase penalties for using illegal plates and ensure that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is empowered to carry out more robust checks on number plate suppliers.

These rightly bold ambitions cannot be met by Government working alone. We call on the support of Members from all parts of the House and extend our hand in partnership to the devolved Governments, mayors, local authorities, the police and other stakeholders. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for her support on behalf of the Transport Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for transport safety for his advocacy on this important issue.

I have sat with families torn apart by deaths and serious injuries on our roads—it is one of the hardest parts of my job. Even through intolerable pain, they campaign, fight and demand change so that others can be spared their sense of loss. This strategy is for those brave families. I truly believe that this is a turning point for road safety in this country, when we finally put victims at the heart of policymaking, see road safety as a shared responsibility and understand that, while driver or rider error is inevitable, fatalities and serious injury are not. A multilayered system, from safer speeds and vehicles to safer roads and robust enforcement, is how we protect every road user. That is how we ensure that people walk away from collisions rather than being carried and how we deliver safer roads for everyone who relies on them. I have laid copies of the documents in the Libraries of both Houses, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.11 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement, although obviously some of it was reported in *The Times* earlier this week. I welcome the fact that the Government have published the road safety strategy, and I welcome the broad ambition, shared right across the House, to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads. As a former Roads Minister and as a local MP, I too have met many grieving families torn apart by deaths on our roads. The fact that we have seen a 10% to 15% reduction since 2010 does not mean that we do not need to go further.

In that spirit, I welcome the comprehensive look at motorcycle training that the Minister has announced, as well as the expansion of Project PRIME from Scotland on motorcycle safety. That will be a major improvement to our road safety. I also welcome stiffer fines and enforcement against bad faith drivers, particularly those on ghost plates, as has been mentioned, and against those trying to evade justice via the use of dodgy number plates and other things to conceal their identity. I also welcome the road safety investigation branch and the better use and collation of data and data sharing—those are incredibly important. I also welcome the inclusion of Charlotte's law, which will help to prevent people trying to evade justice by ensuring that timely blood testing can take place in the most serious of cases.

It is clear that there will be concern about some of the new moves announced and whether they are wholly related to road safety, and I would like to look at a couple of those. In oral questions, the Minister appeared to suggest that part of the reason for the six-month

delay after getting a theory test was to ensure that more driving tests are available. In reality, it will mean an even larger group of people waiting to book driving tests, so I fear that the Government have not fully thought through the consequences of that. I remember meeting a woman aged 60 who had just lost her husband of 40 years. She lived in a small village with no bus service. She had always relied on him to drive. Are we really telling her that she will have to take a theory test and then wait six months after passing it to take a driving test?

I can think of women in similar circumstances—men take more driving tests than women at an earlier stage in life—who maybe only take a test when they move for jobs or after having children. We need to properly think through the consequences of some of what the Government are proposing. It is important that we look at this broadly to ensure that we are not restricting freedoms via legislation to fix problems that are the result of not sorting out driving tests.

No one in this House disputes that drink-driving is totally unacceptable, but I hope that Ministers and the Secretary of State will reflect on the experiences in Scotland, where changes in this space have already been made, and on the concerns right across the hospitality sector that there is no clear evidence of improved road safety outcomes following those changes. In fact, it is extraordinary that the Department—to quote an answer to one of my written questions—

“has not made an assessment of the impact on the economic viability of pubs in Scotland”

as a result of the changes that have already happened up there. Changing the legal limit alone will not change behaviour, and any reform must be based on a thorough examination of the evidence and impacts, not on attempts to look tough.

Alongside alcohol, the House must not lose sight of drug-driving, and I welcome some of the measures announced today. However, the commitments to testing seem rather vague. It would be great to hear more from the Minister on that because the police are pushing for more roadside drug testing. Governments of all stripes have pushed for an emphasis on education and behavioural change. However, that sits uneasily with this Government cutting the budget for the THINK! road safety campaign by £1.2 million last year, particularly when lifelong learning and changes are so critical to many of the plans that the Government have announced today.

That brings me to my final major point, which is around enforcement. This place can pass all the laws it wishes, but if they are not enforced, all that does is undermine faith in our democratic institutions. The House will be aware that police numbers under this Government are down by around 1,300 in the latest figures. Enforcement sits at the heart of any credible road safety policy, so are there are plans to ensure additional roads policing to ensure that enforcement happens?

Finally, there are some omissions. Why still exclude vulnerable road users and motorcyclists from bus lanes in many areas? There is a real missed opportunity to improve safety and survival for those people. There is also a glaring absence when it comes to tackling the scourge of unlicensed and uninsured criminals driving with impunity. Measures such as requiring proof of identity to register a vehicle could have been included, as recommended by the all-party parliamentary group

[Mr Richard Holden]

for transport safety. I am sure that the hon. Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) might mention that in her remarks, too.

Road safety is not delivered by strategies and consultations alone; it is delivered when the law is clear and evidence-based, enforcement is consistent and the Government are willing to confront difficult issues, rather than relying on process and pre-briefed headlines. While we welcome many of the measures, there are still many questions to be answered, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Lilian Greenwood: I welcome the support from the shadow Secretary of State for our measures to tackle road harm. I was slightly surprised by his comment about the coverage in the press because we did of course publish the strategy yesterday, giving him the opportunity to have a full 24 hours to read it. Nevertheless, I note his comments and welcome his support. I also note his comment about the reduction in those killed and seriously injured over the previous Government's term. I welcome the fact that the numbers went down slightly, but they are nothing to the level of ambition that this Government are showing and the seriousness that this problem requires.

The right hon. Member questioned why we are introducing a minimum learning period for new drivers. This is a safety measure. It is about saying that in order to set people up for a lifetime of safe driving, whenever they take their driving test and learn to drive, they need to get a range of pre-test practice in a variety of conditions. We want people to take the time to learn properly, to ensure they know how to cope with things like extreme weather, driving at night and driving on different sorts of roads. We think that that is the right thing to do. Nevertheless, it is, of course, subject to a consultation, and we will listen carefully to all the views expressed in that.

When it comes to drink-driving, of course we do not want to stop people going out and enjoying our hospitality sector. What we are clearly saying is, "If you're going to go out and have a drink, leave your car at home." Reducing the drink-drive limit would simply bring England and Wales into line with Scotland and the rest of Europe. We are the only countries, except perhaps Malta, that have this higher drink-drive limit—

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): We are one of the safest.

Lilian Greenwood: We are no longer the safest. We have been dropping down the rankings, and progress has stalled compared with other countries across Europe. Sir Peter North's review in 2010 estimated that reducing the drink-drive limit from 80 mg to 50 mg would save an estimated 43 to 168 lives each year and avoid a very large number of serious injuries—a conservative estimate put it at 280. We are acting on the evidence.

When it comes to drug-driving, we are looking at how we can make better use of testing. I know that too many people who have suffered as a result of someone drug-driving wait a long time for their case to come to court. It takes too long to process, which is why we are looking at things like roadside testing. Through our award-winning THINK! campaign, we continue to target

publicity at those who cause the most danger: young men aged 17 to 24. At the end of last year, we did an anti-drug-driving campaign—the first in 10 years—using the sorts of media channels that get to those we are trying to target, including TikTok and Instagram.

Finally, the shadow Secretary of State is right to speak about enforcement. That is why this Government are investing in additional police officers—an extra 3,000 police officers by March and 13,000 by the end of this Parliament. We are responding to the requirements of the police. We are giving them the legislation and the powers they need to crack down on those who cause danger on our roads. I am pleased to see that our strategy has been welcomed by the National Police Chiefs' Council's lead for roads policing, Jo Shiner. I welcome the right hon. Member's other comments, and we look forward to reading the official Opposition's comments in response to our consultations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nurat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This strategy and the many elements within it are hugely welcome, and I congratulate the Government on addressing what the previous Government spent 14 years not properly addressing, during which time too many people have been killed or seriously injured on our roads in preventable incidents. When the Secretary of State appeared before the Transport Committee previously, she spoke positively about London's "Vision Zero" strategy. Now that the road safety strategy has been published, are the Government planning to adopt a "Vision Zero" strategy nationally, and if not, why not?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for her support, and she is right to commend Transport for London. Indeed, a number of mayors and local authorities have adopted "Vision Zero" strategies. Of course, we want to get to a position where the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads is zero, but in setting out this strategy, we have established national road safety targets that we think are achievable. Of course, in the longer term, we want to work towards a position where no one is injured on our roads.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank the Minister for her statement and for the strategy. We welcome it, having called for an updated road safety strategy for some time, following years of neglect of our roads by the previous Conservative Government. The strategy shows serious intent, and I commend the thought and research that has gone into it and the breadth of thinking on display. It is welcome that it is largely substance rather than gimmicks, which could have been the case. In particular, I welcome the fact that the Ryan's law campaign on penalties for hit and run, championed by my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire), is incorporated into the strategy.

Our concern is that much of the strategy is based on a commitment to undertake consultations. I hope the Minister agrees that we would not want to see a repeat of the time it has taken to undertake a pavement-parking consultation—admittedly one initiated by the previous

Government—with a wait of five years until the welcome announcement of something today. Consultations need to be meaningful, but they also need to be time-bound and then translated into action.

A number of areas need focus. We need to consider the significant impact on some groups in society that these measures will have, right though they are for advancing road safety. The first group is older people. The older generation have grown up in an age of decades-worth of Government policy promoting travel by car, so this runs the risk of having a significant impact on them. As I know from constituency casework, they also suffer from DVLA administration failures in processing medical changes and so on. This underlines the importance of improving public transport to reduce car dependency—in particular, the development of demand-responsive transport in rural areas, which the Transport Committee has looked at in detail.

These measures also run the risk of placing further pressure on the rural economy. Our pubs and farming communities are already under real pressure from increased alcohol taxation, business rates and inflation and poor international trade arrangements, which makes it even more important that they are properly supported and that the Government listen, including to Liberal Democrat calls for a 5% cut to VAT for hospitality.

It is welcome that the strategy mentions potholes, which drive all our constituents mad—particularly mine on the A4130 between Didcot and Wallingford and the Milton interchange in Queensway. Most importantly, we need to support young drivers. More is needed, given that the Government have twice moved the deadline for reducing the wait for tests to seven weeks. The six-month wait is understandable, but it is important that we support young people.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Those on the Liberal Democrat Front Bench know that they have two minutes, not two minutes and 50 seconds or three minutes and 10 seconds.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of support. Let me be clear that we are consulting on a number of the measures in the road safety strategy so that the public and stakeholders have an opportunity to share their views. The intent is not to delay. The consultations will be open for 12 weeks, and then we intend to take concrete action as a result of the feedback we receive. Some of the measures in this strategy will take very little time and do not require legislation. Others will require secondary or, indeed, primary legislation, but we intend to take action in order to meet the ambitious targets we have set for just nine years' time.

I totally understand what the hon. Gentleman says about older people. We do not want to restrict older people's independence, and we know how important driving can be, but the truth is that we need to keep people safe. We do not want anyone on our roads whose medical condition means that they are not safe to drive. Some people may be unaware that their eyesight has deteriorated and poses a danger to others. I know that many families find it difficult to have those conversations with an older relative about when is the right time to stop driving. We hope that the measures we are proposing on eyesight testing will help in those circumstances.

I recognise what the hon. Gentleman says about rural areas and the need to ensure that these measures are rural-proofed. When it comes to potholes, he is right: they are not only very annoying for all our constituents but a real danger to pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. That is why this Government are investing £7.3 billion over the spending review period in local roads maintenance, on top of the additional £500 million this year. We are giving local authorities that long-term funding settlement so that they can improve the shocking quality of the roads we were left with by the previous Conservative Government.

When it comes to young drivers, we have considered carefully the right balance between protecting young people, who we know are at particular risk, and not curtailing their opportunities for work, education and social activities.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all her hard work on this strategy—I have no doubt that it will save lives. I have spent the last year campaigning against ghost number plates, which make drivers invisible to speed and police cameras. These plates are great for car racers and criminals and terrible for the rest of us. They have spent years going under the radar, but today they have been rumbled, and I am delighted the Minister has announced a massive crackdown on these plates. How soon will these dodgy ghost-plate drivers start to get penalty points on their licence and their vehicles seized for using these plates, and when will we start to see these MOT number plate checks?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and, as I said earlier, for the outstanding work that she has done to bring this issue to national attention. As she knows, alongside the road safety strategy, yesterday we launched five consultation documents, one of which is about motoring offences. It includes our intention to have tougher penalties for those who use illegal plates, and to strengthen the role of the DVLA in looking at number plate suppliers and taking action. I do not intend to delay, but we must obviously await the end of the consultation, and some of those measures will require legislation.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I thank the Minister for her time in discussing these issues. As a former police and crime commissioner who funded a dedicated roads policing unit, this issue is close to my heart. I wish to make two points about drink and drug-driving. First, I fear that reducing the alcohol limit for England and Wales is potentially a red herring policy that will distract from focusing on where the real harm and damage comes: from those who ignore the drink-drive limit no matter what it is. Secondly, I thank the Minister for the focus on drug-driving. This year, after their Christmas operations, police forces will be reporting more drug than drink detections for the first time. It is good that that is being detected, but it is scratching the surface of the problem and we must focus in on those who take drugs and drive cars. I would welcome any further details from the Minister on the specifics so that we can start doing that as soon as possible and get those people off our roads.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued interest in these areas. As I said earlier in response to the shadow Secretary of State, when it

[Lilian Greenwood]

comes to drink-driving, we are drawing on evidence. The UK is an outlier when it comes to our drink-drive limit, which has been the same for almost 60 years. This measure will simply bring us into line with Scotland and most of the rest of Europe. In Scotland, drink-drive fatal collisions halved in the decade after the drink-drive limit was reduced, and as I have said, evidence from Sir Peter North's 2010 review estimated that the measure would save dozens of lives. That is what the road safety strategy is about. It is not about curtailing people's freedom to drive; it is about saving lives, as are the measures that we are looking at on drug-driving, which we know is a growing problem. We are determined to crack down on it.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and her great personal commitment to this vital issue. It is clear that the Government have listened to families and the road safety community and followed the evidence. She rightly recognises the importance of local partnerships in delivering on the ambitions of the strategy. Unfortunately, in Lancashire the Reform-led county council insists on waiting for fatalities and serious injuries to occur before acting, seemingly regardless of concerns raised by residents. Does the Minister agree that to deliver on this strategy and save lives, local authorities such as Lancashire must have a more proactive approach by listening to communities, identifying risk areas and acting before people are killed or injured?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the incredible work that he has been doing through the all-party group for transport safety. He raises concerns about Lancashire's Reform council, and true to form, no Reform Members are here today to debate this issue. I have been concerned that some local authorities hide behind national guidance on setting speed limits and the deployment of speed cameras, and say that they have to wait for a fatality to occur before they can take action. That is not the case. We are intending to strengthen the guidance that we provide to local authorities, to enable them to listen to community concerns and act to save lives.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I welcome all efforts by the Government to make roads safer for pedestrians and motorists, but I heard nothing about roadkill of wildlife, horses, pets, and other animals that can also cause collisions involving the deaths of human beings. In my constituency, Havering-atte-Bower is a rural Essex village with a lot of horse riders. I am told that up to 700 horses have been killed on the roads in recent years, and up to 50 riders. We also have a lot of roaming deer in areas such as Harold Hill and Noak Hill. Apparently, up to 75,000 deer are killed on the roads, along with hedgehogs and other animals, so there is a lot going on with wildlife which needs to be considered. We know that some creatures do not have to be registered if they are run over by a motor vehicle, so will the Minister consider amending the Road Traffic Act 1988 to include cats and other wild animals?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Member is absolutely right to say that on rural roads in particular dangers are posed by drivers who hit animals, and right to raise

concerns about horse riders. He will know that the highway code was strengthened to ensure that those who are driving are mindful of horse riders and the need to pass them safely, slowly and with sufficient room. We will look at what more we can do to strengthen the advice and guidance, and ensure that people are aware of those issues in the highway code. I have listened carefully to many people who have raised with me their concerns about cats, and work is under way in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to look at further research on that issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call David Williams, who is permitted to leave early so that he can deal with his cough.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): That is really kind of you, after a full morning in the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I warmly welcome the road safety strategy, which will save the lives of thousands of people across the next decade. As the Minister knows, because we have had countless meetings, I have been campaigning alongside Claire, the incredibly brave mother of six-year-old Charlotte-Sky Naglis, who was so tragically killed by a motorist in my constituency. Under the current law, police are unable to test the blood of unconscious suspects until they are in a position to give consent, and in their deepest moments of grief, Charlotte's family could not get the answers they needed. Does the Minister agree that through consultation we now have an opportunity to change that, and to bring justice and a lasting legacy for Charlotte and her family, so that no other families have to face such pain and anguish?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and for the work that he has done to ensure that that case was brought to my attention. Claire's voice, and those of many bereaved families, have been in my mind as we have been devising this road safety strategy. My hon. Friend will have seen that in the consultation on offences we are looking to introduce Charlotte's law, to ensure that no other family suffers what they suffered.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): In light of what was essentially a very sensible statement, may I ask the Minister a point of clarification? She talks about data technology and innovation, but have the Government considered an experiment in mandatory black box technology for very young drivers? The AA and the British Insurance Brokers' Association say that that could save money and reduce the number of accidents by 35%.

Lilian Greenwood: The right hon. Member is right that many young drivers will seek lower insurance as a result of having a black box in their car. That issue was considered as part of Driver2020 and research carried out by the previous Government. The results from that were not conclusive in suggesting that such a measure would make a difference, but I remain open to being evidence-led, and if further information comes forward, we would be happy to consider those issues.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I recognise the Minister's dedication to this issue over many years, and I am glad that today she is in a position to introduce

this strategy, which rightly focuses on reducing death and injury on our roads. We all know of places in our communities that are accident or speeding hotspots, where it is only a matter of time before something happens, yet too often safety improvements follow only when there has been a serious injury or a fatality. That mentality has to change. How will this strategy give communities the power to take action before it is too late?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. Clearly, local authorities can and should draw on historical collision data when assessing road safety measures, but proactive measures to reduce risks should not be contingent on a fatal or serious incident occurring. Local authorities have the power and the funding to carry out interventions, so it is vital that they listen to the concerns of local people and act to prevent serious incidents before they occur, rather than just responding to them afterwards.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Ryan Saltern was hit and left for dead by a drunk driver in 2019. The perpetrator received a four-month suspended sentence. In 2021, Ryan's family launched their Ryan's law campaign to increase sentences for hit-and-run offences, and in October I introduced a Ryan's law amendment to the Sentencing Bill. We all know that there can be lots of talk in this place, but not always much action. Last year, I met the road safety Minister with the family; she clearly listened and has now acted, and I thank her. I pay tribute to my incredible North Cornwall constituents Mark and Helen, Ryan's parents, and Leanne, his sister, for never giving up—they are a true inspiration. Once the consultation closes, how long will it take the Minister to bring draft legislation to the House?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Member for the work that he has done to support the Saltern family. It was humbling to meet Mark, Helen and Leanne, and to hear about their work supporting other victims of road traffic collisions. As he knows, we are consulting on strengthening the law around those who fail to stop and report a collision. What happened to Ryan is tragic and I am keen that we act as quickly as possible. Where legislation is required, we will have to wait until parliamentary time is available, but I am determined to act.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and I welcome the strategy, particularly its focus on speed management. While icy and ungritted roads currently make speeding less of an issue, thanks to the Reform-led county council's failure to grit roads across large parts of my constituency, excessive speed in our rural villages, such as Chebsey, has long put residents in danger. How will the Minister ensure that rural road segmentation works effectively with local speed limits to reduce dangerous driving in those areas, so that safety is delivered by this Government's policy and we can get past local or county council failure?

Lilian Greenwood: I am sorry to hear about the failure of my hon. Friend's council to take action that would prevent further collisions. We know that rural roads are more dangerous, and that is why we are determined to take action to support local authorities to introduce measures to make them safer.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Another way to improve road safety is to reduce driver frustration caused by roadworks, particularly those that overrun. That is why in 2022 I launched a campaign to "Can the Cones" and introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to tighten up on roadworks regulations. I lobbied the then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), and after the election I lobbied the road safety Minister, who kindly gave me a hearing. I welcome the fact that the Government have just announced that they are tightening the regulation of roadworks, particularly by increasing the fines for those that overrun, which was integral to my Bill. I give credit where it is due and I thank the Minister personally for listening. The measures will not solve the whole problem of roadworks, but they should certainly help, and my constituents and I will be grateful.

Lilian Greenwood: I am not entirely sure I heard a question, but I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words. I am proud to be part of a Government who listen and act.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I welcome the strategy published yesterday. It will save lives and, as a secondary impact, reduce insurance premiums, which is a non-trivial challenge for many people. I want to talk about the notion of a cognitive test that is set out in the strategy. In 2020, Xander Irvine, who was just three years old, was looking through a shop window in Edinburgh with his mother, when a car mounted the pavement, killing him and injuring his mother. The driver was aged 91 and she died around a year later of natural causes. Despite having dementia, she was able to renew her driving licence just a few months before the accident. The fatal accident inquiry was clear in its recommendation that cognitive tests should be introduced. I believe that all deaths on our roads are preventable; this death was absolutely preventable. The strategy talks about "developing options", but will the Minister go further today and guarantee that we will deliver in this area? Will she go even further and talk about a timeline for delivering that change?

Lilian Greenwood: I dealt with the prevention of future deaths report relating to the utterly heartbreaking case that my hon. Friend refers to. While there is not currently a suitable test of cognitive ability to drive safely, I recognise the need for us to do further work on the issue. We plan to reconvene the older drivers taskforce and expert groups on this subject to consider suitable options. I do not intend to delay—I intend to take evidence and to take action.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a practising optometrist. I thank the Minister for this wonderful statement. I wholeheartedly agree with it, especially the ambition to reduce road deaths by 65%. The Minister mentioned various figures, including 1,600 fatalities, but according to the RAC, 280 crashes every year are caused by glare from headlights, so can she shed some light on that matter?

The UK is one of the only countries in Europe that does not have mandatory sight tests until people have to renew their licence at the age of 70, so somebody could pass a driving test at 17 or 18, then not have an eye test

[Shockat Adam]

until they are 70 years old. Does the Minister agree that people should have a sight test every time their driving licence is renewed, which is every 10 years, to ensure that they are safe on the road?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. No one should be driving on our roads whose eyesight does not meet the required standard. We have chosen to consult on eye tests for those over 70, but it would be good advice for everyone to have their eyes tested on a regular basis. We have undertaken research on headlamp glare. I know that this is a growing problem, and I certainly recognise it as a driver myself. We are going to consider the outputs of the research that we already have and do further work, in addition to looking internationally at work on vehicle standards, but I absolutely want to take further action on headlamp glare.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We definitely need to speed things up or colleagues will not be able to get in.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her written statement about enforcement on pavement parking, which is a huge issue in Luton South and South Bedfordshire. I welcome the launch of today's road safety strategy, particularly the emphasis on tackling drug-driving. There was a trebling of fatal collisions between 2014 and 2023 related to drug-driving, so will the Minister elaborate further on how that will be enforced under the new strategy?

Lilian Greenwood: We know that drug-driving is a growing problem. We have already done further publicity on the dangers of drug-driving, because not everyone appreciates how dangerous it is, but we also want to crack down on those who do drive with drugs in their system. We are looking to improve testing and processing so that we can bring more convictions, and more importantly to deter people from ever getting behind the wheel of a car when they have taken drugs.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Dangerous driving and speeding are among the biggest road safety issues in my constituency. Despite that, the local Cheshire councils frequently say that they cannot introduce further safety measures because the police are unable to enforce them. What discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office to ensure that police forces have the funding and resources necessary to enforce existing, as well as new, driving laws as part of the road safety strategy?

Lilian Greenwood: I know that the hon. Lady has been a real campaigner on road safety during her time in the House. The ambitious targets that we have set can be delivered only by working in partnership with the police. I have had a number of meetings with the Minister for Policing and Crime. We both agree that this is an important issue and we will be working with police forces to ensure that it is enforced.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for taking pity on my throat. I recently held a public meeting

about road safety in Polesworth, where there have been reports of illegal street racing. Constituents shared with me their concerns about the illegal number plates used by criminals to get away with dangerous driving. That is why I strongly support the Government's strategy, which will introduce tougher checks to ensure that number plates can be read by cameras and to crack down on the use of ghost plates. Will the Minister outline what support my local police force in Warwickshire will receive to crack down on criminal street racing and the use of illegal number plates?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she has done at a local level. We are consulting on new powers to give the police precisely the tools that they need to crack down on the criminals who feel that they can get away with illegal activity by using ghost plates.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Road safety in Woking is regularly raised with me by my constituents, so I am pleased that the Government have announced ways to toughen up our drink-driving laws. However, police forces, including mine in Surrey, cannot adequately police the drink-driving laws as they are, and these changes will be less impactful if they are not able to do proper enforcement. With police forces increasingly deprioritising policing on our roads due to budgetary pressures, has the Minister conducted a review of current enforcement? If not, will she do so?

Lilian Greenwood: The Government have done a great deal of work in collaboration with the Home Office on road policing. We know that this strategy will be effective only if there is enforcement. I cannot instruct chief constables on how they deploy their resources, but we are determined to work in partnership to ensure that this road safety strategy is effective, including the measures around enforcement.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all her hard work over many years to bring this excellent statement to the House. Some 500 people are killed or seriously injured on Birmingham's roads every year, including in my constituency. Sadly, due to the historical layout of many of our estates, schools, shops and other amenities are in some of the areas at the most acute risk. Can she assure the House that her Department is working with other public agencies to ensure that efforts are targeted at those most at-risk areas? Once the consultation has closed at the end of March, will every effort be made to respond to them as soon as possible?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. We are working very closely with those who have expressed a similar desire to reduce deaths and serious injuries on our roads, including the Mayor of the West Midlands, who has shown real leadership on this issue. I can give my hon. Friend the commitment that we intend to act to ensure that the measures we have set out lead to the changes needed.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the Minister for her statement, and I welcome and commend this Government's road safety strategy. Late last year, there were three incidents outside Lydgate

junior and infant school, Headfield school and Westmoor primary school in my constituency—thankfully, there were no fatalities. I joined West Yorkshire police, local councillors and the affected schools to conduct a road safety campaign outside those schools. In some parts of the country, roads outside schools are temporarily closed for 30 minutes at the beginning and end of the day, and other schools have no-parking zones that extend to ensure that there are no safety risks. Will the Minister confirm what steps the Government will take to increase road safety outside schools?

Lilian Greenwood: Local authorities already have the powers to introduce school streets, as the hon. Gentleman described, or to reduce speed limits outside schools. They have our full backing to use those powers to improve safety outside schools, including those in his constituency.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I very much welcome the proposals in the strategy, which I have no doubt will save lives. May I thank the Minister for her statement on pavement parking earlier today? Many of us have raised that issue over many years.

I am particularly pleased to see moves to crack down on unlicensed and uninsured drivers. The Minister will remember that she kindly met my constituents John and Karen Rowlands last year to talk about the death of their son Andrew. As the Minister knows, they want to see better oversight of insurance and licensing, especially in relation to car sales on social media. Would she welcome further representations on this issue as part of the consultation?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for her words and for the incredible work she has done to advocate on behalf of those who want safer streets and pavements and to raise the particular case of John and Karen Rowlands. I would be very happy to see their response to the motoring offences consultation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for the statement; there is much positivity in it. Anyone who has to declare a health issue on their driving licence will know that it becomes much more complex—I declare an interest as a type 2 diabetic. They need a full MOT and an eyesight test before they get their driving licence renewed, but that does not mean that they cannot drive; the point I am trying to make is that it has to be regulated. The current waiting time for medical tests and feedback for driving licence renewals to be processed is 16 weeks. I know two lorry drivers who had to wait six months before they got their licence due to their health changes, so they were not able to work. What plans are in place to address this issue and to speed up the process?

Lilian Greenwood: The Roads and Buses Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), who has responsibility for the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, is sitting next to me. I recognise that there have been delays in dealing with some medical licensing. The DVLA is introducing a new IT system, which will certainly help to speed up the licensing investigations that the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): More needs to be done to clamp down on dangerous driving. Oldham has seen far too many lives lost as a result of drivers treating the roads as racetracks. There is much to be welcomed in this strategy, and I congratulate the Minister on the work. However, I am not convinced that the proposal to introduce a practical test waiting period holds. Drivers are already waiting an unacceptable 24 weeks, and surely tests should be taken at the point when drivers are ready to meet the required standard. In many areas, driving is not a “nice to have”; it is essential to get to work or college and to go about daily life. May I ask that this work is not rushed into and that more is done to end the 24-week wait experienced by drivers in Greater Manchester?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend will know that the Government are already taking action to address driving test wait times, which I know are incredibly frustrating. However, we need to ensure that young drivers are set up for a lifetime of safe driving. We know from evidence that a minimum learning period will save lives and improve safety. That is why we are consulting on it, but we will listen as part of that consultation.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Every 17 minutes, someone is killed or seriously injured on our roads. That is a national scandal, which this Labour Government are tackling through this road safety strategy. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to Rochdale trading standards, which, together with local police, led the country in exposing how ghost number plates are used by criminals, groomers, drug dealers and others to avoid detection? Will she thank all those bereaved families who campaigned with me and fellow MPs to ensure that we have mandatory eye tests for over-70s and much tighter drug-driving laws?

Lilian Greenwood: I am very happy to commend those from my hon. Friend's constituency who do such fantastic work to campaign, as well as the police and trading standards on the work that they do. We are determined to act on the things that they have led on.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): This year marks 13 years since the most incredible bestie that anybody could wish for—the ray of sunshine that I was lucky enough to have in my life—was killed on our road, leaving her two young boys. Ashya Vanner, I think about you every day. I also pay tribute to Amie Pearson and Chelsea Carlisle, who were killed in Pleasley in November, with a nine-year-old boy being left with life-changing injuries. I thank the Minister for this work, but can we please get the legislation passed as soon as possible so that we can work on preventing unnecessary deaths?

Lilian Greenwood: I hope my hon. Friend will send my condolences to those in her constituency who have been affected by such a terrible loss. There is no question but that too many people are killed and seriously injured on our roads, and we intend to act to reduce the number as soon as possible.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and thank her very much for presenting the strategy. Road safety is a frequent and serious concern across Erewash. Following the tragic murder of

[Adam Thompson]

Samuel Wilson by a driver under the influence of alcohol and drugs in Ilkeston marketplace in December 2023, I have been supporting a local campaign for safer road rules and stronger pedestrianisation in our marketplace to prevent such events from ever happening again. Will the Minister comment on how her road safety strategy will make our town centres safer for pedestrians?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and am very sorry to hear about that road traffic collision in his constituency. One of the things we are doing as part of this strategy is reissuing the manual for streets. That manual supports local authorities to introduce road safety measures, particularly in urban areas, extending things like pedestrianisation. We will ensure that pedestrians are put at the heart of our road safety strategy.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): In my constituency, 19 people died on the roads between 2018 and 2024. It is usually assumed that that is because we have some motorway in the constituency, but in fact people are six times more likely to die on a rural road. I thank the Minister very much for the measures within the strategy. I know there will be those who push back against changes to drink-driving limits, so does she agree that when people talk about personal responsibility in respect of driving, they fail to understand the depth of damage that is caused—both to families and to the wider community—when there are so many deaths of young people in my constituency?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Deaths and serious injuries resulting from road traffic collisions tear apart families and communities, and they come at great cost to our national health service and our country. Those are just some of the reasons why we are acting to reduce them.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her statement and join her in paying tribute to the bereaved families who, in the face of unimaginable loss, have campaigned for these road safety improvements. At the end of 2025 there were a number of serious accidents at Moor Farm roundabout in my constituency, leading to hospitalisations and serious delays on the network. The Minister is well aware of my campaign for improvements at Moor Farm—improvements that were long neglected by the previous Government, and which I will continue to push for as part of the road investment strategy. Can she say a little about how these two strategies will interact and, hopefully, unlock those vital improvements?

Lilian Greenwood: Safer roads are an essential pillar of the safe system approach that underpins our road safety strategy. We have had a number of conversations about investments in infrastructure, and road safety remains the top priority for National Highways as it devises its road investment strategy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Can we have super-short questions and super-sharp answers? I call Sarah Edwards.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and happy new year.

Although I welcome the road safety strategy, it sadly ignores school minibus safety, despite my raising this issue with the Department last year. I have been campaigning with my constituents Liz and Steve Fitzgerald since 2023, following the tragic loss of their daughter Claire in a minibus accident. Private schools follow strict O licence rules, yet state schools can use weak section 19 permits. Will the Minister remedy this failing in the law through mandatory national safety standards for all school minibuses?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. The Minister for Roads and Buses, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), was listening carefully and will be happy to write to my hon. Friend or meet her to discuss it further.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) described the Government's plans to reduce the blood alcohol limit as "absolutely ridiculous" and "wholly unacceptable", and said that the current system worked "pretty effectively". Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that the families of the 260 people who tragically died last year as a result of intoxicated drivers' behaviour would strongly disagree, and that we should reject those claims?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Let me just give colleagues a bit of guidance: if you are going to mention another Member in the Chamber, the protocol is to let them know in advance.

John Slinger: I did, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Lilian Greenwood: It is noticeable that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is not here, but I would invite him to sit down with any of the families I have sat down with and claim that there is no need for action—260 lives were lost last year, and every single one of those deaths was preventable.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I thank the Minister for taking the time before Christmas to talk to me about my constituent Jamie Nolan, who sadly lost his life last October, aged 17, when his vehicle left a rural road in the dark. His parents, Sam and Paul, are obviously devastated, but they are really keen to make sure things improve for other families so that they do not experience this kind of tragedy. Can the Minister advise them on how they could get involved once they get through the worst of their grief, to ensure that the excellent measures in the strategy to focus on young people, rural roads, signage, road markings and local speed limits can be implemented across Lincolnshire's roads?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and my heart goes out to her constituents. I would be very happy to meet them and her to discuss what further action can be taken at whatever time they think is appropriate.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): One of the first people I met when I became an MP was my constituent Janine, whose son Leon was

tragically killed on a road in my constituency in 2020. I am proud that, working with her, we were able to get the speed limit changed on that road, but much more needs to happen nationally to ensure that this never happens again. As such, I welcome the road safety strategy. The strategy acknowledges that there is a relationship between deprivation and casualties, so when it is being implemented, will resources be targeted at the communities that need them most across the country?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We have called for action to tackle, in particular, the death and serious injury of children on our roads, and we know that they are at far greater risk in more deprived communities. I will consider further his point about funding.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): As the Minister knows, my constituents Marie Cunningham and Grace Foulds were killed by a driver who had been told several times that his eyesight fell far below the legal standard to drive. Eyecare professionals are not currently required to inform the DVLA if someone's vision is so poor that they cannot safely get behind the wheel. Will the Minister consider mandating eyecare professionals to report directly to the DVLA all drivers with insufficient visual acuity and an inadequate field of vision, no matter their age?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I pay tribute to the campaigning work of Terry Cunningham and his sister, Sue Rimaitis, who have acted following the sad loss of their mother Marie and her friend Grace. He is absolutely right that medical professionals have an important role to play, and we want to make sure that we work with their professional bodies to ensure that they report to the DVLA in those circumstances.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for publishing this strategy. I recently met with the community in Tintwistle in my constituency, who are concerned about speeding and unsafe driving on the A628. I have also had similar conversations with communities in Peak Forest and in Padfield. They desperately want road safety measures, but every time we ask, the answer that comes back is, "I'm afraid somebody has to die first." That is the very thing that we are trying to avoid, so could the Minister reassure me and my constituents that this road safety strategy will put the power back into those communities so that they can protect local people?

Lilian Greenwood: It is local authorities that have the power to act in relation to road safety. We are determined to give them the guidance they need to take action in a proactive way to save lives in communities such as my hon. Friend's.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): In Blackpool we have seen year-on-year increases in the number of uninsured drivers, skyrocketing our premiums and the cost of insurance. Can the Minister outline to my constituents what her Department is doing to clamp down on this problem, and has it done any assessment of what this will mean for the pockets of my constituents?

Lilian Greenwood: Arm's length bodies of the Department for Transport and the police work together closely on Operation Tutelage, to take people who are

driving uninsured off the road. We are proposing tougher measures to deal with uninsured drivers. Frankly, if there were fewer road traffic collisions, that would reduce insurance costs for everyone.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I very much welcome this strategy, and the Minister's commitment to making the changes necessary to bring down the tragic and avoidable loss of life on our roads. I have launched a survey for Road Safety Week, and I have already heard from many constituents across Cannock Chase who do not feel safe on our roads, with speeding and dangerous junctions causing particular concern. Will the Minister join me in encouraging people in my towns and villages to fill out my survey so that I can take up their specific concerns, and does she agree that the knowledge of local people will be vital to achieving the Government's mission of sharply reducing deaths on our roads?

Lilian Greenwood: I am happy to encourage my hon. Friend's constituents to complete that survey. It is vitally important that the views of local people are heard by those local authorities who have the power to act to save lives.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. Over the past 17 months, I have supported my constituents Nevgül and Bora Bicakci. In August 2024, a bus mounted the pavement in Bexleyheath and killed their nine-year-old daughter, Ada. The driver of that bus was subsequently found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving and driving while unfit through drugs. I pay tribute to the family's campaign work on issues relating to drug-driving. Will the Minister confirm that the strategy includes a review of the penalties for drug-driving offences and the exploration of alternative methods for collecting and processing drug-driving evidence?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done to support his constituents, whom I had the pleasure of meeting at the Livia awards last year. I can confirm that we are taking the action he sets out to curb drug-driving and to ensure that those who act in such a reckless manner feel the full consequences of the law.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I commend the Minister for bringing forward the first road safety strategy in more than a decade, alongside specific and measurable targets for cutting the number of deaths on our roads. Evidently, one of the experiences we share across the House is the first time we meet the family of a child who has been killed on our roads. In my case, it was a child from Middlewich who was just cycling to school when he was hit by a young driver racing another car. What will stay with me—as it will stay with his friends, the school and our community for ever—is not just the sense of utter devastation, but the sense of determination from the parents that it cannot be allowed to happen to another family. The strategy sets out a broad range of measures that the Government want to bring in. Will the Minister commit to publishing a timetable for when each consultation and each measure is likely to come in, so that we can give reassurance to families that we are going to do this?

Lilian Greenwood: I can provide my hon. Friend with the assurance that we are going to do this. We will establish a new road safety board, which I will chair, to ensure that we make progress on the measures we have set out in the strategy and that we look at how soon we can act to ensure that those people see change happening.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): As I have previously discussed with the Minister, the A505 is one of the deadliest roads in the country, and the stretch between Baldock and Royston in particular has seen tragedy after tragedy in my constituency. Will the Minister set out how the road safety strategy will empower local highways authorities to take the necessary actions to finally make the A505 safer?

Lilian Greenwood: This strategy will be delivered in partnership with local authorities. We are strengthening the guidance that we provide to them so that they can put in place those measures that are needed to save lives.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I commend the Minister on this strategy; I know how much tireless work she has put into it. I represent residents on Stonebridge Lane in Farnley, Dixon Lane in Wortley, Green Lane in Lofthouse and Westerton Road in Tingley. They all tell me that the speeds on their roads are far too high, but they are repeatedly told by the highways department that the mean average speed is too low to do anything about it, despite the fact that the mean average speed is often slightly higher than the speed limits on those roads. As a former maths teacher, I know the value of data, but I also know the limitations of the mean. What will the road safety strategy do to alleviate my residents' genuine concerns?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He raises very familiar concerns on behalf of his constituents. We know that the guidance on setting speed limits and on taking action needs updating. That is why we have committed to do that as part of this road safety strategy.

Subsea Telecommunications Cables: Resilience and Crisis Preparedness

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. Matt Western will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not to the relevant Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.14 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to present the first report of this Parliament of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this statement on the United Kingdom's resilience and crisis preparedness in relation to subsea telecommunication cables.

Subsea cables are critical to the UK's economic prosperity and global influence. They provide crucial, irreplaceable connectivity between the United Kingdom and the rest of the world. Like the trade routes of old, they are the arteries and veins of global commerce and communication. They carry a staggering 99% of the United Kingdom's international data, and \$1.5 trillion-worth in global cross-border trading. That is across 64 cables, including 45 international connections, but capacity is concentrated in newer equipment. For example, two newer cables carry 75% of transatlantic capacity.

For centuries, the United Kingdom has felt secure as an island, but that geostrategic strength is now a vulnerability, as the subsea cables on which the world depends have become a new front in a hybrid war. Revisionist powers and their proxies are targeting liberal democracies' critical underwater infrastructure. Their aim is to disrupt connectivity, inflict economic damage and cause panic. By attacking us in this way, below the threshold of war, our adversaries are demonstrating their ability to do more at a much bigger scale and a much faster rate, should hostilities escalate. Subsea cables can be cut by something as unsophisticated as a rogue anchor dragged along the seabed by a commercial vessel.

As we have seen over recent months in the Baltic sea, such activity can easily be made to look accidental and readily denied, but Russia and China are also developing more targeted capabilities and operating at greater depths in our oceans, where the cables are harder to access and repair. Governance of subsea cables has been fragmented across at least eight Departments, seven agencies and numerous private sector actors. Contingency planning has been inadequate and largely ignored the possibility of a co-ordinated attack. We rely on legislation from 1885, with the threat of a paltry £100 fine to deter acts of cable damage.

The United Kingdom's approach to subsea cables is no longer good enough. Concerned by the apparent lack of action in this area, my Committee launched an inquiry to assess the resilience of the United Kingdom's subsea telecommunications cable network and the effectiveness of the Government's work to protect it. We spoke in public and in private to security experts, lawyers, cable owners and operators, cable repair firms, former and serving naval leaders, policymakers from NATO allies, telecoms firms and those working in sectors reliant on data carried by subsea cables.

We were encouraged to find that, in the business-as-usual scenario, the UK subsea cable network enjoys a good level of resilience. Nevertheless, there are points of vulnerability in the network and gaps in the Government's work, such as onshore infrastructure. Cables come ashore via landing stations, which remain vulnerable to sabotage. Many onward terrestrial links converge towards data centres. This all presents risks for low-level deniable attacks, which would be costly, provocative and hard to prevent.

Another example is the lack of genuinely sovereign repair capabilities. The United Kingdom is currently reliant on cable maintenance and repair consortiums, but repairs can take many days or weeks, and there is no guarantee that these consortium ships will be available when we need them. Commissioning a cable repair ship does not happen overnight. There is little to no redundant repair capacity that could be purchased at short notice on the open market. The Government must look ahead and acquire a genuinely sovereign cable repair ship by 2030.

Our report covered many other issues, and we were encouraged by the Government response. They had clearly engaged with the issues in depth, and there was a clear explanation of their rationale on each of our points. In particular, we are glad that the Government have committed to, first, establishing an oversight board, chaired by the Cabinet Office, to co-ordinate cross-Government work on protecting undersea infrastructure; secondly, updating impact assessments and strengthening contingency planning across critical public and private sectors; and thirdly, writing to landing station operators to emphasise the importance of robust security standards, and to ask them to produce emergency repair plans within 12 months.

None the less, the Government response does not address the Committee's concerns about developing a more robust military deterrent. The recent announcement of further details of the Atlantic Bastion programme is welcome, but the capabilities outlined must be deployed at sufficient scale and pace to effectively deter threats to subsea cables. Furthermore, our Navy may be world-renowned, but our hands are tied by international law when it comes to intercepting suspect civilian ships outside our territorial waters.

The Government have said that they are launching a comprehensive review of legislation relating to subsea cable infrastructure, but they have not elaborated in detail. They have committed to exploring options for a sovereign cable repair ship, and we will keep a close eye on the progress made on this key recommendation. We will also keep a close eye on the commitments to upgrade security at cable landing stations, on which the Government have agreed to make progress.

Of course, the damage that our adversaries can cause us is not without limitation. Cable-monitoring schemes are increasing, and NATO can track sub-surface activity closely in a crisis. Would-be saboteurs may be identified by the security services in advance of carrying out an attack, but the damage that our adversaries can cause is nevertheless extensive. Unless we adopt much better mitigations, a tipping-point scenario seems possible. From the evidence submitted to our inquiry, we estimate that severe disruption would include financial payment and supply chain failures, degraded communications, overstretched emergency responses and unexpected cascading issues, all at a time of crisis.

We hope that this report has given the Government the wake-up call that they need to take this matter seriously. We will keep a keen eye on the Government's progress in these areas, and we will conduct further scrutiny as required.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate the Committee on its report, and I know that it took evidence from authoritative experts, such as the excellent Elisabeth Braw. Can the Chair explain to the House whether his findings were compatible with the alarming headline in today's *Daily Mail* about another report from the Council on Geostrategy think-tank, which claims that cutting just 60 cables going in and out of the UK could affect 99% of our data? Is there more resilience in the system than that would seem to suggest?

Matt Western: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his service on the Committee over so many years, which was hugely valued, and his point is absolutely fair. I have not seen the specific report that was published today, but it echoes the points that we have made in this report. We do not want to be alarmist, but we cannot accept any complacency about what the threats are, because there is a genuine risk.

The truth is that there is the potential to reroute cables. There is a significant amount of traffic across the Atlantic—some of it comes into Ireland, some of it into mainland Europe, and some of it into the UK—so it is always possible for data communications to come through to us in different ways and, in an extreme crisis, for us to turn to satellites, although that capacity is significantly lower. I am sure there are some very valid points in that report, and I will look at it more closely.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his statement, and commend the hard work of other members of our Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in helping to compile the subsea telecommunications cables report. The number of recommendations agreed to by the Government demonstrates that our detailed analysis in the report ensures the very best for our nation's security. Does the Chair agree that in this fast-evolving security environment, the UK must ensure that our military deterrent is robust to protect subsea cables from the deliberate damage that we have seen in, for example, the Baltic?

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend for serving on the Committee and for the work he is doing in chairing the Defence Committee, and he is absolutely right. There are several elements to this. One is, as we have seen in the Baltic and around our shores, the nature of

[*Matt Western*]

the threats. The attacks on cables are proving provocative, and we have to demonstrate a more muscular approach to how we view them. It is interesting to see that some of our peers in NATO have taken this a bit further, and we should look closely at that, but we are constrained by international law.

I have mentioned the Submarine Telegraph Act 1885, which is not fit for purpose. There needs to be some thinking along the lines of what we can do within our territorial waters to address any threat that is presented, such as we saw last year with the Yantar and other ships. Work needs to be done on the legal side, but also on the hardware that we can deploy. As an island nation, this should be something on which we can develop a huge sovereign capability, which would also boost our exports.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the quality of this report? I have a family interest in undersea cables: it was my great-great-grandfather, Professor Fleeming Jenkin, who laid the first transatlantic telephone cable in 1858. On the question of deterrence, can we realistically deter this kind of behaviour by our adversaries if we continue to allow our hands to be tied by an overstrict interpretation of international law? The vandalism committed on undersea cables has very serious economic consequences, and maybe even national security consequences. It is being committed by ships that are themselves in breach of international law. Should we not just deal with them, particularly if they open fire on our military aircraft, as happened recently with lasers from a Russian ship?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Western, be careful of the time.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I will keep my comments brief. I absolutely agree that the legal side of this urgently needs to be addressed, and I understand from the Government that they will look very closely at it in their defence resilience Bill.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the Committee for its work. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the restrictions of international law, but could he explain what evidence the Committee took about the need for international co-operation? It seems evident to me that the nature of subsea cables means that international co-operation is required to protect them sufficiently. Are there any mechanisms with which the UK should be engaging better?

Matt Western: Various organisations that have been established have interests in this area. Of course, much of this is in the private sector. The Committee is concerned

about how much of it is in the private domain and how much influence the Government can have. Collectively, there is a need for Governments to work much more closely on this issue, so we need to have closer ties with friendly nations that are facing similar challenges in order to build a greater deterrent. Atlantic Bastion is a good example of the work that can be done.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend the Committee's report and the hon. Member for summarising it so excellently. There are several questions I would like to ask him, but for brevity I will confine myself to one. A few minutes ago, he suggested that the Government should consider including a cable repair ship in its new defence equipment programme, and I think we would have sympathy with that, but for that we need a defence investment plan. The House was faithfully promised such a plan in August and then very faithfully promised it by Christmas, but the rumour is that we will not get it till March. Would he agree with me that we need that equipment plan sooner rather than later, and ideally this month rather than having to wait till March?

Matt Western: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I do not know about the timings—I am not close enough to the Government for that—but the United States did something interesting, which was to have a scheme to lease two ships, costing them \$10 million a year. There are ways around this, but having a sovereign capability is going to be important or, to go back to the question asked by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean), we could combine with other nations to develop such a capacity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Select Committee's report. The very nature of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in being a member of NATO, means that it has protection, and therefore the connection from the mainland across the Irish sea to Northern Ireland is protected. However, what is not protected is the Republic of Ireland, which is not a member of NATO, although it is a member of the EU. What consideration did the Committee give to the fact that the Republic of Ireland could be the vulnerable back door when it comes to subsea telecommunication cables, and what has been done to address that?

Matt Western: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and it is absolutely true. We did not specifically look at the situation in Ireland. We will be doing further work on this in the coming months, because I think that is required and will be welcomed by Departments, but, yes, we need to meet the EU and Ireland to talk about those threats and how we can collaborate. He is absolutely right to identify Ireland as an important part of this.

Points of Order

1.31 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your guidance? The provision of social housing by the London borough of Hillingdon is important to the two thirds of my constituents who are served by that authority. They are therefore concerned that the House may have been inadvertently misled by the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), who said on 5 November, and I quote from *Hansard*, that one of the crucial sites the council is progressing had been

“left derelict for years, with the council not determining the application”.—[*Official Report*, 5 November 2025; Vol. 774, c. 401WH.]

It is clear that the decision about this key provision of great concern to my constituents sits with the Mayor of London. A stage 2 decision by the mayor is required before any planning can progress on the site, and it is therefore important that the House is aware that the delay is attributable not to the London borough of Hillingdon, but to the failings of the Mayor of London. How can I ensure that the record stands corrected?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order, and for confirming that he has indeed informed the Member he mentioned. He seems to be raising a point of dispute, and the point at issue is not a matter for the Chair, but he has most definitely put his view on the record.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I very much regret that I did not have the opportunity to let you know I would be raising this, but it has been drawn to my attention that the Government are briefing a change of policy on business rates for pubs. Has a Minister indicated that they want to come to the House to make a statement, as I am sure the Speaker would prefer them to do that before they give any further briefing to the media?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have not been made aware of any such statement, but I have been in the Chair for a little while now. No doubt those on the Treasury Bench have heard that, and will accordingly be acting appropriately.

BILL PRESENTED

UNIVERSAL CREDIT (REMOVAL OF TWO CHILD LIMIT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Pat McFadden, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Darren Jones, Secretary Wes Streeting, Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Secretary Ed Miliband, Secretary Steve Reed, Secretary Peter Kyle, Secretary Liz Kendall, Secretary Hilary Benn, James Murray and Nick Thomas-Symonds, presented a Bill to make provision to remove the two child limit on the child element of universal credit.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 12 January, and to be printed (Bill 359) with explanatory notes (Bill 359-EN).

Backbench Business

Human Rights Abuses: Magnitsky Sanctions

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Sir Iain Duncan Smith, who will speak for about 15 minutes.

1.34 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned that serious human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity, war crimes and torture, together with widespread grand corruption, continue to escalate in an increasingly unstable global environment; notes that global human rights and anti-corruption sanctions, commonly known as Magnitsky sanctions, remain an essential mechanism for accountability and redress, yet their implementation by the United Kingdom is inconsistent and insufficient, and lacks oversight; regrets that numerous individuals credibly implicated in serious abuses and corruption remain unsanctioned, that enforcement and transparency around decision-making remains inadequate, and that sanctioned individuals continue to exploit evasion methods while victims receive limited support; further notes the absence of a long-term strategy for the management of frozen assets and a lack of clear criteria for delisting, alongside growing concerns that sanctions are becoming politicised internationally; urges the Government to strengthen the credibility of the Magnitsky sanctions regime through consistent and impartial application, enhanced enforcement, and by ensuring greater Parliamentary oversight and expanded measures to support victims, including developing pathways for compensation; and holds that, relevant to this, those involved in the arbitrary detention of British nationals should face Magnitsky sanctions, including those involved in the detention of Ryan Cornelius, Jagtar Singh Johal and Jimmy Lai.

I rise to speak to the motion in my name, which is supported by 17 hon. and right hon. Members from across the House. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions and reparation, I welcome the advent of the growing use of Magnitsky sanctions as a major development in accountability for human rights abuse and corruption.

These sanctions are named after Sergei Magnitsky, a tax adviser killed in a Russian prison after exposing fraud by Russian Government officials. Magnitsky sanctions freeze perpetrators' assets and stop them travelling internationally, and they are now used by the UK, the US, the EU and Canada, which together represent over one third of global GDP. In the UK, Magnitsky sanctions stop perpetrators accessing London, the world's second largest financial centre and the world's largest luxury property market. Sanctions are most effective when the various jurisdictions work together to close perpetrators off from, and drive them away from, financial markets.

Looking at the comparative picture, the US has sanctioned 608 individuals and entities under its Magnitsky-style regime, though 20 have been delisted. Of those designations, 17 relate to Russia, with one since delisted, and 34 are against China and six against the United Arab Emirates for corruption. By contrast—and this is the point I really want to make—since introducing Magnitsky sanctions in the legislation passed in 2020, the UK has imposed 164 designations under its global human rights regime and 65 under the global anti-corruption regime. That makes a total of 229 Magnitsky-style designations, of which 60 relate to Russia, eight to China and none to the UAE.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I apologise for intervening on my right hon. Friend so early on, but he has mentioned Russia several times. He will be aware that there has been much talk about ceasefires, but there is no sign of one yet, because Putin still thinks he is winning in Ukraine. Would he agree with me that, if we really want to compel Putin to stop killing Ukrainians, we need to increase sanctions on the Russian Government, particularly on their hydrocarbons, which means action not just by us and Europe, but further sanctions from the United States?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. We have a tool here that can be used to drive back those who act badly—in this particular case, against a country illegally invading a neighbouring democratic state—so we should use this ability to sanction those involved and to increase such sanctions dramatically. I know Labour Members will be raising this issue, but they will have noted what he has said.

The UK and the US have imposed extensive additional sanctions on Russian individuals and entities under the Russia-specific sanctions regimes. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) may want to note, those regimes use broader designation grounds and, crucially, do not usually acknowledge an individual's direct involvement in human rights abuses in Ukraine or elsewhere. That distinction matters, and this should be rectified by the UK Government. The symbolic and moral force of the Magnitsky sanctions is precisely to name perpetrators and link consequences directly to human rights abuses, and that is what sets them apart. In sheer volume, the contrast is stark. The US has imposed well over 5,000 such Russia-related non-Magnitsky designations, and the UK about 2,900. Yet despite this scale, the absence in most cases of any explicit human rights attribution in such regimes means an important opportunity for accountability is being missed.

As a mechanism in the Government's foreign policy toolkit, Magnitsky sanctions have a huge potential. However, important gaps remain in their implementation, raising serious concerns about their overall effectiveness. There is no publicly available information on the number of Magnitsky sanctions evidence dossiers received by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. However, based on estimates since the inception of the UK's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020, the FCDO receives on average about two or three dossiers of evidence per month from civil society organisations, which often identify between three and 15 individuals or entities alleged to be implicated in human rights violations. This means that since July 2020, the FCDO has received evidence on anywhere between 360 and 3,000 alleged perpetrators of serious human rights violations. In stark contrast, only 229 individuals and entities have been sanctioned under the global human rights regime and global anti-corruption regime, to date.

The limited number of Magnitsky sanctions imposed undermines their effectiveness. Designations tend to overlook broader command structures, instead focusing on isolated actors, excluding key backers or enablers and failing to adopt when sanctioned entities rebrand. For example, Chen Zhi is one of the many leaders of scam networks with bases in south-east Asia trafficking and torturing vulnerable individuals to compel them to

scam citizens here in the UK and abroad. The news that the UK and the US sanctioned some of those responsible is always welcome, but those sanctions fail to target Cambodian Government figures who are themselves implicated in the practice, or who turn a blind eye to those violations.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on obtaining the debate and on highlighting how the Magnitsky sanctions could be used more effectively. Could he explain to the House, and for my benefit, what effect, if one applies sanctions to some foreign leader, dictator or person who is in a completely different jurisdiction, does a sanction actually have and how can it be made to bite on the interests of that person so that the sanctions are actually felt by that person?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It has two effects. First, anything to do with any finance or movement or visitations to the United Kingdom are immediately ruled out and the seizure of financial entities can take place. Secondly, it influences other countries to do the same. America may work with us on that, too. Two of the greatest financial markets are then shut to an individual, who may be part of a Government, thus making it highly difficult for them to operate, or to come and enjoy themselves—a lot of that is done. They become pariahs internationally and that has a huge effect, because it influences what others near them will do when they realise they are about to lose their access to very important areas—cities and financial markets. It has already shown to have had a massive knock-on effect.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain to the House who actually does the research that leads to people being identified for sanctioning, whether there is resistance in such places as the City of London, which no doubt could make enormous financial profits from having illicit money deposited there, and whether such places are incentivised to turn a blind eye when attempts are made to camouflage the real sources of the dirty money flowing in?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Many groups are doing that research at the moment, some of them private and voluntary organisations, but the Foreign Office itself is meant to be doing it. I am struck by the fact that it does not always check everybody's backgrounds. The reality is that it must be much more intense and we must start going after these people. The City of London had a bad reputation for dirty money. A lot of that has stopped now as a result of the Russian sanctions. More importantly, individual sanctions also helped to end that. We need to be much more particular about where that money is coming from and how, and who are the individuals who are behind the use of that money. My right hon. Friend is quite right about that.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: If I keep giving way, I will end up losing time. But I will give way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is right to bring this issue forward. Some 229 people have designated by the

United Kingdom, and 3,000 Russians have been designated after the invasion of Ukraine. However, weak enforcement risks hollowing out the regime. To date, no fines have been imposed for breaches of the UK's Magnitsky-style sanctions. If this House is serious about protecting life and dignity, we must ensure that these tools are used consistently and enforced credibly. I am often reminded of the example of Jesus Christ, the greatest leader and yet the greatest servant. He protected lives by giving his own. We, as leaders, should echo his example by diligently helping those who cannot help themselves.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, absolutely right. It is important to get justice and to make sure that others who would be tempted to go down that road realise there will be real penalties to pay.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate on Magnitsky-style sanctions for serious human rights abuses. There are numerous ways that sanctioned individuals have attempted to evade UK authorities, in particular when it comes to cryptocurrencies. Does he agree that co-ordination with our international allies, as well as being at the cutting edge of technology, is key to ensuring that increasingly evasive individuals are brought to heel?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and that is the whole point of today's debate. My feeling is that this Government and even the previous Government have to a degree dragged their feet. I often say to the Minister, who I know very well—we have debated with each other endlessly—that it seems not to matter who is in government, because the Foreign Office retains its reluctance over many sanctions. He will deny that, of course, because it is his job to do so, but I see him as a very decent individual and he must know in his heart of hearts that there is more that we could do. I will leave that for the moment, until he has the chance to wind up the debate.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a perception in my constituency and across the country that the money laundering checks on individual consumers going for a mortgage or buying something expensive such as a car seem to be more stringent than those for the millionaire-billionaire foreign investors who are investing in the City of London?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The whole point of the debate is to ensure that we know where the money comes from, that we know how it has been gained, and that the individuals must pay a penalty if they are involved in what is illegal or inhuman. The key point is that all those matters can be picked out by the Magnitsky sanctions.

I mentioned Myanmar earlier. Despite historically leaning on sanctions against Myanmar's military junta for its role in the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity against its civilian population after the 2021 coup, the UK has failed to target the State Security and Peace Commission, the military's successor to the UK-sanctioned State Administration Council. Without additional sanctions, the State Security and

Peace Commission, which was established in an attempt by the military to rebrand itself and rebuild financial ties with international partners, has effectively succeeded in its mission. That is exactly what we should have been tackling through the sanctions available to us, but we have not done so.

Finally, last month the UK placed sanctions on four senior commanders of Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces suspected of involvement in heinous violence against civilians in the city of El Fasher. However, no action was taken against their key military and diplomatic backer, the United Arab Emirates, or their chief commander. That highlights a broader, troubling trend: to date, only a fraction of Magnitsky sanctions have ever been applied by the UK Government to perpetrators from countries considered strategic allies of the UK. That is a very important point to make; politics have an awful lot to do with this issue. As reported by REDRESS, several of the most notorious human rights abusers and corrupt actors, including in Iran, Nigeria, Sudan, China, Eritrea, the UAE and Egypt—we have mentioned Russia, too—have not been sanctioned by the UK.

I will now come to some examples of individuals and contexts that remain unsanctioned despite overwhelming evidence of involvement in corruption and serious human rights issues. Let me deal now with China. While the UK imposed sanctions on four individuals and one entity involved in China's violent repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang in 2021, it never acted on detailed evidence received from human rights organisations. REDRESS—I know, because I have seen the evidence—previously submitted it to the FCDO, calling for targeted sanctions on the following individuals and entities for their involvement in serious human rights violations in Xinjiang.

All of the following are sanctioned by the US—our ally—but not by the UK. The persons recommended for designations are: Chen Quanguo, party secretary of the Xinjiang Chinese Communist party and the key driver of the policy of genocide; Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps; Sun Jinlong, former political commissar of the XPCC, who was sanctioned by the US on 31 July 2020; Peng Jiarui, deputy party secretary and commander of the XPCC, sanctioned by the US on 31 July 2020; and Huo Liujun, former leader of the Public Security Bureau, sanctioned by the US on 9 July 2020. As somebody sanctioned by the Chinese Government myself—like you, Madam Deputy Speaker—for raising the issues of Xinjiang at the time, I think that that is a major omission. These are the key people—close almost to President Xi himself—who, when sanctioned, will really feel it. They are locked out of America, but have not been locked out by us. Will the Minister therefore outline what steps the FCDO will take to ensure that sanctions are consistently applied to all actors involved in human rights abuses and corruption?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Why is there no transatlantic co-operation on this? What does my right hon. Friend think is the cause of that lack of co-operation?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I really do not know the answer to that question. All I can say to my hon. Friend is that we act individually and are supposed to co-operate, but that does not always work. We have seen with the Chinese and others that America leads the way and we half follow, or do not follow at all. My concern is that

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

we do not champion such action in the way that we could and should as an upholder of human rights and freedom. This country has a huge record in that area and we need to use it much more.

I am not the only Member of this House to have raised concerns about the relationship between the Government of the United Arab Emirates and the activities of the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan. What is going on in Sudan is brutal, bloody and huge, even in comparison to what is happening in somewhere like Gaza. It is an astonishing abuse of human rights and the value of life. The RSF is responsible for brutal murders, rapes, attacks on hospitals and significant numbers of killings, and yet this organisation has been supported heavily by the UAE. It is said that without the support of the UAE, there would not now be a major war going on in Sudan. There are really big questions to be asked here, because without those arms shipments and other support, there would not be the fighting and terrible consequences that we see in Sudan.

I wish to draw the attention of the Minister to reporting by *The New York Times* in June last year, which, citing US intelligence sources, references the involvement of Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Deputy President of the UAE, in co-ordination with the RSF and in his role as chair of two charities funding hospitals in Chad that have allegedly been used in the distribution of weapons to the RSF. The investigation further reports that the US envoy to Sudan confronted Sheikh Mansour personally in 2024 about his support for General Hamdan of the RSF. As the ultimate owner of Manchester City football club, Sheikh Mansour is possibly the most high-profile UAE investor in the UK economy. What are we going to do about that? That is a signal and serious problem for us.

Will the Minister confirm that, given the appalling crimes of the RSF, which fall squarely in the purview of the global human rights sanctions scheme, the Department has carried out a full assessment of whether representatives of the UAE Government may meet the criteria for sanctions, given the significant role the UAE is alleged to play in support of the RSF and the substantial influence of the UAE on investments in the UK economy and public life? If such an assessment has not been carried out, will the Minister say whether it is the Government's intention to do so?

Individuals arbitrarily detained abroad are particularly vulnerable to torture, ill treatment and other serious human rights violations, from the moment they are detained. The Government's own figures show that in 2024 the FCDO received 186 new allegations of torture and mistreatment from British nationals overseas. Arbitrary detention and related human rights abuses have long-lasting effects on those who experience them; following release, survivors must bear the physical, psychological and socioeconomic toll of their captivity.

This makes it all the more concerning that the list of British nationals currently subject to arbitrary detention abroad is long. I am going to read out the names on it: Jagtar Singh Johal; Ryan Cornelius, whose family are with us today in the Gallery; Jimmy Lai; Nnamdi Kanu; Christian James Michel; Matthew Alexander Pascoe; Ramze Shihab Ahmed al-Rifa'i; Charles Ridley; Mehran Raoof; Craig and Lindsay Foreman; and Ahmed al-Doush. I want to focus on two particular cases that

exemplify the FCDO's reluctance to use Magnitsky sanctions to challenge arbitrary detention: first, Ryan Cornelius; secondly, Jimmy Lai.

A case that underscores the ongoing failure of the UK Government—and, I have to say, that of their predecessor—to effectively employ Magnitsky sanctions to deter and punish those responsible for arbitrarily detaining and mistreating UK nationals is, of course, that of Ryan Cornelius, who has been arbitrarily detained in Dubai for more than 17 years. I want to mention the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), who has raised this issue on a number of occasions. I congratulate him on his support for the Cornelius family. This arbitrary detention also applies to Charles Ridley, Ryan Cornelius's business partner, but I will focus today on Ryan.

Unlike the case of Vladimir Kara-Murza, Ryan's plight has been met with deafening silence, despite well-documented evidence of an unfair trial and the inhumane treatment that has been meted out to him. His detention has been found arbitrary by the UN working group on arbitrary detention. Ryan's original 10-year sentence was extended by 20 years at the behest of the Dubai Islamic Bank, which has used his imprisonment as leverage to seize his assets, rendering his family essentially homeless.

The FCDO has been reluctant to engage fully with the detail of Ryan's case from the very beginning. Even now, Ryan's family—who, as I said, are with us in the Public Gallery—are repeatedly forced to set out the basic facts of his case at every single meeting with the FCDO or Ministers, despite the fact that they are fully known to them. Despite repeated calls from Ryan's family and from MPs for sanctions against Dubai officials, the UK Government have taken no action. Not a single individual has been sanctioned for their role in this case.

I urge the Minister to look at imposing targeted Magnitsky sanctions on those responsible for Mr Cornelius's arbitrary detention and asset seizure. I am going to list just eight people who are involved in the board of the Dubai bank: His Excellency Mohammed Al Shaibani; Yahya Saeed Ahmad Nasser Lootah, vice-chairman of the board of directors; Hamad Abdulla Rashed Obaid Al Shamsi, a board member; Ahmad Mohammad Saeed Bin Humaidan, also a board member; Abdul Aziz Ahmed Rahma Mohamed Al Muhairi; Dr Hamad Buamim; Javier Marin Romano; Bader Saeed Abdulla Hareb; and Dr Cigdem Kogar. I offer up the names of these people, all of whom are involved in this case, for the Government to think carefully about taking action. Unfortunately, Ryan's case appears to be a clear example of economic interests taking precedence over human rights, largely because the UAE is such a major financial investor and trading partner.

I am afraid that that double standard is not limited to Ryan's case. India—another country with a recent trade deal—continues to hold a British citizen in arbitrary detention without consequences. Jagtar Singh Johal, from Dumbarton, Scotland, was violently arrested in 2017 while in India to get married. He was tortured and has endured eight years of detention, which the UN working group on arbitrary detention has ruled “lacks legal basis and is arbitrary”.

After lots of hearings—hundreds of them—prosecutors in India have failed to produce credible evidence against Jagtar, and the UK must now use every diplomatic lever to bring him home.

I want to return, finally, to the case of Jimmy Lai. The time has come, surely, for the UK to wield its sanctions authority against the officials responsible for repression in Hong Kong. Jimmy Lai's guilty conviction for "foreign collusion" and "sedition" on 15 December, which paves the way for Hong Kong's courts to sentence the 78-year-old British citizen to life in prison, is the final straw.

Beijing has trashed the Sino-British joint declaration, crushed the freedoms it promised Hongkongers and the world, and imprisoned nearly 2,000 political prisoners, including Jimmy Lai. I have long called for the Government to hold the Hong Kong authorities to account for their persecution of the pro-democracy campaigner, who is guilty only of performing his duties as publisher of Hong Kong's *Apple Daily* newspaper by speaking to diplomats and other overseas officials.

Not a single Hong Kong individual is named on the UK sanctions list, which sets out all the people, entities and vessels sanctioned by Britain. In comparison, the US has sanctioned 11 officials from the top of Hong Kong's Administration downwards. How is it that this country, which used to administer and run Hong Kong, has not sanctioned a single person in that process? The three judges responsible for Jimmy Lai's outrageous guilty verdict—Esther Toh, Alex Lee and Susana D'Almada Remedios, two of whom were called to the bar in London—should be immediate targets, as should the prosecutors: Maggie Yang, Anthony Chau, Ivan Cheung, Crystan Chan and Karen Ng Ka-yue.

Despite the clear role that Magnitsky sanctions could play in these cases, the Government do not treat them as a core foreign policy tool for protecting British citizens abroad. They should not be reserved for politically convenient situations but applied consistently, particularly when we have economic leverage over the perpetrating state. The UN special rapporteur on torture has formally recommended the use of Magnitsky sanctions to deter state hostage taking, and survivors themselves have repeatedly called for their use.

I will listen very carefully to what the Minister has to say, as I think the House wants to get a sense of where the Government are moving on this and whether they intend to increase the level of sanctions or speed them up. If they do so, they will receive my support and, I believe, the support of the Opposition side of the House. These are important moments, and this debate is important.

When this House passed the Magnitsky Act, we did so in good faith. This singular tool would help us in the fight against the abuses of powerful people, particularly in the defence of British citizens who have been wrongly detained and are without the ability to defend themselves. It will help our fight against the powerful people who have control over others who have no redress and no hope for their future.

With the rise of totalitarian states and their satellites, who threaten our very belief in freedom and due process, and who are tearing apart what we call the international rules-based order—such as China, Russia, North Korea and Iran—this facility is needed more than ever. Its use is to deter others as much as to punish those who have acted without the law, and such action should be co-ordinated among our allies.

This House has to hold the Government to account—that is our task—and that is what today's debate is all about. If we do not speak for those languishing under the

control of others and the power of powerful states, then who will? I say to the Government simply: this is not *parti pris*, and nor is it personal; it is an idea that originated here in this place. It is the idea of freedom—freedom of the individual and their protections under the law. For those who carry out the most heinous crimes, there has to be some kind of sanction. The Magnitsky sanction is the best tool that we have. We should surely use it, and use it well, and we must make sure that those out there realise that if they get up to these most disgusting and debilitating acts, they will face a consequence and that consequence will last as long as they do.

2.3 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important and timely debate. I pay tribute to him for the persistence that he has shown in campaigning on this issue over many years, and for his work in this place helping to make and win the argument for deploying Magnitsky-style sanctions.

I would like to start by welcoming three successes of the Government regarding our sanctions regime: namely, decisive action against Putin's regime, action against people-smuggling gangsters, and action against kleptocrats the world over. The Government have shown that they are prepared to make bold and decisive use of sanctions to crack down on serious human rights abuses, corruption and breaches of international law.

First, I welcome the Government's sustained tough action against the Kremlin, introducing the largest package of sanctions since the early days of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. I firmly believe that this country must never again act as a safe haven for Russian dirty money, and the City of London must never again be seen to be a secure, out-of-the-way piggy bank for Putin's cronies to stash their wealth. It is only right that we continue to expose and disrupt every enabler of Russia's war machine, which has been terrorising the Ukrainian people for close to four years now. That must include ramping up the pressure on Putin's energy revenues.

The Government's sanctions measures have also gone a long way toward sinking Russia's shadow fleet, which we all know is a vital source of funding for Putin's war in Ukraine. Since the start of the invasion, Russian oil companies have established a shadow fleet of cargo ships charged with transporting sanctioned crude oil to third countries. Those vessels are usually owned by anonymous shell companies to shield the ships from scrutiny and sanctions. The fleet is then used to perform illegal ship-to-ship oil transfers at sea, making it much more difficult to monitor the final destination of Russian crude oil. This decaying and dangerous shadow fleet risks oil spills, which could then cause damage on the UK's shores—spills that, I remind the House, the British taxpayer would be liable to clean up.

The sanctions designations brought forward by the Government mean that a total of 545 ships have been sanctioned by the UK. Almost half the Russian shadow fleet's overall capacity has been forced off the seas by sanctions from the UK and our partners, with many ships now dead in the water.

Sir Julian Lewis: In support of what the hon. Gentleman is saying, does he agree that it is significant how important even a single ship of this fleet is to the Russian authorities

[Sir Julian Lewis]

that in desperation yesterday, in a final attempt to stop it being seized, they allowed the Russian flag to be put on one of the vessels, in the hope that that would deter the Americans from gaining control of it? Fortunately, it did not.

Lloyd Hatton: I agree with the right hon. Member's remarks. I think that the actions of the previous Government and this Government to tackle the shadow fleet are starting to bite. The measures are hitting the Kremlin war machine and will slash the revenues that Putin desperately relies upon to continue to wage war in Ukraine.

Secondly, I welcome sanctions against organised criminal gangs that are currently perpetrating the vile trade of people-smuggling. This action by the Government is a world first, and it targets ringleaders, key intermediaries and the suppliers of people-smuggling equipment. The sanctions help to disrupt the flow of money and materials, including by freezing property, bank accounts and other assets. It will help to disrupt a range of different activities—from supplying small boats for smuggling to sourcing fake passports, middlemen facilitating illicit payments, and people-smuggling via lorries and small boats. It also sanctions the very gang leaders themselves. The people-smuggling gangs operating on the English channel are attempting to make a small fortune. It is essential that this Government continue to use sanctions and every lever at our disposal to disrupt and destroy the gangs.

Thirdly, the Government have made innovative use of sanctions against kleptocrats and their enablers. Notably, the Magnitsky-style sanctions deployed against Isabel dos Santos, the daughter of Angola's former president, for corruption and stealing public funds marked a pivotal moment in the fight against kleptocracy in Angola and helped to address long-standing corruption that had hindered development and worsened inequalities in the country. I welcome that action, as I am sure do Members on both sides of the House, but we must now look to deploy similar sanctions against other kleptocrats and those who enable their corrupt dealings.

While all those measures are achievements worth celebrating today, I fear that we are not going quite far or fast enough. Our use of Magnitsky-style sanctions to target human rights abuses has, to date, been a little too timid. Only 229 individuals and entities have been sanctioned under that style of sanction, which contrasts with the nearly 3,000 individuals and entities sanctioned under a single scheme specific to one country: namely, Russia.

As REDRESS and other civil society organisations have shown, too many individuals remain unsanctioned despite overwhelming evidence of their involvement in corruption and serious human rights abuses the world over. Despite high-profile designations, such as the targeting of Isabel dos Santos, the frankly limited number of Magnitsky-style sanctions imposed undermines their effectiveness. By focusing only on isolated bad actors, such narrow designations overlook key backers or enablers and they fail to adapt when entities rebrand, or disappear and then reappear, simply to sidestep sanctions.

To illustrate the problem, here are just three brief examples that highlight the gap in our use of Magnitsky sanctions, allowing those responsible for egregious human

rights violations to act with impunity. For instance, just last month the UK placed sanctions on four senior commanders of Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces—the RSF—suspected of involvement in heinous violence against civilians in the city of El Fasher. The civil war in Sudan, as has already been mentioned, is the world's biggest humanitarian crisis, displacing some 13 million people. There is overwhelming evidence of heinous crimes, mass executions, starvation and the systemic and calculated use of rape as a weapon of war. Evidence compiled by the UN, experts and journalists has shown, as has already been cited, that the UAE and its officials have been secretly supplying weapons to the RSF via neighbouring Chad—a position that the Gulf state denies, but the overwhelming evidence suggests otherwise. Sadly, no action was taken against the RSF's key military and diplomatic backer, the UAE, or against the chief commander of the RSF.

Similarly, the narrow scope of sanctions designations in Georgia also undermines our response to the human rights crisis currently under way. Georgia is increasingly finding itself subject to authoritarian rule. Since the highly disputed election in 2024, during which the Georgian Dream party claimed victory, there has been an escalation in the crackdown on protests and on independent media, including widespread violence and human rights abuses. The Georgian Dream party has now captured almost all Government branches and institutions. It has used its new-found power to aggressively suppress protests and all scrutiny of its actions, including hundreds of reports of arbitrary detention and even torture.

Although the UK has rightly sanctioned some of those responsible for violent attacks against journalists and protesters, key members of the pro-Russia elite were sadly absent from those designations. They include Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder and chairman of the Georgian Dream party, who was sanctioned by the Biden Administration in the United States for undermining democratic processes simply for the benefit of the Kremlin. The UK has yet to take the same steps in relation to Georgia, so will the Minister make decisive use of sanctions to crack down on the abuses, which only benefit the Russian Government and are entirely at the expense of the Georgian people?

Finally, although the UK imposed sanctions on four individuals and one entity involved in the deadly repression of Uyghur Muslims in China in 2021, it never acted on detailed evidence received from REDRESS and other human rights organisations, which identified the broader command structure behind the violent atrocities committed against the Uyghur people in China. We cannot continue to ignore the calls, already put forward today, for sanctions on senior Chinese officials, who must include the Chinese Communist party secretary in Xinjiang, who is considered the architect behind the human rights abuses committed.

Those three cases all show how limiting our use of Magnitsky-style sanctions undermines their effectiveness. Sanctions are a key tool in our armoury to crack down on the most egregious human rights abuses, but narrow designation overlooks the key backers or enablers of the worst atrocities.

Underpinning our sanctions with strong enforcement is also critical to their impact. We know that sanctions are only as strong as the enforcement behind them. In last year's cross-Government review of sanctions, the Government rightly recognised that there are gaps in

the UK's sanctions implementation and enforcement, which they are seeking to address through new measures to increase the deterrent effect of sanctions and enhance our ability to take robust action against those who choose to break the rules.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Member is making an excellent contribution to the debate. The Treasury Committee heard evidence last year about the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation. It appeared to me that it is far too small for the job that it has to do, especially compared with equivalents overseas in the US and Europe. Does he think that part of the solution is also funding OFSI properly, so it can be proactive in its monitoring of sanctions, and not only reactive?

Lloyd Hatton: I believe that proper resourcing of OFSI is essential. Similarly, other bodies and authorities that fight economic crime must be properly resourced so that they can do their job properly.

Three further changes are needed to ensure that there are effective instruments for challenging human rights abuses. First, to free sanctioned assets, we need to be able to identify their ownership. If we cannot follow ownership of assets through corporate and trust structures, which are often complex and involve secretive offshore havens, many of our designations will inevitably seep through the cracks and our enforcement will turn into nothing more than a game of whack-a-mole.

Ensuring that we can follow the money is therefore a priority and that must include the UK's overseas territories and Crown dependencies. The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation found that since February 2022, over a quarter of all suspected sanctions breaches were made using intermediary jurisdictions, including the British Virgin Islands and Guernsey. That is deeply concerning, as the very jurisdictions that are enabling sanctions evasion are dragging their feet on important corporate transparency measures that would help us to follow the money in their backyards. Transparency at home and abroad is essential if sanctions are to be enforced effectively. That means ending all tolerance of secrecy in our overseas territories and Crown dependencies, which we all know have provided shelter for dirty money for far too long.

Secondly, we must strengthen the policing of sanctions evasion with a clear focus on networks and professional enablers. Reports from the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation have found that it is almost certain that lawyers, estate agents and associated property service firms based right here in the UK have helped clients to evade and avoid asset freezes, seemingly undermining our efforts from within. Some companies and enablers with a high risk appetite are willing to provide services to sanctioned high net worth individuals, allowing them to maintain their property empire and sidestep sanctions altogether. Infamously, the oligarch and former owner of Chelsea FC, one Roman Abramovich, was reportedly able to transfer his extensive property empire and a fleet of super-yachts, helicopters and jets to his children just weeks before being sanctioned here in the UK.

Despite the vast scale of sanctions evasion, enforcement by authorities in the UK in response to violations has been too weak in recent years. The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation has imposed just three fines for violations of the UK's Russia sanctions regime in

the past year, totalling a measly £622,750. That is an utterly damning figure and shows that we are bringing a water pistol to a knife fight when it comes to enforcing our sanctions measures. Worse still, OFSI has not imposed any fines at all for breaches of Magnitsky-style sanctions.

I know that the Government are planning to scale up our capability to target the professional enabler network. In the recently published anti-corruption strategy, which I wholeheartedly welcome, Ministers were right to commit to expanding the use of sanctions against professional enablers. Given the UK's world-leading role as a professional services provider, such a measure is essential if we are to begin to impose serious constraints on sanctioned individuals. A professional services ban, for example, would be an effective way to start to tackle kleptocrats and human rights abusers. Many of those individuals might not own an asset in the UK or even plan to travel here, but they rely on UK-based professional services, such as a legal firm and a bank. That simple measure would block wrongdoers from enjoying access to our large professional services sector in the UK.

Finally, I remain concerned that there is a real lack of publicly available data about enforcement capacity, actions and impact, which will undermine Parliament's ability to scrutinise sanctions enforcement and better understand whether they are working. Without a credible public picture of what is actually frozen, how can Parliament judge the effectiveness of sanctions and whether enablers may simply be assuming that enforcement in the UK is patchy at best? I ask Ministers to look closely and carefully at these proposals to improve data transparency, strengthen our ability to identify ownership and boost the policing of the enablers of sanctions evasion.

Magnitsky-style sanctions remain one of the most useful tools at the Government's disposal to hold perpetrators of serious human rights abuses and corruption to account. The effective use of these sanctions sends a clear message that the UK will not act as a safe haven for dirty money belonging to kleptocrats or human rights abusers. However, the effectiveness of sanctions depends not on their existence alone, but on the political will to use them fully, consistently and credibly. At a time when, unfortunately, the United States sometimes appears reluctant to deploy these tools with the necessary resolve, the United Kingdom has a clear responsibility to step forward and work with a broad coalition of allies and partners to effectively deploy Magnitsky-style sanctions.

I know that the Government, and almost all Members of the House, are serious about defending human rights, tackling corruption and upholding the rules-based international order, but to achieve that we must ensure that Magnitsky-style sanctions are not only a symbolic gesture, but sharp, effective instruments used to hold bad actors to account and speak truth to power. As has already been said, in an age of global uncertainty, with rogue states and corrupt individuals wishing to operate with impunity, that is exactly the type of leadership that this moment demands.

2.21 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing forward this important debate on the effectiveness of Magnitsky-style sanctions for serious human rights abuses. They are tools that reflect our values as a country that is meant to defend human rights and the rule of law.

[Iqbal Mohamed]

Under the UK's autonomous sanctions framework, which is built on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 and reinforced by subsequent legislation, the global human rights sanction regime allows us to target individuals and entities responsible for gross violations of human rights, including with asset freezes and travel bans. Magnitsky sanctions have been used against perpetrators of egregious abuses in multiple contexts, from Russian officials linked to the death of Sergei Magnitsky to those implicated in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and military leaders in Myanmar. However, today's debate also requires us to consider the broader effectiveness and consistency of these tools in the face of major crises.

Multiple authoritative assessments, particularly from REDRESS and UK parliamentary evidence submissions, highlight several areas where the UK Magnitsky sanctions regime has failed to act effectively. Evidence shows that the UK has not replicated the majority of Magnitsky sanctions imposed by partner jurisdictions across the US, Canada and the EU. Only 14% of global Magnitsky designations are listed under the UK Magnitsky regime and another 17% appear under other UK regimes, meaning that 69% of perpetrators sanctioned abroad are not sanctioned by the UK at all. Of the unsanctioned cases, 71% were designated by the US, 27% by Canada and 2% by the EU, yet the UK has not followed suit.

The gap means that the UK is failing to act against individuals already identified as human rights abusers or corrupt actors by close allies. The UK has received at least 15 detailed evidence packages from NGOs such as REDRESS documenting alleged human rights abuses or corruption in many of the countries that were referenced by previous speakers, including China, Sudan, Uganda, Bangladesh, Venezuela and others. In many of those cases, the US has already sanctioned the perpetrators, but the UK has failed to act in almost all of them.

On the use of the legal powers available, according to parliamentary evidence, since September 2021 the UK has sanctioned only three individuals under its Magnitsky human rights regime, compared with 105 designations in the preceding period under the previous Foreign Secretary. That reflects a significant slowdown and a lack of strategic direction. There is also poor co-ordination with our allies in the US, the EU and other sanctioning partners. The recommendations from the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions and reparation stressed that the UK's unilateral approach weakens the effectiveness of sanctions. The UK has failed to systematically sanction individuals already targeted by partners, co-ordinate multilateral actions to target corrupt networks instead of isolated individuals, or match the scale and frequency of designation by allies.

Magnitsky sanctions have been used against the egregious abuses that I have mentioned. However, today's debate requires us to reflect on the broader effectiveness and consistency of these tools. In recent months, the United Kingdom has taken steps to sanction two Israeli Government Ministers over their repeated incitement of violence against Palestinian civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Those designations, made alongside partners including Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Norway, include travel bans and asset freezes and were justified by the Foreign Office as necessary responses

to genocide and serious abuses of human rights. Moreover, the UK has suspended trade negotiations with Israel in response to its ongoing military offensive in Gaza and related violence in the west bank and has applied sanctions against settlers and settler organisations linked to violence against the Palestinian communities.

The scale and scope of action by the UK Government has not been sufficient, and we have failed to reflect our obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to ensure that civilians do not suffer, particularly in the light of provisional measures from the International Court of Justice ordering the protection of civilians in Gaza and actions directed at ending grave human rights violations in Gaza and the west bank. The sheer scale of suffering in Gaza, including from the blockade's effect on civilians and the risk of mass starvation, must prompt far stronger measures, ranging from broader sanctions and trade restrictions to the enforcement of legal obligations to prevent atrocities.

Instead, we see 37 NGOs, including Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Rescue Committee, ousted and banned from providing aid across the west bank and Gaza with impunity. That is despite nearly 1.9 million displaced Gazans being vulnerable to shortages of tents, shelter materials, medical assistance, clean water and sanitation support during winter, and we still refuse to go further on sanctions and punishment for Israel's actions. At the same time, the UK Government have stressed their continued support for Israel's security while the Israeli Government expand illegal settlements deeper and deeper into Palestinian territory. We have recognised the state of Palestine, which is a welcome step, but we must follow that up by fulfilling our obligations under that recognition to the Palestinian people.

All that illustrates an essential point: Magnitsky-style sanctions are neither symbolic nor irrelevant, but their effectiveness depends on consistent, principled application, rigorous enforcement and alignment with broader obligations and foreign policy goals. Targeted sanctions are most effective when they clearly align with international law, with evidence and with credible human rights concerns, when they are co-ordinated with international partners to avoid loopholes and politicisation, and when they are part of a broader strategy that includes diplomacy, humanitarian advocacy and engagement with multilateral justice mechanisms. Used in isolation, sanctions risk being dismissed as gestures rather than being seen as instruments of accountability. Used in co-ordination with wider action, they can contribute meaningfully to deterrence, pressure for change and justice for victims.

The United Kingdom should make principal use of Magnitsky sanctions wherever there is credible evidence of human rights abuses—be it in Russia, the middle east, Sudan, Myanmar or elsewhere—but they must also be prepared to act boldly and consistently, in line with international law when confronted with mass civilian suffering anywhere on the globe. Our inconsistent approach to human rights, and the protection of so-called allies, condemns us all to an unsafe world in which might is right and wrongdoing is never corrected. In the same stroke of a pen, we shame our enemies and sign away the human rights that we like to proclaim are sacrosanct. We must ensure that our sanctions regime is not just a statement of values but a tool that genuinely contributes to accountability, justice and the prevention of atrocities. I commend the motion to the House.

2.30 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I join colleagues in congratulating the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing the debate. As he rightly said, an effective sanctions regime is an increasingly important foreign policy and defence tool. Having worked on international anti-corruption and open government efforts for over a decade before I came to this place, I know that they can make a real impact. I agree with him that such a regime includes the threat of sanctions, as well as their execution.

Like others, I am pleased that the Government have introduced over 900 new sanctions against individuals, entities and ships under the Russia sanctions regime, and over 60 designations under human rights and anti-corruption specifically. I know how seriously the Minister takes this tool, and I sincerely thank him and his officials for their complex work. I believe that the UK's ambition on sanctions is at the edge of global leadership. That means that we must continually look for ways to make the system more effective, and I will suggest a couple of areas in which we might do so.

One obvious area, in which I know the Government are working hard, is the transparency of asset ownership across jurisdictions. If we want sanctions to work, we need to know where the assets are, and transparency is an important prerequisite for effective targeting. To give one example, approximately 40% of the foreign-owned properties in Kensington and Chelsea are controlled by trusts. Through sanctions, our borough has one of the highest numbers of frozen properties. Trusts are not automatically included in the foreign-owned property register, and although information can now be made available on request, the lack of open data makes it harder to track real ownership. I know that the Government are considering that matter.

Similarly, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) mentioned, the long-standing effort to bring in transparent beneficial ownership registers to the UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies would enable better tracking of assets under the control of sanctioned individuals. I support the Government review of asset and beneficial ownership in the UK, which is being carried out by anti-corruption champion Baroness Hodge, as part of the anti-corruption strategy, to identify vulnerabilities in that area. I hope that her recommendations can support our sanctions regime to be more effective.

International data sharing on this issue is important. The illicit finance summit is coming up in May. Will the Minister outline whether sanctions policy, and international co-operation around it, will be on the agenda?

On scope, we may benefit from looking more closely at how the two Magnitsky-style regimes interact, particularly in terms of corruption related to abuse of function, trading in influence and illicit enrichment, which bridge human rights and corruption. I hope that the Minister will keep under close review the potential effectiveness of sanctions relating to Georgia. I have met representatives of Georgian civil society, which has been calling for the UK to expand our sanctions further, including to Mr Ivanishvili and his top officials.

For sanctions to be effective, they have to bite, and enforcement is critical. I welcome the Government's approach of working multilaterally with allies to maximise

effectiveness. However, it is also important that we look closer to home. Roman Abramovich is a former resident of Kensington and Chelsea, and still owns frozen property in my constituency. As the House will no doubt be aware, he was sanctioned in March 2022, and his UK assets were frozen. In May 2022, he sold Chelsea football club under an agreement that the sale proceeds would be used for humanitarian need in Ukraine. It is shameful that, almost four years later, that money has still not been released. I strongly welcome the Prime Minister's leadership in issuing a licence last month to release the money within 90 days, and in making a commitment to taking legal action if necessary.

This is a case of profound national and international importance—and a test of whether our sanctions have the bite that they need. Although I welcome the cross-party spirit with which the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green approached the debate, I find it astonishing that such a serious conflict of interest has now emerged at the top of the Conservative party. Sir Bill Browder—the man who spearheaded the global campaign for Magnitsky sanctions—has asked how it is possible that the shadow Attorney General can

“moonlight as the attorney for a Russian oligarch who is trying to wiggle out of a £2.5 billion deal to aid victims of the war in Ukraine that he made with the UK Government? Back in the day that was called a ‘conflict of interest’”.

I agree with Sir Bill, and I suspect the right hon. Gentleman has sympathy with that point, too.

The detail matters here. Yesterday, Lord Wolfson published a letter saying that the Prime Minister got his facts wrong, and that he was not advising Mr Abramovich on UK sanctions or the proceeds of Chelsea FC. First, the Prime Minister did not in fact say that Lord Wolfson is advising Roman Abramovich on UK sanctions and the proceeds of sale of Chelsea FC. The Prime Minister did say, however, that Lord Wolfson is advising Mr Abramovich. That is true, as both Lord Wolfson and the Opposition spokesperson have now confirmed. The record should, in my view, be corrected.

Secondly, Lord Wolfson's letter omitted the most crucial piece of new information released by the Opposition spokesperson yesterday, which is that the shadow Attorney General has now recused himself from advising the Leader of the Opposition and shadow Ministers on Ukraine and Russia. Quite apart from whether someone can be an effective shadow Attorney General when they are unable to provide legal advice on the most important issues facing this country—Ukraine's security guarantees to name but one—this recusal raises serious questions. Does it include efforts to tackle the Russian shadow fleet, including the military action yesterday? Does it include sanctions policy and enforcement? Does it include tax policy? The BBC reports that Abramovich could owe the UK up to £1 billion in tax after a botched attempt to avoid tax on hedge fund investments via shell companies in the British Virgin Islands.

Thirdly, it is naive in the extreme to think it possible to separate the various legal cases that Mr Abramovich is engaged in and which affect UK national interests. According to *The Times*, Abramovich's own representatives say that £1.4 billion of the proceeds from the sale of Chelsea cannot be released to a charitable foundation until legal proceedings brought by the Jersey Government are concluded. I would welcome clarification from the shadow Minister and the Minister on whether they

[Joe Powell]

consider that the ongoing litigation, and Mr Abramovich's position on its connection to the transfer of the Chelsea FC proceeds, conflicts with the ability to transfer that money speedily?

Fourthly, there has been a concerted effort to conflate the vital principle of the right to legal representation and the prevention of conflicts of interest. I absolutely support the right to legal counsel of people I may find disreputable or worse, including sanctioned individuals—that is the basis of a strong legal system—but it is a choice to serve as shadow Attorney General, and it is a choice to represent a sanctioned Russian oligarch in the Jersey case. My view is that those two roles are incompatible. By recusing himself from giving the Conservative party legal advice on Ukraine and Russia, Lord Wolfson has himself confirmed that, in his view, it is not possible give that advice while being paid to represent Roman Abramovich, and that, given the choice, being paid to represent Roman Abramovich is more important to him than fulfilling his duties as shadow Attorney General. He could have made the opposite choice, but he did not.

I want our sanctions regime to be as effective as possible. I know that the Government are committed to continuing to learn and adapt as that regime evolves. I hope—I really mean this—that the Leader of the Opposition will clear up the mess that has been created and restore the cross-party consensus that is in our national interest.

2.39 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this debate and for being a doughty champion for British citizens unfairly imprisoned abroad. Colleagues have already made clear that Magnitsky sanctions are not an abstract policy instrument but a really powerful tool, so for me the debate is really about whether we are prepared to use that tool fully and consistently on behalf of our citizens.

It is worth reminding ourselves of how this all began. We call these measures Magnitsky sanctions for a reason: a young man, Sergei Magnitsky, paid with his life for exposing corruption. He left behind an irrefutable paper trail that shows us exactly how authoritarian injustice works.

Sergei was a Russian tax lawyer—not an activist or a dissident—but he uncovered fraud of extraordinary scale involving the theft of millions of dollars carried out by state officials in Russia using the very institutions meant to uphold the law. He did what the law demanded of him: he documented it, testified and trusted that evidence would matter. Instead, the state turned on him. He was arrested by the very officials he had implicated and placed in pre-trial detention, where punishment begins long before guilt is even alleged.

What sets Sergei apart, and why we still speak his name, is what he did next. Even as his world narrowed to concrete walls and iron doors, he documented everything, with over 450 complaints, petitions and diary entries written by hand, often without a table, sometimes in freezing cells, under conditions designed to break the human spirit. In a letter to his lawyer in August 2009, he said:

“Justice, under such conditions turns into the process of grinding human meat for prisons and camps.”

That phrase was not rhetoric; it is a description of a system where detention itself becomes the punishment and where exhaustion, humiliation and neglect replace the rule of law.

Sergei was moved repeatedly between cells—often at night—and deprived of sleep, but he still refused to withdraw his testimony or plead guilty, so his conditions worsened. He was placed in cells flooded with raw sewage. He slept in his coat because the windows had no glass. Rats ran freely at night across the prison.

Fatally, Sergei was denied medical treatment. Despite a diagnosis of pancreatitis and escalating pain, and despite written pleas, verbal pleas and petitions to judges, prosecutors and officials, his requests were ignored. One official told him plainly that he would get help only after release and that nobody was obliged to provide it to him in detention.

Sergei's last note asked when the ultrasound prescribed months earlier would finally be done. It never was. On 16 November 2009 he died on a prison floor after being restrained, isolated and denied emergency care: clearly a gross breach of human rights. Even then in death, the system denied responsibility. That is why Magnitsky sanctions exist: because Sergei and the incredible campaign of Sir Bill Browder showed us that truth outlives prison walls and that accountability has to cross borders.

Why does this matter today? We are seeing the same injustice applied to the case of Ryan Cornelius, not in Moscow but in Dubai. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green talked a little about Ryan's case. He was arrested in 2008 and convicted of fraud in 2010, but the sentence that he received—harsh as it was—had an end date, and he had served it. But just weeks before his scheduled release it was extended by a further 20 years using a law introduced after his original conviction, with no proper hearing and no meaningful right of appeal. That is not justice; that detention is leverage. The parallels with Sergei are stark.

Like Sergei, Ryan was arbitrarily detained, according to the United Nations working group on arbitrary detention. Like Sergei, he has been denied due process. Like Sergei, he has been punished for refusing to concede or comply. Like Sergei, he has endured degrading prison conditions and inadequate medical care during a serious bout of tuberculosis.

But unlike Sergei—this should trouble the House deeply—Ryan Cornelius is a British citizen. The UN has ruled his detention arbitrary, and experts have raised the alarm. His family, some of whom are in the Gallery, have campaigned for years; some of them have lost everything. Members from parties across the House have spoken up, yet Ryan remains in prison. If Magnitsky sanctions are not relevant in this case, we must really ask ourselves: what are they for? I am grateful that we have heard some of the names relating to Dubai Islamic bank. I hope that the Government will take them away and think carefully about use of the powers that we have, which seem wholly appropriate in this instance.

What does the House want from the Magnitsky sanctions regime? I am grateful that several hon. Members have made these points. We want them to be more than just symbolic; we want them to be consistent, ambitious and principled. We have been honest about where our use of these sanctions has fallen short. On that, I am grateful in particular to my hon. Friend the Member for South

Dorset (Lloyd Hatton). Since we introduced the regime, we have designated 229 individuals and entities under it. While these measures have had a meaningful impact in some cases, overall we have applied them in a limited and inconsistent way. We know that the FCDO has received dossiers and evidence from civil society organisations in their hundreds—potentially thousands—implicating perpetrators, but only a small number have been sanctioned.

The contrast has already been made with the UK's response to Russia's invasion. I do not want to denigrate that response, because the Minister in particular and his colleagues have worked incredibly hard on that, and I give credit where credit is due. However, it demonstrates that where there is a political will, we do act at scale. That is what we want to see in other cases as well.

The inconsistency is particularly evident in cases involving UK strategic partners or trade allies, and in relation to conflict-related sexual violence, despite the UK's preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. There is also a clear failure to use the regime robustly in response to British nationals arbitrarily detained abroad, such as Ryan Cornelius.

Beyond designation decisions, weak enforcement is further undermining the regime. To date, no fines have been imposed for breaches of Magnitsky sanctions. Reports indicate widespread evasion involving professional enablers, opaque corporate structures and overseas territories, as has been capably pointed out. In addition, there is no obligation for the Government to report to Parliament on the use of these sanctions. I believe that should change.

The UK lacks a strategy for managing frozen assets and ensuring that sanctions contribute to justice for victims and survivors. Funds can remain untouched for years, losing value while survivors receive no reparations. I think here particularly of the family of Ryan Cornelius; his wife Heather is effectively homeless as a result of the circumstances she faces. At present, all the proceeds flow back to the Treasury rather than to those harmed by the underlying violations. Let us use these sanctions ambitiously, consistently and appropriately in combination with other mechanisms if they are effective in upholding human rights, tackling illicit finance and preventing this country from becoming a haven for war criminals and kleptocrats.

Sergei Magnitsky showed us what courage looks like when the law collapses. Ryan Cornelius reminds us what happens when we hesitate to act. Sanctions are not about vengeance; they are about drawing a line and saying that no official, no banker and no judge is beyond accountability when they participate in grave injustice. If we honour Sergei's legacy, we must be prepared to act with the same clarity he showed even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient, especially when one of our own is still paying the price.

2.48 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important debate and I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. He has already heard plenty from colleagues in the Chamber on sanctions, and I hope that today's debate will provide further food for thought.

Effective sanctions regimes for human rights violations and corruption speak to who we are as a nation—a nation that stands up for the rule of law, that respects

international law and that says, "Wherever and whoever you are, if you persecute individuals, plunder your country's resources or embezzle from your own people, there will be consequences." The reason we are having this debate today to my mind is not to call for some shiny new instrument to hold the world's criminals and the corrupt to account; rather it is to call for better use of the world-leading tools that we already have to deny the human rights abusers and kleptocrats access to our financial system, professional services and property market.

I want to focus on two particular threats: first, what I see as the inconsistent and inadequate use of Magnitsky sanctions against serious human rights abusers, particularly in Georgia and Hong Kong; and secondly, the failure to enforce sanctions properly, allowing evasion, secrecy and professional enablers to undermine the entire regime.

Let me begin with Georgia, because Georgia is a country that should be moving closer to Europe, not sliding backwards into authoritarianism for the benefit of Moscow. Yet since the highly disputed parliamentary election of 26 October 2024, that is exactly what we have seen: all branches of government and state institutions now captured by Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream party; civic space crushed; independent media and civil society organisations targeted under a new foreign agent law—legislation that comes straight out of the Kremlin playbook; and peaceful protests met time and again with violence.

The UK has rightly sanctioned some individuals responsible for violent attacks on journalists and protesters, and that is very much welcome, but as the Minister knows, I do not feel it is enough. The omissions are glaring. Most notably, the UK has failed to sanction Bidzina Ivanishvili, the individual widely regarded as exercising decisive influence over Georgia's political direction.

Lloyd Hatton: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the current situation in Georgia is not dissimilar to what we have seen in other central and eastern European countries and beyond, where Russia seeks to have greater political influence and control and has mission creep? Unless countries such as the United Kingdom push back against that early, Russia will continue to infringe and extend its tentacles into political life in countries such as Georgia?

Phil Brickell: My hon. Friend is quite right about the spheres of influence that Russia seeks to exert across central and eastern Europe.

Ivanishvili could be sanctioned under any number of our regimes—Magnitsky, global anti-corruption or even the Russian sanctions regime given his reported links to the Kremlin and his blatant kowtowing to Moscow. Just this morning, I was made aware that Georgian Dream has increased state financing for the Kulevi oil refinery, which Reuters has reported received its first shipment of Russian oil last October. The refinery itself is linked to Vladimir Alekseev, first deputy chief of Russia's GRU. That seems to be an obvious route for sanctions violations, and I hope it will be added to Ivanishvili's rap sheet. I know the Minister will be unable to comment on individual cases, but can he at least confirm that Ivanishvili's supposed status as too big to fail due to his alleged personal importance to the Georgian economy does not preclude him from being sanctioned by this country?

[Phil Brickell]

I will come to the United States later, but our allies across the Atlantic sanctioned Ivanishvili on 27 December 2024 for undermining democratic processes on behalf of, or for the benefit of, Russia. I certainly do not suggest that we follow the US in every aspect of foreign policy, but it is correct in applying that designation. Sanctioning cronies and underlings can make an impact, but let us be clear that the fish rots from the head. My fear is that our silence on Ivanishvili sends the wrong message to would-be kleptocrats around the world.

Let me turn to Hong Kong and the ongoing repression there, which is of keen interest to me and the valued community of Hongkongers across my Bolton West constituency. The dismantling of Hong Kong's freedoms is unacceptable. Since the imposition of the national security law, we have seen the systematic criminalisation of dissent: independent media shut down, civil society organisations dissolved, elected opposition figures jailed, and fundamental freedoms erased in all but name. This is textbook human rights abuse.

The case of Jimmy Lai, who has already been mentioned, symbolises that injustice—a point I was reminded of by constituents of mine who used to work with him back in Hong Kong. As a British national, a publisher and a peaceful advocate of democracy, Jimmy Lai has been imprisoned for years for exercising rights that we regard in this place as fundamental. He now faces the prospect of spending the rest of his life behind bars under a law designed to silence free speech, not to deliver justice. Of course, I welcomed the Foreign Secretary's strong condemnation of Jimmy Lai's sham trial last month, but words alone do not protect political prisoners. If Magnitsky sanctions are to retain any credibility, they must be used against those responsible for the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy and for the persecution of individuals such as Jimmy Lai. That includes officials who designed, implemented and enforced the national security law and those who have overseen its use to crush free expression and political participation.

That brings me to a wider point. We are entering a period in which the United States cannot always be relied on to apply evidence-based sanctions. In that context, the UK cannot simply wait for Washington to lead. We must be prepared to act where the United States will not. We should also not be afraid, as critical friends, to point out where the US gets it wrong. I asked the Minister earlier this week at the Foreign Affairs Committee for his response to Trump's sanctioning of two British citizens for seeking to, as Secretary Rubio sees it, "coerce" American tech platforms into suppressing free speech. Does the Minister agree that that is dangerous nonsense?

That brings me to my second theme: enforcement. Increasing designations alone is not enough. Sanctions without enforcement are no sanction at all; they are just suggestions. We now have a vast and complex sanctions architecture—Magnitsky sanctions, Russia sanctions and anti-corruption sanctions. Since Putin's barbaric invasion of Ukraine, we have had a massive boost in our own sanctions capacity and seen a huge undertaking in the private sector to keep up, yet enforcement in the UK remains worryingly weak.

We know that sanctions are being evaded. We heard earlier about Roman Abramovich reportedly transferring his UK property empire to his children just weeks

before being sanctioned—the very same individual who is now being represented by the Conservative shadow Attorney General over a dispute with the Jersey Government on the source of his wealth. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) outlined forensically, if the Opposition are serious about standing by Ukraine, they cannot have him as their top Law Officer, serving in the other place and attending shadow Cabinet meetings. It is simply incredible. Does the Minister agree that Lord Wolfson's position in the shadow Cabinet and attendance of those meetings is now completely untenable?

The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation has concluded that it is "almost certain" that UK lawyers, estate agents and property service firms have helped clients evade asset freezes. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) outlined, in the past year OFSI has imposed just three fines for breaches of the UK's sanctions regime, totalling just over £622,000. That is a rounding error compared with the scale of wealth at stake, and it is simply not a credible deterrent. All the while, there have been no breaches of Magnitsky sanctions in the past year.

This issue is acute in the British overseas territories, where low policing capacity and high financial secrecy create ideal conditions for sanctions evasion. There have been some laudable efforts in the OTs to enforce sanctions. However, I have too often been made aware of civil society organisations submitting detailed evidence of Magnitsky sanctions breaches in the overseas territories but receiving no meaningful response at all from those jurisdictions. Will the Minister assure me today that he will ensure that British overseas territories that receive such detailed allegations will act on them?

We must tackle head-on the scourge of corporate secrecy in offshore financial centres linked to the UK. If we are to ensure that our sanctions bite as much as possible, there is an urgent need for those overseas territories that continue to drag their feet—including the British Virgin Islands—to finally adopt fully public registers of beneficial ownership, as they have promised time and again but failed to deliver. As an interim step, the Minister will agree that individuals with a legitimate interest, including journalists and civil society, must have meaningful access to beneficial ownership information. Without that transparency, asset freezes cannot be enforced effectively. I look forward to the update on this issue promised earlier this year in the Government's new anti-corruption strategy, but can the Minister provide any further information on timelines—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to bring his remarks to a conclusion, because we have another debate to follow, and we still have the Front-Bench spokespeople to come.

Phil Brickell: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Transparency is the name of the game here, so will the Minister confirm whether his Department has looked at publishing comprehensive data on assets frozen within UK jurisdictions, broken down by asset class, including assets held by individuals, state-owned enterprises and states themselves? The reason I ask is simple: Parliament cannot assess the effectiveness of our regimes if it cannot see the full picture.

Let me end with this. Magnitsky sanctions are one of the most powerful tools we have to defend human rights, but they work only if they are used consistently, enforced rigorously and connected clearly to accountability and reparations. If the UK wants to be a global champion of human rights, it must stop being a safe haven for those who abuse them and start ensuring that sanctions mean something on paper and in practice.

2.59 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank and congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this important debate. I seem to remember that he once referred to himself as a “quiet man”, but he has had a loud voice on this issue. I also congratulate the other excellent speakers we have heard today. The hon. Members for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton), for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed), for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) and for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) took us on a journey through different territories, spaces and countries, and reminded us of the history of the important name that we associate with the kind of sanctions we are talking about.

We are living through a period marked by rising authoritarianism, escalating human rights abuses, and the increasing use of corruption and repression as tools of state power. In that context, Magnitsky-style sanctions are among the most powerful instruments in our armoury to uphold human rights, defend international law and promote democracy. Their strength lies in the fact that they target perpetrators, not populations, and individuals, not states, holding those responsible to account without inflicting further humanitarian harm on civilians—at least they do when they are working at their best. Magnitsky sanctions were designed to establish both legitimacy and intent. As Members have noted, they include asset freezes, travel bans, and restrictions on financial transactions, aimed directly at individuals who violate international law or commit serious human rights abuses. Their purpose is to reduce the humanitarian costs associated with blanket sanctions, to draw a clear line between civilians and abusers, and to provide a mechanism for accountability where domestic justice systems very often fail.

When used consistently and in co-ordination with our democratic allies, these sanctions carry real power. They deter future abuses, impose reputational and financial consequences, and challenge the assumption among perpetrators that they can act with impunity. Yet despite their importance, the United Kingdom’s current approach is, I contend, still falling short, and in so doing it is undermining the very purpose of the sanctions. Application remains inconsistent, enforcement is insufficient, as we have heard, and transparency and oversight are often inadequate. Sanctions retain their power only when they are applied coherently, consistently and with the political will to enforce them.

The Liberal Democrats believe that Magnitsky sanctions remain essential, yet too many individuals credibly implicated in serious abuses and corruption remain unsanctioned. Even where sanctions are imposed, those targeted continue to exploit evasion methods. Delays, gaps and selective application fundamentally weaken deterrence and erode confidence in that regime. We have consistently argued that the UK must be prepared to act decisively, rather than hesitating or allowing political

convenience to override principle. On human rights and the rule of law, the United Kingdom must be a leader, not a follower.

A key weakness lies in how Magnitsky sanctions are operationalised. There is no clear, strategic approach to when and how the powers are used, leading to narrow and often selective application that ultimately undermines deterrence. Structural complexity has discouraged bold action, and weakened the overall effectiveness of the Magnitsky regime in the UK. That problem is compounded by a lack of alignment with our allies. A significant number of individuals sanctioned by partners such as the United States, the European Union and Canada are not mirrored by the UK, reducing the collective impact of co-ordinated action. In fact, in 2022 the UK failed to replicate 69% of global Magnitsky designations. Let me be clear: these sanctions will not serve their intended purpose without close international co-ordination.

Moreover, unlike the United States, the UK does not operate under a single, clearly defined Magnitsky Act. Instead, our framework risks producing narrower and less transparent criteria for designation, particularly in cases involving serious human rights abuses and grand corruption. If we are serious about accountability, we must be bolder, clearer and more decisive in how we use these powers. That is why the Liberal Democrats would prioritise the defence of democracy and the promotion of human rights globally, deepen co-ordination of sanctions policy with our democratic allies—particularly in relation to Russia—and strengthen economic crime legislation to close loopholes that allow sanctioned individuals to evade accountability. Sanctions must be backed by rigorous enforcement and tougher vetting of major investments, or they simply will not work.

That principle applies just as strongly to the protection of British nationals overseas. Arbitrary detention is not diplomacy; it is coercion. That is why, as well as appointing a dedicated envoy for arbitrary detention, Magnitsky sanctions must be a tool for enforcement, ensuring that hostage-taking carries a personal cost to those who seek to perpetrate it. Looking ahead, the future development of the UK’s sanctions policy must be genuinely joined up across Government. Only a whole-of-Government approach can ensure effective enforcement, close loopholes and maintain both the credibility and the moral authority of our sanctions regime.

The Liberal Democrats are clear about what that means in practice. Sanctions must target the individuals responsible for human rights abuses, not just states. Economic crime legislation must be strengthened to prevent evasion. Magnitsky sanctions must be used proactively, not reluctantly, as they so often appear to be used now. Arms export controls must reflect our human rights obligations, and asset freezing and seizure must be used to stop the flow of dirty money through our financial system.

That clarity must be reflected in our response to events around the world. In Hong Kong, a territory that has been mentioned several times during the debate, the Liberal Democrats want to see Magnitsky sanctions imposed on those responsible for the erosion of freedoms and the unacceptable targeting of pro-democracy activists, including those here in the United Kingdom. The arrest warrants recently issued by Beijing are disgraceful attempts to interfere in our democracy, and they must be met with actions that befit the words that are so often spoken in this place and elsewhere.

[Dr Al Pinkerton]

The same boldness is required in response to Russia. We must work with our European partners to seize and repurpose frozen Russian assets, up to £30 billion of which are held in the UK, and direct them towards humanitarian, financial and military support for Ukraine. Sanctions that are not enforced do not constrain aggression, but enable it.

That consistency must be extended to Israel too. The Liberal Democrats were the first major UK-wide party to call for a full ban on military exports to Israel, and we continue to demand sanctions against Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Cabinet Ministers for their conduct in Gaza. International law must apply to everyone, without exception, and that includes senior figures in the UAE for their personal and institutional support for the still unfolding atrocities in Sudan.

In conclusion, Magnitsky sanctions are undoubtedly a powerful tool, but they cannot be deployed only when politically convenient. If the United Kingdom is to retain credibility on the world stage, our sanctions regime must be principled, consistent and enforced with resolve. Only then can it serve its true purpose: accountability for abusers, justice for victims and the defence of the values we claim to uphold.

3.7 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing the debate. He has long been a determined and principled advocate for human rights, and it is entirely fitting that he brought this important issue before the House for debate. I thank Members from across House for their many contributions.

The debate is not about whether Magnitsky-style sanctions are justified—they are—but about whether they are being used as effectively as they should be, and whether the Government are doing enough to ensure that they deliver real consequences for those responsible for the gravest human rights violations.

The UK has one of the most developed autonomous sanctions regimes in the world. The Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, introduced by the last Conservative Government, gives Ministers the power to impose asset freezes and travel bans on individuals and entities responsible for serious human rights abuses and corruption. That framework was designed to give the UK the ability to act decisively, in co-ordination with allies and without delay. Ministers spoke of a regime capable of reaching from Xinjiang to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and to the persecution of the Rohingya. Those ambitions were right, but the test is how the regime is applied in practice, because sanctions that are slow, inconsistently applied or weakly enforced do not deter abusers; they signal hesitation.

Much of today's debate has understandably focused on Russia, and rightly so. Since launching its illegal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been responsible for widespread and systematic abuses, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. The UK's response has been significant. It was under the last Conservative Government that the framework for these measures was put in place; as a result, around £28.7 billion in Russian-linked assets have been frozen, but freezing assets is

only part of the picture. How is this sanctions regime being enforced? How many investigations has the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation opened in the last year? How many enforcement actions have been taken, and how many penalties have been imposed? Without visible and credible enforcement, there is a real risk that sanctions become something that can be managed, worked around or even absorbed as a cost of doing business.

Several Members have raised the issue of Russia's so-called shadow fleet—the vessels and networks used to evade sanctions and to continue exporting oil. The Government have sanctioned a number of ships, which is welcome, but, as others have said, the shadow fleet is consistently adapting. It relies on complex ownership structures, opaque insurance arrangements and ship-to-ship transfers designed to obscure origin and destination. As the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), has made clear from this Dispatch Box, enforcement needs to be relentless, not only identifying vessels but targeting the wider networks that enable this activity.

That brings me to a recent example that raises important questions about enforcement. Recent reporting has suggested that sanctioned Russian crude oil was delivered to a refinery part-owned by Lakshmi Mittal, a UK-resident businessman, using vessels that had already been blacklisted by western authorities. Those shipments reportedly involved ship-to-ship transfers and other practices commonly associated with sanctions evasion. Those reports may ultimately lead to enforcement action, and I have written to the director of OFSI to seek clarification, but they underline a wider point: if sanctions are to be effective, they must follow all those involved in enabling sanction busting, not just the ships themselves. That includes those who benefit from, facilitate, finance, or fail to exercise proper oversight over, the continued flow of Russian oil revenues.

When credible concerns are raised about potential sanctions circumvention involving UK-linked individuals or businesses, there must be confidence that those concerns are examined rigorously and without hesitation. Does the Minister know whether OFSI is actively assessing the activity reported in connection with Mr Mittal's refinery? How does OFSI approach cases where supply chains are deliberately complex, span multiple jurisdictions and are designed to obscure accountability? How are the Government ensuring that enforcement action keeps pace with increasingly sophisticated attempts to evade sanctions in the energy sector?

It is also reasonable to ask whether the Government are prepared to apply the same level of scrutiny where individuals with UK links hold influential positions, such as directorships in major international institutions, banks and multinational companies, while also being connected to sectors implicating Russian energy flows. Can the Minister confirm that no individual, however prominent, and no corporate structure, however complex, is treated as being beyond scrutiny? Sanctions must be applied consistently and without exception, because their credibility depends on it.

Magnitsky-style sanctions were never intended to apply to Russia alone; they were designed to target serious human rights abuses wherever they occur, so let me turn to a number of other areas. First, there is Sudan, which has been mentioned today. We welcome

the sanctions already imposed on individuals associated with the RSF, but the situation on the ground remains dire. Civilians continue to suffer, particularly in Darfur, so what more is being done? Are further designations under active consideration? How are sanctions being used alongside diplomatic efforts at the UN and with regional partners to press for a ceasefire and accountability?

Secondly, let me turn to people smuggling and human trafficking. These crimes, which have been mentioned today, involve exploitation, violence and abuse on a large scale, often facilitated by corruption and financial secrecy. In 2025 alone, more than 41,000 illegal migrants crossed the channel in small boats—nearly 5,000 more than in the previous year. Have the Government considered whether Magnitsky-style sanctions could be used more systematically against the leaders of those criminal networks, particularly where there is evidence of corruption or serious human rights abuse? What assessment has been made of that option?

There are a number of long-standing and deeply concerning situations in which Magnitsky sanctions remain highly relevant. In Hong Kong and China, the UK has sanctioned some officials for abuses in Xinjiang and for undermining rights and freedoms. That was the right decision, but serious concerns remain; for instance, not a single Chinese or Hong Kong official has been sanctioned in connection with the dismantling of Hong Kong's freedoms, despite more than 200,000 Hongkongers relocating to the UK. The recent guilty verdict against Jimmy Lai is a stark reminder of the continued assault on the rule of law, press freedom and judicial independence in Hong Kong. Are the Government actively considering Magnitsky-style sanctions against Chinese Communist party officials involved in that case, including those responsible for political interference in the judicial system?

I also ask the Minister what action is being taken against those responsible for placing bounties on the heads of activists—including individuals now living here in the UK—in acts of clear transnational repression. The US has already sanctioned officials linked to those bounties; why has the UK not followed suit? More broadly, these issues sit alongside growing concerns about foreign influence and intimidation here in the UK, including through the proposed Chinese super-embassy in London, and the need for the effective implementation of the foreign influence registration scheme. How confident is the Minister that the UK's sanctions policy, its approach to foreign influence, and its response to transnational repression are properly aligned?

Turning briefly to Iran, as we have seen, the regime's response to peaceful protest has been brutal. Arbitrary detention, torture and executions continue, so what further steps are being taken to sanction those responsible for repression, and how is the UK working with partners to ensure that Iranian officials involved in those abuses cannot move or hide assets abroad? In Myanmar, nearly four years after the coup, the military junta continues to carry out widespread abuses against civilians, so are additional designations being prepared, and how is the UK ensuring that sanctions remain targeted, relevant and effective over time?

Finally, I turn briefly to Venezuela, where decisive action taken by the US against the Maduro regime has once again underlined the seriousness of the human rights and democratic crisis facing that country. Against

that backdrop, can the Minister set out clearly the Government's current approach to Venezuela sanctions, how human rights considerations are being reflected in policy, and whether Magnitsky-style sanctions remain firmly on the table?

Joe Powell: Would the shadow Minister consider briefly responding to my question about whether she thinks it is appropriate for the shadow Attorney General to be simultaneously advising shadow Ministers and a sanctioned Russian oligarch?

Wendy Morton: I am happy to respond. I refer the hon. Gentleman and his colleague who also raised that question, the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), to a letter that Lord Wolfson, the shadow Attorney General, has published. That letter sets out the position very clearly.

Returning to the subject of the debate, when we step back, a clear pattern emerges: sanctions only work if they are enforced rigorously, applied consistently and backed by the political will to follow the evidence wherever it leads. As such, I will close with a few final questions for the Minister. How are the Government strengthening enforcement against sanctions evasion, particularly in complex sectors such as energy and shipping, and where do they see as the next priority for designations? What steps are being taken to improve transparency and accountability to Parliament? If sanctions are to serve their purpose, they must be more than symbolic; they must be enforced, credible and consistent. That is what victims of human rights abuses deserve, and that is what the UK's reputation as a serious and principled actor on the world stage requires.

3.19 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): Let me start by thanking the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this debate. He always speaks with conviction and passion; he has been absolutely consistent on these issues for a very long time, and I recognise his leadership as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions and reparation. We fully support him and every colleague in this House who stands up for our values and has been sanctioned as a result—including your colleague the hon. Member for Sussex Weald (Ms Ghani), Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful for all the contributions today, which have been constructively critical. I assure the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and all Members that our teams will take the individual cases raised seriously, and I will try my best in the time available to respond to all the key points.

I emphasise from the start that I share the ambition of Members across this House. I take on board the challenge—indeed, I made many similar points in opposition on these issues in similar debates. I emphasise to colleagues the extraordinary work of the officials at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and of other teams across Government who work on these issues. I have to be honest: resource is finite, but we have invested substantially and we will continue to do so. We have set ambitious targets, including on enforcement, which I will come to, but I pay tribute to

[Stephen Doughty]

those people and recognise that they have been awarded for that work within the Department, and rightly so. That work is having a genuine impact, because sanctions are one of the most powerful tools we have to protect our security and advance our foreign policy, including in the areas described today.

We impose sanctions to isolate those responsible, to restrict their ability to act and to change their behaviour, as well as to send deterrent and other messages beyond those we target. However, sanctions must be focused, enforceable, legally sound and backed by the right resources and credible evidence. We maintain the integrity of our regime through the strictest interpretation and the solidity of the evidence underpinning sanctions. I want colleagues to understand that, because it is important for the functioning of the regime as a whole.

Since this Government came in, we have set ambitious targets on sanctions, and we have introduced more than 1,000 new sanctions designations against individuals, entities and ships. We have laid 15 new statutory instruments before Parliament, including to create a new regime on irregular migration, to which the shadow Minister referred. We have already designated 32 individuals and entities under that. We have played a leading role in the snapback of sanctions on Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. Those are just some of the examples showing that sanctions are not just symbolic gestures, but practical tools that are tightly focused and have a meaningful impact.

The UK covers Magnitsky-style sanctions under two regimes: the global human rights regime and the global anti-corruption regime. Under this Government, we have delivered more than 60 designations under those regimes. In 2025, we sanctioned 29 individuals and entities under the global human rights regime, going after scam centres in Cambodia and targets in Sri Lanka, Georgia and the west bank. Many colleagues have raised those areas and issues.

We have also delivered 164 sanctions taking action on human rights violations, war atrocities and gender-based violence. We have imposed sanctions on individuals, entities and organisations responsible for supporting or inciting violence against Palestinian communities in the west bank. In June 2025, we sanctioned the Israeli Government Ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich in their personal capacities, in response to their repeated incitement of violence against Palestinian communities. I mentioned the Cambodian scam centre package, which froze 20 UK properties worth more than £125 million, directly disrupting criminal activity in the heart of London. That activity impacted on British citizens on our streets, but was also linked to global corruption networks.

In November 2024, under the global anti-corruption regime, we sanctioned three notorious kleptocrats who had siphoned wealth from their countries, along with their enablers, including family and financial fixers. We froze more than £150 million in UK assets and sent a strong signal of support to Angola and other countries. We targeted an illicit gold network centred on a Kenyan-British smuggler who was using corruption to move gold out of southern Africa. In April 2025, we sanctioned corrupt officials and judges in Georgia and Guatemala and a pro-Russian network in Moldova, exposing their activities and supporting democracy and the rule of law.

Magnitsky sanctions are not our only tool. We also have the wider geographic regimes. Just in December, we sanctioned nine individuals and entities under the Syria regulations for abuses committed under the Assad regime and during last year's coastal violence. We have to ensure that sanctions are robust, legally sound and evidence-based and that they stand up to the most robust scrutiny, and I am sure that colleagues understand why.

Russia has been highlighted by many Members today. We have taken concerted action on that front, and it is making a significant difference. Last year, we sanctioned more than 700 individuals, entities and ships under the Russian regime. We were the first G7 country to sanction all four Russian oil majors. The US followed suit, and that has had a direct impact: Russia's oil revenues have dropped to their lowest level since the invasion began. I know that there is strong support across at least the majority of the House on those issues, and I have listed off the many other Magnitsky sanctions designation packages.

I am conscious of the time, and I will try to respond to some of the points that have been raised. It is worth making the point that often there are similarities between the different regimes. We co-ordinate very closely with partners, particularly the European Union, the United States, Canada and others. We try to bring the weight of the world to bear on these issues at crucial times, but I emphasise to colleagues that the legal bases for our sanctions regimes are different. There are different legal and judicial processes, and that is why there are often differences. Because of where nexuses of individuals and entities are, there are also often differences in where our sanctions can have the biggest impact. Sometimes that is what underpins what otherwise appears to be incongruity between regimes, but we always try to bring them together.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green specifically mentioned the Cambodian scam centres and Chen Zhi. I emphasise that Cambodia arrested Chen Zhi and extradited him to China this week, and that the National Bank of Cambodia liquidated Prince Bank on 8 January, so there has been a significant impact as a result of that package. Obviously, the sanctions are only one part of the response to these networks; there are other measures that countries can choose to take in response to very serious allegations.

A lot of questions have rightly been raised about Sudan and the work that the Government are doing on that issue. The Foreign Secretary, the Minister for Africa and I place a great deal of importance on that, and building a consensus on ending that horrific war is a core part of the Government's diplomatic efforts, including with other regional partners and the UAE. The Foreign Secretary is in regular contact with the Emirati Foreign Minister, and the Prime Minister has also spoken to his counterpart. We will continue to use all necessary means to bring an end to the war in Sudan, which is having a devastating impact on its citizens.

A number of colleagues have asked questions about Hong Kong. Of course, we call on Beijing to repeal Hong Kong's national security law. We are closely monitoring the situation there, and we keep sanctions under close review. I am not going to speculate on future designations, for obvious reasons, but particular cases have been raised. The case of Jimmy Lai remains an

utmost priority. Diplomats continue to press for consular access, and they attended his trial. The Prime Minister has raised Mr Lai's case directly with President Xi, and we are in close contact with his family and representatives. Of course, we want to make sure that he receives proper treatment, and we are deeply concerned about some of the allegations made about his treatment in prison.

On the case of Ryan Cornelius, I want to acknowledge that his family have been in Parliament today. We continue to support them and, indeed, the family of Charles Ridley as well. The former Foreign Secretary raised their cases with the UAE Foreign Minister last year, and I understand that he and the Minister for the Middle East, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), met the families in September. We support their clemency applications, and of course we raise those and other cases with appropriate authorities at the right time.

Jagtar Singh Johal's case has also been mentioned. We continue to raise serious concerns about that with the Government of India at every possible opportunity.

We have not stopped our Myanmar sanctions. Since the coup, we have sanctioned 25 individuals and 39 entities.

Very important concerns have been raised about Roman Abramovich and Chelsea football club's assets. I draw colleagues' attention to what we have said on that, and to the Prime Minister's action on the licence.

Colleagues have also expressed strong concerns about the shadow Attorney General. As the Prime Minister set out yesterday, the Conservatives have some very serious questions to answer on this issue, which is completely unfathomable to me and deeply disappointing.

On the question of enforcement—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: What about an annual report?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman mentions the importance of reporting to Parliament, and I can assure him that I have been scrutinised in this place many times. I have sent a letter to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and to Lord Ricketts in the other place, to set out the full detail of all the work we have done. I am committed to reporting regularly to Parliament on these issues; indeed, I have held private meetings with many Members from across the House to discuss their concerns, and I am absolutely committed to continuing to do that.

On the issue of enforcement, I think some of the criticism was somewhat unwarranted. This is an issue that I have regularly championed. I agree with the principles of what colleagues have said, but I point out that in November the National Crime Agency announced that, based on the intelligence it gained in Operation Destabilise, it supported international law enforcement partners in seizing \$24 million and over €2.6 million from Russian money laundering networks with links to drugs and organised crime. There have been over 128 arrests as a result of that operation alone, with over £25 million seized in cash and cryptocurrency—another issue that has been mentioned. In 2025 alone, OFSI issued four major civil monetary penalties, totalling over £900,000—I think some of the figures Members have used are not quite accurate—and for its part, HMRC concluded a £1.1 million compound settlement for trade sanctions breaches in May.

The shadow Minister asked for figures. I am happy to write to her with further details, but to give one example, OTSI has received reports or referrals about 146 potential breaches of sanctions and it has a number of investigations under way. I do not want to comment on them, but I do want to assure hon. Members that we take all the considerations they have raised very seriously. Sanctions, including Magnitsky-related sanctions, are an important tool, and we will continue to look at all such possibilities. I welcome the challenge, and we will continue to rigorously pursue not only the designation of such regimes, but, crucially, the enforcement that makes the difference.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Sir Iain Duncan Smith to wind up very quickly.

3.30 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I will indeed be very quick, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Members for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton), for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed), for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) and for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), who all made speeches, for their support in this debate.

In winding up, I have some points on which I want to press the Government. First, why not have an annual report? I simply raise that as a question, because it would stop us having to bid for a Backbench Business debate, and—who knows—we may even mean we get more Members to attend.

I would raise questions about Sudan and the UAE, because the fact is that they are now complicit in the most brutal of murders, rapes and everything else. I would couple that with the holding of Ryan Cornelius as a hostage—and I call him a hostage—whose family have been without him for 17 years and are in penury as a result. Surely this gives us the opportunity to say that, unless he is released, we will put sanctions on individuals at the bank and elsewhere, which would certainly be very helpful.

It is the same with Jimmy Lai. It is now time for us to say that the country that used to administer Hong Kong can no longer put up with the trashing of the Sino-British agreement, the terrible behaviour over legal systems and, basically, the ending of English common law in the territory.

Those are some of the issues, but many others were raised. I must say that I have the highest regard for the Minister, as he knows. We have spoken endlessly about different aspects of this, and I take him as a very honest individual. I hope he will take these points back to the Foreign Office and say that we have done well, but we could do an awful lot more.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is concerned that serious human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity, war crimes and torture, together with widespread grand corruption, continue to escalate in an increasingly unstable global environment; notes that global human rights and anti-corruption sanctions, commonly known as Magnitsky sanctions, remain an essential mechanism for accountability and redress, yet their implementation by the United Kingdom is inconsistent and insufficient, and lacks oversight; regrets that numerous individuals credibly implicated in serious abuses and corruption remain unsanctioned, that enforcement and transparency around decision-making remains inadequate, and that sanctioned

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

individuals continue to exploit evasion methods while victims receive limited support; further notes the absence of a long-term strategy for the management of frozen assets and a lack of clear criteria for delisting, alongside growing concerns that sanctions are becoming politicised internationally; urges the Government to strengthen the credibility of the Magnitsky sanctions regime through consistent and impartial application, enhanced enforcement, and by ensuring greater Parliamentary oversight and expanded measures to support victims, including developing pathways for compensation; and holds that, relevant to this, those involved in the arbitrary detention of British nationals should face Magnitsky sanctions, including those involved in the detention of Ryan Cornelius, Jagtar Singh Johal and Jimmy Lai.

High Street Gambling Reform

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Health and Social Care Committee on 2 April 2025, on Gambling-related harms, HC 804; and Correspondence between the Health and Social Care Committee and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Prevention, on Gambling-related harms, reported to the House on 18 June and 29 April 2025.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dawn Butler, who will speak for about 15 minutes.

3.33 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the aim to permit principle in planning policy erodes the ability of local communities to shape their neighbourhoods; further believes that planning decisions should be made in the public interest, not skewed towards automatic approval; and therefore calls on the Government to remove the aim to permit provision so local councils can regulate the spread of gambling premises.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I will talk about three things: first, why I am campaigning for safer streets and why gambling-related harm is a key component of my work; secondly, some of the people and their testimonies; and, thirdly, the good work the Government have done, but also the further work that needs to be done next.

I am tired of seeing the number of betting shops on the high street in Brent, and how every time there is an empty shop, another betting shop opens in its place. This is specifically the case in areas such as Harlesden, Willesden, Neasden, Wembley and Kilburn. In Harlesden, we have 10 betting shops within a 10-minute walk, which is absolutely ridiculous.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I apologise that I will not be able to stay for this debate because I have to follow up with the family of Ryan Cornelius—they were in the Gallery earlier—whom I referenced during the previous debate.

As the hon. Member knows, we on the all-party parliamentary group on gambling reform have taken very seriously the lessons from Brent, which have been cited in letters to the Government. We have to stop this ridiculous proliferation of betting shops and adult gaming centres, over which councils have no control. Councils do not think it is right to have them, yet they have no say in the matter. The No. 1 thing for the Government to do is to end this nonsense, and give councils the power to say no.

Dawn Butler: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who chairs the APPG on gambling reform, of which I am a member, for his intervention. Brent is a solid example of why change is needed. Another shop—a double-fronted shop—is due to open. On it has been written what I call conscious graffiti: “Stop opening gambling shops in deprived areas.” I endorse that message! In Kilburn, there have been 300 written objections to a proposed new adult gaming centre. When I campaigned on this issue, Brent council said that its hands were tied and that I needed to provide more evidence, so I collated more evidence—thousands of responses from my constituents—but that still was not enough because of the “aim to permit” legislation. That has led Brent council—through

my campaigning and, probably, nagging—to run an incredible campaign. It now has other councils on board and the deputy leader from Brent council is here today for this debate.

In 2025, for my summer campaign, I decided to travel around the country, but mainly London, to investigate high streets and what they look like. And—would you believe it?—in economically deprived areas, every second or third shop was a brightly lit gambling shop. I could look down the road and see all the bright lights glittering and trying to encourage people to come in and spend their money. There was, however, one particular high street where I could not find a gambling shop. I walked up and down it on both sides. It is one of the wealthiest high streets in London, in Hampstead. Isn't that shocking? One resident happily told me, "We even campaigned to stop McDonald's opening on the high street. We didn't want them."

On Monday, I published an open letter to the Prime Minister. It had 280 signatures—mainly from London, but from all around the country—from councillors, leaders and mayors all saying that the aim to permit needs to change. In Brent, gambling premises outnumber supermarkets in 17 out of 22 wards. The gambling industry says that gambling shops help high streets, but they do not. When a gambling shop is set up, other shops do not want to be there. Gambling establishments entice people to come in and then ply them with food and drink, and teas and coffees. There is no point in opening a coffee shop next door when there are free coffees in the gambling shop.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for her visit to Kensington and Bayswater, where she herself enticed me into an adult gaming centre to show me how it is set up to keep people in there. Machines could even be reserved, so people could go away and come back. That is preying on the addictive mentality. And these are not the 20p slot machines or arcades in seaside towns; this is serious money.

Dawn Butler: Absolutely. I hope I was not a bad influence on my hon. Friend. It was the first time that I had gone into one, but you have to go into one to really understand what it is like. Like he says, we went in and a machine had been reserved for a person who had gone somewhere for when they came back. The business model is extreme and rather cruel.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is delivering an excellent speech, and I support her campaign to end the aim to permit. Another issue I have heard lots of people concerned about is the 80:20 rule, which requires gambling shops to have only 20% of their machines to be the higher stake, more dangerous and addictive machines. There is a rumour or a consultation out that the rule might be liberalised. Does she agree that the liberalisation of that rule, at a time when gambling regulation is not fit for purpose, would be completely unacceptable?

Dawn Butler: That rule must not be changed, and I will tell my hon. Friend for why. Gambling shops get around that rule by having iPads, which are classified as lower stake machines, that do not work. That is how they get away with having more B3 machines, which are the most addictive machines where you can put in £20

and lose it in a minute. That is why the rule should not be liberalised. As I say, the business model is quite shocking.

Across the nation, an average of 13.4% of people are categorised as low-risk gamblers, with 2.9% categorised as high-risk. In Brent, 17.1% of residents are categorised as low-risk and 6.2% as high-risk. This shows the link between the proliferation of gambling shops and harm. One kind of business that is found on high streets when there are lots of gambling shops is pawn shops, because people lose their money and then pawn what they can to gamble more to try to win it back.

I am not saying that we should ban gambling all together, but we have to be honest about the harm that is being caused at the moment. The Gambling Act 2005 is completely out of date.

The latest iteration of this campaign has been a personal journey for me and has increased my understanding of the harms of gambling. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), with whom I went into some gambling shops, and who is running an excellent campaign to stop a huge gambling shop opening in his constituency, I have met some amazing people, and I want to talk about their testimonies. I interviewed two of them, and those interviews are on my Substack. Their testimonies opened my eyes, and I hope they do the same for anyone else who hears them. They also moved me to tears.

Jackie Olden is a phenomenal campaigner. Her mum, Wendy Hughes, worked at a bookmaker. After Wendy was given free plays on the machine so that she could entice the punters with the bright lights, the sounds and the music when the customer wins, she became addicted and started gambling with her own money. Towards the end of her life, Wendy gambled on a slot machine for 16 hours straight; the staff knew how she liked her tea and coffee, and bought her food so that she did not leave. Wendy had maxed out her credit card, so they kept her in the shop over 12 hours so that her credit card limit would be renewed and she could take out money and start gambling again. They knew her favourite chair and her favourite machine, and they let her gamble for 16 hours. Wendy lost almost £2,000 in that session. Merkur was fined £95,000 as a result of social responsibility failings—none of that money, I might add, went to the family.

Wendy later died of cancer. *[Interruption.]* I am getting quite emotional, sorry—Jackie is an amazing campaigner. Wendy had told her daughter that she was gambling to win enough money to pay for her funeral. The people in that gambling shop knew she was dying of cancer; they saw her emaciated body as she kept going in to gamble.

Charles and Liz Ritchie lost their son, Jack, at the tender age of 24. Jack had a gambling addiction. In his suicide note, he said that he would never be free from gambling, and that is why he took his life. Charles told me that Jack got addicted at school; he and his friends would go into gambling shops and he would place bets with his dinner money. Okay, things have been strengthened, and there are now checks on young people who look under 18, but there were not then. Using his dinner money to gamble, Jack had two big wins, winning £1,000, and became addicted, chasing that win time and again. His parents did not find this out until after he died.

[Dawn Butler]

In their grief, Charles and Liz decided to mobilise others, and they have since set up an amazing charity called Gambling with Lives. There are so many people who have been fighting this addiction on their own. The Labour Government have done some good work; there was just one NHS gambling clinic when Jack died, and now there are 15. However, there is so much more that we must do.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Member is making a really powerful speech. We had representatives from the gambling industry in front of the Treasury Committee recently, and that revealed to me that such stories are not tragic by-products of an industry that is actually okay, but actually part of the business strategy of that industry. The gambling industry receives 60% of its profits from 5% of its customers. It needs people like the ones the hon. Member refers to, in the circumstances that they are in, in order to make the profits that it survives on. Does the hon. Member agree that it was a disgrace that the representatives in front of the Treasury Committee said that there is no evidence of social harm related to gambling?

Dawn Butler: Not only do I agree but I find it shocking that they can blatantly ignore the evidence and lie like that. You wonder sometimes how people sleep at night knowing the harm that is being caused.

We are not saying, “Scrap all gambling”, but we have to recognise and understand the harms and do what we can to stop and prevent them. Gambling with Lives has helped influence NHS centres and the guidelines of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which I will come to later. That is really important in how we identify and link gambling harms to the increase in mental health and suicides. At the moment we have an average of one suicide a day due to gambling harms.

I met Rob Davies, a reporter from *The Guardian*, who was the first person to take me into an adult gaming centre and show me the ropes, which are basically, “Stick your money in the machine and press the button”. There is no skill to it at all, and there is even an autoplay option so that the user does not have to keep pressing the button. It also spins at 0.25 seconds, which is why a user can lose £20 very quickly.

Veterans came to give evidence as part of the work of the APPG on gambling reform, and their evidence shocked me, because I had not realised just how prolific gambling was among our veterans and those in the armed forces. If we think about it, because of the gambling industry’s business model, they are the ideal clientele. They have experienced occupational stress and trauma, and face long deployments and separation from their support networks. There is also a cultural acceptance of gambling as a social activity and easy access to gambling opportunities. There are even addictive B3 machines in Army barracks. We do not know how many there are; we are still trying to get those numbers.

It is shocking that the gambling is so prolific, because despite the obvious risks of gambling, there is an additional risk for those in the armed forces at an organisational level. It can reduce operational readiness and leave personnel distracted, vulnerable to bribery or criminal influence and less able to focus on their duty, which

increases the risk of errors that may endanger them, their colleagues and operational outcomes. We have to tackle gambling in the armed forces if we want them to be able to do their job properly. We must also protect veterans.

I have also spoken to Tom Fleming, Lord Foster of Bath, Harj Gahley, and Tom Goudsmit and Adam Brichio, who are making an important documentary on gambling harms.

To end, I want to address what gambling harms are and what the Government can do about them. Gambling harms include domestic abuse, rent arrears, mental health decline, relationship breakdown, and suicides, especially in young men, as we have spoken about. There is also a link to violence against women and girls. The Government want to tackle violence against women and girls, but to do so they must tackle gambling. When I asked the gambling industry why it needed some shops to be open 24/7, I was told that it is because taxi drivers who are working nights can come in after a hard night’s work and basically gamble away their wages. What used to happen is that people who lost their money—their wages—used to get really angry, pick the chairs up and smash the machines. The machines cost about £40,000, so the chairs were made so heavy that people could not pick them up and smash the machines. It is absolutely shocking.

There are links between gambling and homelessness. Rent money is being gambled away. I met a gambler who was thrown out of his house by his wife because he had just gambled away all their money; they could not even afford food. There is also suicide, particularly among young men. Gambling is not like drugs and alcohol, where we can see or smell it. It can be hidden for a while until someone has no money and is desperate. That is why sometimes it is found really late: because it gets to that desperate point.

The Social Market Foundation notes that residents consistently associate high concentrations of gambling venues with increased antisocial behaviour, reduced feelings of safety and a decline in pride in people’s high streets. If we want pride in place, we need to clear up our high streets.

GambleAware shone a light on the scary prospect of young children being systematically groomed by the industry. Young people who are being groomed become desensitised to gambling, specifically through gaming. The same addictive hooks are being used to get young people addicted to the games and gambling—and it is more potent than drugs and alcohol.

Some influencers are being paid to influence young people to gamble. Sixteen-year-old boys are more vulnerable to that than any other group, and that is because there are video games, such as EA Sports FC—I have never played it, so do not know it—with loot boxes and virtual currencies that people can use to pay. We have to get a grip on that and we need to work with creators. I have been working with Caspar Lee, Joe Sugg, Ambar Driscoll, Joshua Pieters and Giuseppe Federici on how we can involve, help, develop and nurture current and future creators. Will the Minister also meet that group of creators to see what we can do to help that industry?

Action must be taken. The Social Market Foundation says that the statutory duty to “aim to permit” gambling premises

“is no longer fit for purpose.”

As an activity, it prevents councils from responding to evidence of harm and local opposition, and it erodes the ability of local communities to shape their neighbourhoods. This is what needs to be done: the foundation has five steps and I will read them out, because I agree with them all.

“1) Greater licensing powers should be granted to local authorities, including cumulative impact assessments, with no further delay.

2) Public health directors should be included in the gambling licensing process, as they are for alcohol.

3) The current premises licence classifications should be reviewed, particularly in relation to AGCs operating under bingo licences.”

Bingo licences are another way that those adult gaming centres get away with saying that they are a bingo hall, when there is no live bingo played at all and it is mainly B3 machines, which, by the way, make an average of £30,000 a year. That is money that goes directly from the poor to the gambling industry.

Let me continue with the list of recommendations:

“4) The cap on annual licence fees payable by premises to local authorities should be increased”—

at the moment it is just £1,000—

“to at least £2,000, and the amount of the fee reviewed...

5) The balance of responsibilities between local authorities and the gambling commission on enforcement and inspection of regulations should be clarified.”

That is very opaque at the moment. The sixth recommendation is about the “aim to permit” rule. Basically, we need to get rid.

In addition to those recommendations, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines and recommendations for healthcare professionals say that when people go to their GP for appointments and are asked if they have an alcohol or drug addiction, they should also be asked if they have a gambling addiction. That way, we can identify the link between gambling, mental health breakdown and suicide.

Gambling harm harms us all. For every person who is addicted to gambling, six or seven people—their family members, close friends and even work colleagues—are also affected. If we want safer streets, safer homes and safer minds, we must tackle the gambling industry and the harm of gambling and end “aim to permit”. That would make a dramatic improvement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. We will start immediately with a seven-minute time limit.

3.54 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I give huge thanks to the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for proposing the motion. I was pleased to support the application for the debate. We have just heard an excellent case for action and some really clear examples of the harm that gambling causes. I am also a member of the APPG on gambling reform; I thank its chair, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), for his work. It is clear that Members across parties feel passionately that the Government are ignoring clear evidence and going far too easy on this industry.

This debate is very timely: by chance, tomorrow I will be visiting the excellent Breakeven charity in Brighton, which provides free support for Brightonians dealing with gambling-related harm, including people’s partners,

family members and friends. I want to thank some of the brilliant campaigners on gambling reform and harm who I meet regularly for their work, including Matt Zarb-Cousin of Gamban, Gambling with Lives, which is incredible, and the many other local charities in Brighton that are working on addiction, including to gambling, and recovery.

The motion focuses on planning policy, and we have heard excellent further suggestions about licensing. I fully support the proposal in the motion to remove the “aim to permit” provision. Councils must be able to control the spread of gambling premises in every way possible. Currently, gambling debates often centre around online gambling, which is clearly a growing menace, and its excessive levels of advertising, but much of the harm still occurs in our neighbourhoods. GambleAware research has shown that shopfronts on the high street are the source of a high number of advertising views.

My recent work on that aspect has included proposing changes to Brighton and Hove city council’s gambling policy. My response to its review highlighted the proliferation of high street gambling establishments in my city. As evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee last year stressed, gambling companies concentrate their efforts in areas of greater deprivation. However, coastal constituencies such as mine also have a very high density of gambling facilities due to our history as seaside resorts, which I believe has a harmful impact on my constituents.

According to the council, the total number of licensed gambling premises where residents and visitors can gamble in Brighton and Hove was 257 as of May 2024. In comparison, we have 25 GP surgeries, 13 libraries, 44 dentists, around 20 youth services and seven leisure centres. Soon, we could have more gambling establishments than the city’s 340 pubs. For that reason, my submission to the council called for the introduction at the very least of a one in, one out principle for gambling establishments to represent and respect our licensing objectives of preventing harm to children and people with vulnerabilities, including problem gambling and addiction. To back up that policy, I also want to see the prohibition of advertising gambling on billboards, bus stops, buses and any other outdoor advertising sites in the city.

Advertising bothers me in many ways, but on this topic it makes me really angry. I think the Government could do a lot more about it. With the physical adverts in our neighbourhoods alongside all the gaudy shopfronts, coupled with the ever-present marketing on social media and television every time we tune into sport, it is no wonder that we are seeing increased gambling harms. The Gambling Commission has estimated the problem gambler rate to be close to 2.5%. Based on the Office for National Statistics’ latest population estimates, that puts well over 1 million people in Great Britain into the category of problem gamblers. The commission also estimated a further 3.1 million people to be classified as at risk, with many more harmed indirectly.

That is experimental data using new survey methodologies and it is regularly challenged by the industry, which does not surprise me, because it is so shocking. However, it is backed up by other evidence. We know that the national gambling helpline is receiving more calls and online chats than ever before. The NHS has also reported significant growth in referrals to its gambling harm services.

[Siân Berry]

Young people are increasingly at risk from this harm. In 2018, the GambleAware charity commissioned two reports to consider the extent and nature of the impact of gambling marketing and advertising on children, young people and vulnerable groups in the UK. It reported that, although children are not directly targeted by advertisers, almost all children and young people see gambling adverts. Only 4% of 11 to 20-year-olds who participated in the survey reported that they had not been exposed in the previous month. High street premises clearly contribute to that, alongside the advertising that bothers me so much.

It is clear that the Government have worked to advance the 2023 White Paper proposals. I welcome the introduction of a statutory levy on gambling operators in place of the voluntary scheme, which will generate money for research, prevention and treatment. I also welcome next steps on financial vulnerability checks and enhanced risk assessments for the online services, and the withdrawal of gambling sponsorship from the front of premier league players' shirts by the end of this season—although that will not address the significant volume of gambling adverts that are visible during top-flight matches. We are also ambling towards a gambling ombudsman, but it should have been up and running by the summer of 2024.

As the hon. Member for Brent East said, we need bolder action, and it must focus on the high street, as the motion rightly sets out. We must give local councils the powers to properly regulate the spread of gambling premises, among other things. I have encouraged my local council to get together with other councils and to use the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 to produce proposals—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Unfortunately, the hon. Lady has reached the seven-minute limit. I call Feryal Clark.

4.1 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing this incredibly important debate on the removal of the so-called “aim to permit” rule, and on giving local authorities stronger powers to protect their communities from gambling harm.

The harms of gambling are evident and were well set out by my hon. Friend. Gambling addiction means missed birthdays, unpaid bills, broken relationships, families torn apart and lives quietly falling to piece behind closed doors, while communities deal with the consequences. At the heart of this debate lies a simple but fundamental question: who should decide what happens on our high streets—local communities and their elected representatives, or gambling companies pursuing huge commercial gain? Right now, the answer is not local communities.

Under the Gambling Act, councils are legally required to err on the side of approval when considering applications for betting shops and 24-hour slot machine venues, even when there is clear local opposition, an area is already saturated or harm is obvious. That is not localism, it is not prevention and it is certainly not protection. If councils do not follow that instruction to err on the side of

approval, they face legal challenge, costly appeals and the threat of court costs—that money should be spent on local services, not on defending the indefensible.

Residents of my Enfield North constituency have watched their high streets change not because of community demand, but because the law makes it almost impossible for councils to say no to new gambling premises. There are now 30 gambling premises across my constituency. Such venues are designed to drain more deprived communities, and the law still forces councils to approve them. That is indefensible, and the Government must act to end it now.

Even if an area already has multiple betting shops or adult gaming centres, and even if constituents object and harm is well documented, councils are still legally pushed towards approval. The “aim to permit” rule is an outdated rule that stacks the deck in favour of gambling companies, as it tells councils to say yes to new gambling premises even when they have serious concerns. The result is predictable.

In Enfield North, as in many London boroughs, gambling venues cluster in our most deprived areas, not our most affluent ones. Reports tell us that a third of adult gaming centres are in the poorest 10% of neighbourhoods, but Enfield residents do not need a report to tell them that; they see it every day on their high streets. They are often located close to bus hubs, shopping parades and areas of high footfall from people already under financial pressure. Many operate long hours, and many more are operating around the clock 24/7, relentlessly feeding addiction.

My constituents tell me the same thing again and again. They say, “We object, but it makes no difference—the council says its hands are tied. We object, we organise, we lose.” They are right and the situation is wrong. Councillors across Enfield North want to protect their communities, but the law does not give them the tools. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East said, change is needed not to ban gambling, close existing premises or stop people from placing a bet, but to restore balance and local control.

We need to remove the automatic legal bias in favour of gambling operators and allow councils such as Enfield to make decisions based on evidence, community impact and local need, rather than a law that loads the dice against local communities. The money leaves the community, but the harm does not; it shows up as debt, it shows up as mental ill health and it shows up as pressure on our NHS—and tragically, as we have heard, in lives lost.

The Government have acknowledged the problem, which is of course incredibly welcome, but with the “aim to permit” rule remaining in place, councils are being told to say yes by default. We must trust local democracy and empower councils such as Enfield to act before harm escalates and put people and communities before profit. Our high streets should serve the people who live around them, not exploit them. The law is broken, the balance is wrong, and the time for change is now.

4.6 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): High street gambling is hollowing out our high streets and causing untold harm to hard-working families. For too long, gambling harms have been tolerated, minimised or treated as an unfortunate side effect of what is in

reality an exploitative, predatory industry. That approach has failed. The consequences are visible across the country, and acutely so in my constituency.

Gambling-related harm extends far beyond financial loss. Every year in the United Kingdom, between 250 and 650 people take their own life as a result of the relentless, isolating grip of gambling addiction. Gambling fuels cycles of debt, secrecy and shame, driving anxiety and depression, and placing unbearable strain on relationships. Children grow up in households marked by stress and instability, partners face emotional and financial ruin, and communities are left to deal with the long-term fallout.

Nationwide figures show that a staggering 1.4 million Britons have a gambling problem. What makes this harm particularly troubling is its predictability. Gambling harm is not randomly distributed; it disproportionately affects those in deprived areas already facing economic insecurity, poor mental health and social isolation. These noxious effects are not unavoidable collateral damage but the predictable human cost of an industry that pursues profit above all else and a regulatory system governed by weak safeguards. We must therefore be honest about how gambling companies operate. These are not passive providers of leisure but sophisticated corporations that systematically use behavioural data, targeted marketing and psychological design to maximise profit from often vulnerable users who are routinely incentivised to continue gambling despite clear warning signs.

Some 86% of gross online betting profits come from just 5% of customers. Major gambling operators feed on misery while dodging their wider social responsibilities. There are 440 offshore companies with UK gambling licences, with over 1,500 active sites from offshore locations. Profits taken from local high streets are routed through opaque corporate structures and offshore jurisdictions, minimising tax contributions to the very communities that bear the costs of this harm. An ITV investigation in November 2025 found that Sky Bet had relocated its headquarters to Malta to avoid paying our Government £55 million a year. That is a profoundly unjust settlement. Families are pushed into debt and despair; public services absorb the social and mental fallout of gambling harm; and the wealth generated is quietly siphoned away. Gambling giants have perfected a cynical extractive business model. This is not enterprise, but an egregious abuse of capitalism dressed up as entertainment. Yet the political establishment has failed to meaningfully wrestle with the harm that the gambling industry has caused.

For years lobbyists have successfully watered down efforts to rein in reckless gambling operators. Just a few months ago, the head of the UK's Betting and Gaming Council made the ludicrous claim to MPs that gambling does not cause any social ills. Previously hiding behind so-called voluntary contributions to harm prevention amounted to a fig leaf that allowed profits to soar while safety mechanisms remain pitiful. The introduction of a statutory levy last year is not a success story, but an admission of failure and a clear verdict on the bankruptcy of self-regulation.

When an industry repeatedly places profit over protection, Parliament has not merely a right to act, but a moral obligation to do so. Despite that obligation, treatment and support services remain overstretched and unevenly

distributed. Access remains inconsistent, with too many falling through the cracks. According to data from the annual Great Britain treatment and support survey, almost 40% of those experiencing problem gambling in Great Britain have not accessed treatment or support in the last year. Tools such as self-exclusion schemes, affordability checks and voluntary limits are too often poorly enforced, inconsistently applied and easily circumvented. The burden is frequently placed on individuals to recognise their own harm and seek assistance. Gambling regulations—as for alcohol and tobacco—must be preventive, mandatory and robust.

In particular, our communities remain constrained by the outdated “aim to permit” principle, which places a legal presumption on local authorities to approve new gambling premises even when harm is evident. Our existing regulatory framework strips local authorities of the ability to prioritise public health and community wellbeing, instead forcing them to wave through applications and turn local democracy into a rubber stamp for gambling profits. I am proud to support the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) and other colleagues in calling for its abolition.

In my constituency of Dewsbury and Batley, these national failures to effectively regulate the gambling industry have very real consequences. According to the gambling commissioner's own register, Kirklees council has granted 34 gambling licences, with 10 gambling premises located in my constituency alone. That level of concentration is not accidental; it reflects a system that allows gambling operators to cluster in areas of economic vulnerability.

Gambling reform is ultimately about choices—not the choices of individuals under pressure, but the choices we make as lawmakers. Do we continue to allow an industry to extract wealth from the most vulnerable with insufficient safeguards, or do we act to rebalance the system in favour of public health, fairness and community wellbeing? We need protection from gambling education in schools, and we need support. For constituencies such as mine, this is not a theoretical problem; it is urgent and it demands immediate action. We must strengthen regulation, hold corporations accountable and properly fund treatment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Members will be able to see that four Members are left. I plan to call the Front Benchers at 4.35 pm. I shall leave Ruth Cadbury on seven minutes, but there will be a five-minute limit for the remaining Members.

4.14 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for her powerful speech, which outlined the impact on gambling addicts and their loved ones. I fully support the reforms she is putting forward and congratulate her, Members across this House and Brent council on leading this important campaign to address the scourge of gambling premises on our high streets.

Hounslow council is one of a number of councils across London and beyond that have signed up to the campaign. It has done so because it is aware of the harmful impact of these premises and the need for new powers, and because Hounslow High Street was the

[Ruth Cadbury]

high street with the second greatest number of gambling premises in the country a few years ago. Hounslow council seeks these new powers so that it can protect public health and safeguard our communities from the tide of new gambling shops opening, whether they are new bookies or 24-hour adult casinos. I have seen the changes that have hit our high streets over the past 30 years. The rise of online shopping, the outdated business rates regime and the decline of traditional British shops have sucked the life out of many of our high streets. Too often, the gap left has been filled by bookies and casinos, which naturally can afford to run premises on our high streets.

In my constituency, I have seen the problems that gambling addiction causes. Understandably, not many constituents are prepared to admit that they have been financially affected by gambling, whether due to their own habit or that of a family member, but those who have opened up to me have told me of the devastating consequences—family separation, subsequent debt and individuals losing £5,000 or even £10,000. The gambling often started with a vain hope that a particular debt could be paid off by a win at the local bookies or the fixed odds betting terminals.

An excellent 2023 report by Hounslow council on gambling patterns in the borough referenced the work of the Gambling Commission in identifying those most at risk from the adverse impacts of gambling. The council then linked that data to the prevalence of gambling establishments in our borough. The former finds that those most at risk of falling into gambling addiction are people who already have drug or alcohol dependencies and/or mental health problems; too often, the two issues go together. That in turn has a knock-on impact on our frontline services—the NHS, social care and the police.

The “aim to permit” policy, which allows the proliferation of these premises, clearly is not cost-free. Furthermore, these high street gambling premises are targeted at the communities with the highest levels of deprivation, unemployment and homelessness. I counted the number in my constituency this morning. We have over 10 bookies and gaming centres in Hounslow town centre, compared with around three in the neighbouring, much more affluent Richmond town centre. Back in 2016, we had 44 fixed odds betting machines on Hounslow High Street. Those with the least resources are being targeted most by the gambling industry. A *Guardian* article in 2021 found that 21% of Britain’s gambling outlets are in the poorest 10% of the country, with just 2% in the most affluent areas.

I support the proposed amendment, because I support giving councils the power to shape their communities. Residents often incorrectly think that local councils can block new developments or new shops simply because they want to, but under the current laws, they cannot. Too often, local councils are unfairly blamed for the rise in the number of gambling establishments. If the Government truly want to put power back into communities and let local people shape their areas, they must give local councils proper powers.

I am sure the gambling industry will have prepared its defence in response to today’s debate. That is its right, in a pluralistic society, but we should remember the

ferocity with which the industry reacted when there were proposals to clamp down on fixed odds betting terminals, the “crack cocaine” of gambling. Whenever sensible reforms are proposed, we see the gambling industry fall back on the same old tired clichés.

The Labour Government’s Pride in Place powers aim to give local people more control over their high streets and areas, but let us go further, faster, and give local authorities and local people more powers to take back control by reviewing and ultimately removing the “aim to permit” rule from the Gambling Act.

4.19 pm

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing this important debate. Gambling is a subject that the Health and Social Care Committee has looked at in some detail, and it is clear from what I have heard from witnesses, from talking to the National Gambling Clinic—it is in my constituency—and from walking round our local high streets talking to people I know, that high streets remain at the heart of the gambling harm being caused in our country and localities, particularly in our most disadvantaged and poorest communities.

As we have heard, when the Gambling Act 2005 abolished the so-called “demand” test, and replaced it with the “aim to permit”, it removed the requirement to prove local need before opening a betting shop, and opened the door to a wild-west clustering of betting shops in poorer areas. That does devastating damage to individuals, families and communities, because residents in streets where every third or fourth shop can be a gambling den with cups of tea, face constant exposure to gambling during routine activities. They could be shopping for groceries, taking kids to school or commuting for work, and there is a gambling premises. Gambling becomes normalised. It is like a regular part of daily life, rather than activity that, as we know, requires caution. For those vulnerable to addiction, it makes avoidance nearly impossible and relapse inevitable, and the financial consequences can be catastrophic.

Lower-income families, and people who earn far less or live on benefits, have no buffers to absorb that sort of loss. What might be manageable for someone with savings becomes ruinous for someone living from pay cheque to pay cheque. We are talking about people who cannot pay their rent, or whose bills are going unpaid and whose children are going without. The toll on mental health is huge. Indeed, it is immense: depression, anxiety, shame, and isolation. As we have heard, we cannot necessarily see a problem gambler. We may be able to see a problem drunk, but a problem gambler hides their addiction from loved ones—that was one of the points made strongly to me when I visited the National Gambling Clinic in Earl’s Court. The stress that someone is already under is compounded by the gambling, and those mental health stresses may already be more prevalent in depressed or deprived areas, where housing is less adequate and people face other stresses and challenges on a daily basis.

We have heard about the redoubtable charity Gambling with Lives, to which I pay tribute. There is no doubt in my mind that the gambling industry and its lobbyists are often, in their behaviour, simply thugs. People such as the wonderful Ritchies—who set up Gambling with

Lives after losing their son, and who brought a constituent to see me who talked about his own son losing his life to gambling—are still ploughing away and fighting their fight, and they have been inspirational for all Members of the House who have met them. They made me and the Health and Social Care Committee aware that there are between 117 and 496 gambling-related suicides every year. Having taken evidence, we thought that, although wide, that data was strong enough to place in our report so that it is on the public record. Gambling does not just tear families apart, it also takes lives away, and we must remember that.

We must also look at the community impact of allowing the clustering of betting shops since the law changed in 2005. That clustering drives out family businesses and community services, and it feeds neighbourhood decline. Hammersmith and Fulham council tried to do something about it. We have a high concentration of betting shops, especially in deprived neighbourhoods. North End Road in Fulham has been identified as a gambling vulnerability zone, and there are two council estates nearby, which are in the bottom decile for deprivation, employment and income.

That is not a coincidence, because higher levels of deprivation and the clustering of gambling premises go together. North End Road in the heart of Fulham is one of three hotspots in the borough. The council is doing its best to act responsibly within the national framework, and it is consulting on a local plan. Residents are keen for it to do that, and in the most vulnerable areas there will be a presumption to refuse, but in the end it cannot refuse premises because the law still constrains it, in a way that is out of kilter with alcohol and other licensing.

The Health and Social Care Committee welcome the fact that the Government have reframed this issue as a public health crisis. We have called for local authorities to have a key role in gambling licensing and for directors of public health to be made a responsible authority when it comes to gambling planning and licensing applications. We need reform of the legislation governing high street gambling, and we need it now.

4.24 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) on securing the debate and on her campaign.

Our high streets have struggled in recent years and, as others have said, that is harming our communities. My constituents tell me that one of the most pernicious trends has been the rise of adult gaming centres and other gambling establishments. In the past year alone, there have been applications for four new or expanded adult gaming centres in my constituency, and some of the applicants have come back with further applications. Each application has been met with widespread opposition from a large and diverse range of local people, bringing together community campaigners with resident associations, charities, businesses, local schools and the great national charities that have already been referenced this afternoon.

We know that the trend is towards an increase in gaming centres—between 2022 and 2024, the number has risen by 7% nationally—and that the most vulnerable people in society are at the greatest risk from the harms that they generate. Across Kensington and Bayswater, I have been campaigning with residents to halt the tide,

but it is relentless and like playing whack-a-mole. In Earl's Court, we successfully fought off an application by Silvertime to convert a former high street bank into a 24/7 gambling premises, but having withdrawn the application, the company will probably come back again.

Also in Earl's Court, we managed to persuade the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to deny another operator, Admiral, an extended 24/7 licence. I had hoped that that would set a precedent that these planning and licensing applications would no longer be nodded through, but sadly we suffered a major defeat just before Christmas, with RBKC approving a new casino in Notting Hill, again taking over a high street banking premises, despite over 1,500 residents signing my petition to reject and a visit by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East. The residents and I are not giving up, and we will continue to use every procedural step we can to fight this unwanted development and persuade RBKC to say no, or at least to scale it back, but our tools are limited. I thank my hon. Friend for her campaign and for showing me at first hand the risks of the slot machine industry.

That example is symbolic of what has happened to our high streets in the past decade or two. There has been a decline in the services and businesses that our communities depend on, and they have been replaced by 24/7 gambling premises and dodgy shops pushing vapes, low-grade souvenirs and knock-off products. They are often not paying their fair share or employing people legally, so legitimate businesses cannot operate on a level playing field.

We need solutions. I am glad that the Government have committed to reform. I strongly welcome the proposals put forward as part of the Pride in Place programme to give local authorities more powers to assess the cumulative impact of these premises. I am glad that the Government have recognised that high streets cannot thrive with rows of adult gaming centres offering slot machines 24/7, and that data-driven decisions on gambling licences should help to restrict new premises opening. It is vital that the measures give real weight to community voices, like those of my constituents who have had enough, and that those measures come before the House soon, so that we can get discussions up and running.

I also welcome the measures on dodgy shops on our high streets. I welcome the Chancellor's commitment to increasing enforcement, giving trading standards a boost and tackling fake company directors, along with dealing with lots of other elements of high street tax dodging and tax evasion that are linked to the decline that people see. Beyond those hugely welcome measures, I hope that we will see a continued ambition to go further, including by looking at whether the Gambling Act 2005 is still fit for purpose, and whether its provisions are helping local communities or hindering them from coming together for the benefit of their high streets, exactly in the spirit of the Pride in Place programme.

Our high streets can be so much better. There is no one simple solution, but a part of any solution must be to halt the gambling takeover.

4.29 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) on securing this debate and on her campaigning on this issue over the years. That includes this week's letter to

[Phil Brickell]

the Prime Minister, which had nearly 300 signatories and which she co-ordinated. She was quite right to say that our high streets are being hollowed out by a surge of betting shops, with local people left seemingly powerless.

It seems to me that this issue should sit squarely with this Labour Government's Pride in Place programme. I am not suggesting that we should have no betting shops—I recognise that the industry provides jobs and tax revenue—but local to where I am, there are three betting shops within walking distance of my office in Horwich, a town of fewer than 20,000 people, and there are two more nearby in Westhoughton town centre. The current situation is not conducive to fulfilling the Government's manifesto pledge, which I proudly stood on in 2024, to tackle gambling harm, which is sadly a lived reality for far too many families in Bolton and Greater Manchester as a whole.

Iqbal Mohamed: Let me make a couple of points about the high street. The way that these shops are set up, with attractive front faces and lighting, is quite appealing, especially to children and young people. Does the hon. Member agree that that should be managed and that there should be regulation around that? Like cigarettes and alcohol, there should be a health warning on the outside of the shop that would ensure that people are aware of what it is and what harms it can cause.

Phil Brickell: The hon. Member makes a valid point. We see that on high streets in my constituency time and time again, all too often, in the context of vape shops.

As an aside, we all know that gambling today is no longer confined to a once-a-week trip to the bookies; it is on people's phones, in their pockets and available 24 hours a day. Online slots are among the highest-risk products, as they are fast, repetitive and designed to encourage long sessions and binge play. I commend the Government on the introduction of stake limits for online slots. Those limits matter, because harm increasingly happens not just on the high street, but on our phones, anywhere and at any time.

Let me go back to the high street. As we have already heard many times in this debate, the clustering of betting shops remains a serious and unresolved problem, particularly in deprived communities. I received assurances from the gambling Minister last year that cumulative impact assessments on gambling licensing will be introduced to strengthen councils' ability to influence the density of gambling outlets, but this measure is pending parliamentary time—that much-dreaded phrase. I urge the Minister not to let this important measure get crowded out. It is a new year, and with new years come new year's resolutions. How about a resolution to prioritise addressing what is a far too liberal regime for managing gambling harms?

We know that where gambling outlets cluster, harm increases, from debt and mental ill health to family breakdown and homelessness. According to the Government's gambling-related harms evidence review, the north-west has some of the highest rates of at-risk gambling in England, with around 4.4% of adults experiencing elevated risk. Even more worrying is the fact that the north-west has one of the highest proportions of people harmed by someone else's gambling—partners, children, parents and friends all pay the price.

I welcome the steps already taken by the Government. Frankly, the introduction of the statutory gambling levy to raise around £100 million a year for research, prevention and treatment is the least that the industry could do. While acknowledging the issue is always the first step, I know that the Minister, as a former councillor himself, will recognise it is no good leaving councils powerless to tackle the physical concentration of gambling premises on our high streets.

If we are serious about reducing gambling harm, we must accelerate reform. Our high streets should offer opportunity, not addiction; our laws should protect people, not profits.

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

4.33 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for securing this debate and for all her hard work on this issue. What she has been doing is impressive.

Gambling can be a light-hearted pastime that many would describe as fun and harmless. As a Liberal Democrat, I support an individual's right to choose, but, as we have heard, gambling comes at a very high cost for some people—some of the stories shared by the hon. Member for Brent East were very moving. That is true not just for those who are directly affected by gambling, but for their friends, their families, and all those who have that emotional burden and—in some cases—shared financial burden.

I will delve into a few of the statistics—some have already been mentioned, but they are worth emphasising. According to last July's "Gambling Survey for Great Britain" an estimated 2.5% of adults have struggled with problem gambling, equating to over 1 million people. The proportion of people with severe problem gambling was nine times higher for those using in-person slot machines and six times higher for those using online slots. More than one in 40 people who gambled in the last year experienced severe harm to their life, such as turning to crime to finance gambling, experiencing a relationship breakdown or losing their home, and Public Health England estimates that, tragically, there are more than 400 gambling-related suicides a year. Gambling affects all ages and genders, but the rates are particularly high among men and young people. More than one in 20 of those aged 18 to 34 who had gambled in the last 12 months reported a severe impact on their life.

Liberal Democrats have long been calling for gambling reform, and we are pleased that the Government have listened to us in one key area. We campaigned for many years for the remote gaming duty to be doubled, and the Government have done exactly that. That was the right decision, but on the high street—the subject of this debate—much more action is needed. Liberal Democrats support removing the "aim to permit" principle, that statutory presumption under the Gambling Act 2005, giving local authorities the same power to refuse applications for gambling venues as they have for pubs and other licensed premises. That would enable local authorities to introduce cumulative impact policies to prevent clustering and saturation of gambling premises in areas deemed more vulnerable to harm. It is also important that local public health bodies can make statutory representations, and that public health evidence is given full weight in those licensing decisions.

Additionally, we believe that more decisive action is needed to combat the harms caused by problem gambling. With that in mind, we have been calling for gambling advertising to be restricted, to tackle the gambling adverts that bombard people through their TVs and radios as well as marketing via social media; for a gaming ombudsman to be established, one with real power to protect consumers and resolve complaints; for affordability checks to be enforced and implemented by mandating financial checks and data sharing to stop gambling beyond means; and for tough action to be taken against black-market gambling.

Access to a range of support services is also vital. Anyone worried about their gambling or anyone close to them should be able to seek help easily in their local area, and gambling firms must pay their fair share towards those services. A related concern, and one which is shared by leading support charities, is that the introduction of the statutory levy on gambling firms must not mean gambling support services being disrupted during this year's transition period. We call on the Government to ensure that interim funding is available, so that vulnerable people do not fall through the cracks during that transition.

Although most people who regularly gamble do so without a problem, it is evident that for some, it is a slippery slope that leads to a host of financial, personal and health problems. We have a duty to prevent that from happening in the first place, and to help those who are already struggling. As such, I urge the Government to act as a matter of urgency to tackle the very real and evident harm gambling can cause to families, children, young people and communities across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

4.39 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate, and to the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) for bringing it forward. Before I turn to some of the specifics of the case she made, I remind the House that the vast majority of people who gamble do so responsibly, safely and without risk of harm. Indeed, some of our annual events in this country are associated with gambling and form part of our national identity. I am thinking in particular of the grand national. Indeed, the first time I ever placed a bet was on a horse called Party Politics. It probably led to an interest in something different from gambling, but that is another matter.

The Government's own figures show that problem gambling affects around 0.4% of adults. That figure has remained broadly stable for many years. Meanwhile, 22 million people gamble every month without harm. Gambling harms exist, of course, and I sat through oral evidence on that issue in the Health and Social Care Committee in April last year. We have heard some of the most powerful testimony from the hon. Member about real lives that have been harmed because of gambling. Problem gambling can ruin relationships, destroy mental and physical health and, in the worst cases, end lives. The number of gambling-related deaths is far outnumbered by alcohol-specific deaths or alcohol-related deaths, but any life lost and any life destroyed is a tragedy.

We must do more to support people with gambling addictions and crack down on illegal gambling and lawbreaking. However, policy must be based on evidence. Betting shops are among the most heavily regulated retail premises. They have strict age verification requirements, limits on gaming machines, trained staff and formal self-exclusion schemes. Those protections only apply when people gamble in licensed premises. They do not exist in the same way at home and not at all on the black market. We should not assume that further reducing the number of high street betting shops will reduce problem gambling.

When it comes to high street betting shops, research by ESA Retail found that 89% of betting shop customers combine their visit with trips to other local businesses, thereby supporting the high street. Betting shops support around 46,000 jobs, contributing nearly £1 billion a year in direct tax to the Treasury and a further £60 million in business rates to local councils. We have heard how betting shops have spread uncontrollably in some areas, but nationally betting shops are closing. Since 2019, the number of licensed betting shops has fallen by 30%, from more than 8,000 to fewer than 6,000. Thousands of jobs have already been lost as a result, and many more are now at risk following the tax rises announced in the Budget.

Ben Coleman: The hon. Member talks about the amount of money raised in tax from gambling companies. Can he also give us the figures for the amount of money that the NHS has to spend each year on the mental health issues and other problems that arise from gambling addiction?

Joe Robertson: I think the hon. Member himself agrees that this is not about stopping people gambling. The point I am making is that high street premises represent some of the safer environments for gambling, and some of the riskier forms of gambling are far less visible than the high street shops we have heard about today. I am certainly not minimising in any way the effects of problem gambling and some of those involved in the industry, particularly on the black market.

While the Budget did not directly target betting shops, many operators run integrated online and retail businesses. With online gambling duty doubling and sports betting duty rising by nearly 70%, the UK will have one of the highest tax rates on gambling in the world.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Brent East for talking about local empowerment. I think her key point—the heart of her argument—was about empowering local communities and local councils to be able to exercise greater control over high street premises. I want to raise a specific issue that shows how confused the system has become, and which is related to her argument.

Recently, Chesterfield borough council allowed an adult gaming centre to introduce betting facilities without a formal change of planning use, on the basis that betting was considered ancillary. This shows that the council was effectively able to bypass planning laws, and to create confusion and inconsistency in how planning and gambling laws are applied, which is deeply worrying. Betting shops and adult gaming centres are fundamentally different types of premises; they are regulated differently and treated separately in planning law, for good reason. Allowing betting facilities to be introduced into adult gaming centres without proper scrutiny risks creating a

[Joe Robertson]

back-door route for betting operations to open without local consent or oversight. We support the sentiment behind the argument made by the hon. Member for Brent East: local communities and local councils should be better empowered to make decisions for their high streets.

I want to finish by asking the Minister four questions. First, will the Government act to close the planning loophole that allows adult gaming centres to introduce betting facilities without a proper change of use? Secondly, what assessment has been made of the impact of recent tax rises on high street betting shops, including closures, job losses and empty units, and will it be published? Thirdly, what concrete action is being taken to tackle illegal gambling, and particularly operators that target people who have self-excluded from licensed betting shops? Finally, the Government wrote to the Health and Social Care Committee on 12 June last year and said that they would look to complement local authorities' existing powers in relation to the licensing of gambling premises. Does the Minister have an update?

4.46 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on allowing this debate to go forward, and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) on securing it. Many hon. Members from across the Chamber have talked about the harms of gambling. Although that is incredibly important in underpinning the debate, I will concentrate on what the motion says about licences and premises, and on what local authorities can do to deal with those kinds of issues.

I pay a huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East, because the way that she presented her speech and told real-life stories was really powerful. I join her in paying tribute to Jackie Olden for her campaign on behalf of her mother Wendy—my hon. Friend told a hugely powerful story about the impact of gambling on their family and the campaign that they have subsequently proceeded with—and to Charles and Liz Ritchie, who, after the death of their 24-year-old son Jack, started Gambling with Lives. The Minister for gambling, Baroness Twycross in the other place, met both Jackie and Liz in the autumn, and the Government will take forward some of those discussions. Next Thursday there is a gambling harms debate in Westminster Hall, and I encourage Members to bring some of the contributions that they have made today to that debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East mentioned a list of things that she would like to see going forward, and I hope to cover some of them, but I will start by mentioning a few of the other contributions to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), in an intervention, talked about the 80:20 rule and the changes to the rule that were proposed in the gambling White Paper. The gambling Minister recognises the problems and wants to ensure that protections from harms are much more robust before any thoughts on changing the rule come forward. I hope that satisfies Members who are concerned about the 80:20 rule.

The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) talked about the Breakeven charity in her constituency, which I believe she is visiting tomorrow, and about the 2023 White Paper. We want to implement the

recommendations in that White Paper. Obviously, it was the previous Government's initiative, but the recommendations were pretty powerful. We want them to be implemented as quickly as possible, but we also want to see them bedded in before there is another review of gambling. She also talked about the gambling ombudsman, which will require primary legislation. We will bring forward those kinds of issues as and when we are able to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) talked about the 30 gambling premises across her constituency and the cumulative impact of them. I hope to come on to some of those cumulative impacts in my speech.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) rightly talked about gambling harms. He should attend the debate next Thursday, if he is able to do so, and bring some of those real-life examples with him.

One high street in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) has one of the highest concentrations of gambling establishments in the country. She demonstrated why more powers such as the cumulative impact assessments, which I will come on to talk about, will I hope help with such issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) rightly told us that problem gamblers are invisible, whereas those with other addictions are not. That highlights the problem that has to be dealt with, and the issues raised by the Health and Social Care Committee. I commend him and his Committee for what they have done to bring this issue into the public health domain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) highlighted some successes that communities have had in limiting the number of gambling premises in his constituency. However, he is frustrated both about their lack of ability to do so, and about the premises that have been approved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) talked about our manifesto commitment to tackle gambling harms, as well as about stake limits and the statutory levy to fund research, protection and treatments. I hope that the cumulative impact assessments, which I will talk about shortly, are able to help with those issues.

Generally, the Government are fully committed to giving communities across the country stronger tools to shape their local areas, and that is what this debate has been about. We have passed the landmark Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, which will deliver growth and housing, and strengthen local planning through the implementation of spatial development strategies nationwide. That is backed up by the £5 billion Pride in Place funding for neighbourhoods.

We are also widening and deepening local devolution through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, and delivering a suite of tools to support communities in improving their high streets. Those include high street rental auctions, which will give councils the power to auction the lease of long-term vacant premises, a community right to buy for communities to take ownership of local buildings that they value, and streamlining of the compulsory purchase process to help local authorities regenerate our high streets.

As many hon. Members will be aware, we intend to provide additional powers to local communities on the location and density of land-based gambling premises. Today, I will focus on the Government's approach to land-based gambling, and on the powers that local authorities have and will be given in relation to gambling premises. All of us want to see a responsible gambling industry, which brings social and economic value to communities across the country. My own mum worked in a bookmakers. In particular, we are clear about the value of the land-based gambling sector; it was certainly valuable to her when she worked there.

The sector makes an important contribution to our national life, and we have heard about events such as the grand national. I know the importance of seaside arcades and bingo halls to communities across the country, and the joy that they bring to many millions of people. The reforms to gambling duties, including the abolition of bingo duty, announced in the autumn Budget—those duties were mentioned by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson)—reflect the contributions of such venues to our economy and our local communities.

In parallel, the Government recognise that harmful gambling can wreck the lives of individuals. We know that families and communities can be wrecked, which is why we are working with the land-based sector, the Gambling Commission and others to ensure that player-protection measures are effective and that people can gamble safely, while seeking effective help when that is needed.

Local authorities are essential to efforts to mitigate this risk, so let me run through what they can do; they play a crucial role in the regulation of gambling up and down the country. They have a wide range of powers—a suite of powers and tools—in relation to gambling premises. Licences are subject to guidance issued by the Gambling Commission and its licensing objectives. Licensing authorities are given broad powers to set conditions that require licensed gambling to be carried out in a way that is consistent with keeping gambling fair and open. During the licensing process, licensing authorities can attach conditions to premises licences to which operators must adhere.

All local authorities should publish a statement of principles on gambling licensing outlining local issues, priorities and risks. In those statements, licensing authorities can identify high-risk areas and specify local risks. Operators must take steps to mitigate those risks in their applications. I fully acknowledge and understand what hon. Members have said about the “aim to permit” principle, but we do not believe that the premises licence application process is a foregone conclusion. The “aim to permit” principle is subject to strict conditions, including that the licence application is consistent with the local authority's gambling policy statement. It is worth saying that “aim to permit” is a licensing issue, not a planning issue. Once a licence is granted, licensing authorities have extensive powers of monitoring and enforcement, and I would encourage them to use them. Planning permission is always required to create gambling premises or for a change of use to gambling premises such as a bingo hall or a betting shop, and the planning system has to be used.

Given the limited time I have left, let me move on to the cumulative impact assessments, because I think they are at the heart of this issue.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I do not know if I have time, but I will give way.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he accept that freedom of responsibility, when it comes to gambling, is exactly where we should be, rather than restricting people from taking part in activities such as greyhound racing at Romford greyhound stadium in my constituency? It is a part of our local culture and it is very important that we do not allow such places to close down because of severe restrictions from Government.

Ian Murray: I appreciate the intervention, but that is a completely different story to the subject of this debate. Nobody is denying that betting on the grand national or on greyhound racing, as tens of millions of people do every week, is safe and secure, but the Government have to regulate industries such as gambling and have always done so. The regulations are in place to keep people safe, but they also ensure that people who enjoy gambling can be assured that the system they are using is safe.

Let me talk very briefly about cumulative impact assessments, which the Prime Minister committed to directly at Prime Minister's questions in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East. The Government want local authorities to feel empowered to make data-driven decisions that are in their communities' best interests. We want them to feel able to curate healthy and vibrant spaces that reflect the needs of their local communities. As part of our Pride in Place strategy to strengthen local authority influence over the location and density of outlets, we have confirmed that we will introduce cumulative impact assessments when parliamentary time allows. Cumulative impact assessments will empower local authorities to take data-driven decisions on premises licences, particularly in areas identified as vulnerable to gambling harms. We have heard a lot about where those gambling harms are.

It is really important that “aim to permit” applies also to licensing applications. Planning policies, including local plans, offer councils additional tools to influence the number of gambling premises in their areas. With local plans, the “aim to permit”, the cumulative impact assessments and the ability to enforce and set strict conditions, local authorities have a suite of powers to prevent if they so wish and make their high streets the way they want them to be.

In conclusion, the Government want to ensure that local authorities have the tools and resources they need to shape their local areas in line with their community's best interests. That is a Government commitment and a prime ministerial commitment from the Dispatch Box. Our plans to introduce cumulative impact assessments are an important part of that commitment, and we will bring them forward as soon as a legislative vehicle is available.

4.56 pm

Dawn Butler: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. To the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), I say spend just 10 minutes with Katherine Morgan who acts as the secretariat of the APPG. She will talk him through how

[Dawn Butler]

formal exclusions do not work and how families have been affected by gambling. A lot of the information the shadow Minister talked about basically does not hold water.

The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) talked about one in, one out. Exactly—we are not trying to stop gambling; we are just saying that the clustering needs to stop. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) talked about how her constituents want a say. That is what we are talking about: having a say on the high street.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) talked about offshore jurisdictions and tax avoidance. We did not even get into tax avoidance, but this Government have done more than any other Government in that area and they should be credited for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talked about protecting public health and how gambling shops are sucking the life out of our high streets. Residents think that local authorities have the power to stop gambling shops, but they really do not. My hon. Friend Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) talked about the wild west of clustering of betting shops and the normalisation of gambling. We are normalising things that cause harm and there are no buffers to manage loss, which are vital. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) said, the trend is up on just a decade ago. Some 1,500 signatures to any petition from any MP is quite incredible, but we still cannot make the decision that the council wants to make. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) talked about gambling on phones, online slots and clustering.

Ultimately, this is about how we protect people locally. The gambling industry will not lose any money if it does not open another couple of shops. We do not have to worry about that. We need to worry about individuals and keeping people safe.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that the aim to permit principle in planning policy erodes the ability of local communities to shape their neighbourhoods; further believes that planning decisions should be made in the public interest, not skewed towards automatic approval; and therefore calls on the Government to remove the aim to permit provision so local councils can regulate the spread of gambling premises.

Post Offices: Cheshire

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

4.59 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The Post Office is a critical part of our national infrastructure. I do not believe that to be an exaggeration. In the time available to me this afternoon, I hope to demonstrate to the House, and to the Minister, why I, many right hon. and hon. Members on the Conservative Benches and, most importantly, my constituents, feel so strongly about the need to safeguard the future of the post office in Cheshire and across the country.

By way of introduction, it is worth briefly setting out where the post office network stands today. In November 2010, the Conservative-led Government introduced a mandate requiring the Post Office to maintain a national network of at least 11,500 branches, alongside access criteria ensuring that 99% of the population live within three miles of a post office. That mandate has provided an essential degree of certainty and stability for post offices over the past decade. I will set out why each post office plays a vital role in our communities and ask the Minister to commit today to there still being at least 11,500 post office branches at the end of this Parliament.

At a time when other high street services are steadily reducing their physical footprint, including banks and, with them, access to cash—a point to which I will return—it is more important than ever that we protect the physical presence of post offices in our communities. For many people, particularly the elderly, those without reliable transport and those who are digitally excluded, the local post office is not just a convenience but a necessity.

The economic case for the post office is also compelling. Independent research estimates that for every £1 spent through the Post Office, a further £1.51 is generated across the wider economy. In total, the Post Office contributes more than £4.7 billion in economic benefit to the UK each year, underlining the vital role it plays in supporting business and trade, particularly small and microbusinesses that rely on local services to operate efficiently. The Government often speak of their ambition to deliver a high-growth economy—even if their actions and policy decisions too often act as a hindrance to that goal. I urge the Minister not to underestimate the contribution of the Post Office to economic growth and local prosperity.

As an organisation, the Post Office has also demonstrated a clear commitment to rural communities, something that is particularly relevant to me as the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury, and for our county of Cheshire more broadly, where, alongside our towns and cities, we have many rural villages. Some 43% of the post office network is located in rural areas, which reflects not only the opportunities presented by rural economies but the unique challenges those communities face. It reinforces the importance of maintaining reliable, accessible, face-to-face services where alternatives are often limited.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the Post Office Horizon scandal and to pay tribute to the sub-postmasters in Cheshire who were so wronged. When the future of the post office is under threat, it is vital

that we do not deter people from entering the sector; if we want to see a robust post office network in the future, we must ensure that staff have confidence in the systems that they operate.

Before turning specifically to Cheshire and my constituency, I want to briefly acknowledge some of the challenges facing post offices today. More and more of us are going online for shopping and to access services and, as a result, customer visits to post offices have fallen by nearly a third since 2008. Alongside that, the range of Government services delivered through post offices has declined since 2010. While there is a responsibility on Government to operate efficiently and deliver value for money, we cannot ignore the cumulative impact that this shift has had on the post office network and on the digitally excluded.

Perhaps the most pressing challenge, however, is the broader economic context. Rising operating costs, including rent, utilities, energy costs, increases in employer national insurance contributions and the increases in business rates introduced by this Government, have all placed further pressure on already stretched post office operators.

Back in March last year, the Minister's predecessor said that the Post Office's plan aims to achieve operational and financial stability by 2030 and includes a commitment to boost annual postmaster incomes by £250 million by the end of the decade. However, local postmasters have raised concerns with me that, of the £120 million expected in this financial year, the Post Office has confirmed that only £89 million would be delivered by the end of March. What discussions has the Minister had with the Post Office about this reduction, and what steps will the Government take to address the resulting uncertainty for the postmaster network?

The financial challenges that post offices face are real. They are acute, and they must be properly understood by the Government. With that context established, I want to turn to Cheshire, in particular my constituency of Chester South and Eddisbury. There are 21 post office branches across my constituency. I want to highlight a small number of examples that demonstrate both the immense value that those post offices provide and the very real consequences when services are lost or reduced.

I begin with the village of Kelsall, where a post office once operated at the heart of the community, serving residents and local businesses alike. Last year, that post office was forced to close after the Co-op, which hosted the branch, withdrew from operating it, citing challenging economic circumstances. That decision reflects the wider pressures facing retailers and is a direct consequence of rising costs.

Following the closure, I received a significant volume of correspondence from concerned constituents, anxious about the loss of their post office and the impact it would have on their daily lives. In response, I launched a petition to save Kelsall post office and demonstrate clearly the value that the community places on the service. I am grateful to the 337 residents who signed that petition.

For some, the closure affected business continuity—being able to deposit cash takings or send goods—while for others it was about access to cash itself. Many relied on the post office for help in navigating complex digital processes, particularly older residents. In every sense, Kelsall post office was a vital community asset. While

we have not yet been able to secure a new site, I want to reassure my constituents that I will continue to work with local stakeholders and the Post Office to make the strongest possible case for a community post office in Kelsall.

Current access requirements state that everyone must live within 3 miles of a post office branch, and while Kelsall residents do have an alternative branch just within the distance under that criterion, some rural roads have no safe walking routes, offering little comfort to those who cannot drive, have limited mobility or lack decent public transport options. For many, the impact of the closure is therefore still keenly felt.

Each of the 21 post offices in my constituency is highly valued, and the closure of any additional branches would have a significant impact. In rural areas in particular, where public transport is limited or non-existent and digital connectivity has suffered from long-standing under-investment, the local post office plays a vital role in meeting the needs of the community.

The reality is that Kelsall is not the only rural village to have had a post office closure. There will be many, many more across the country. Audlem, another village in my constituency, has been without a post office for two years. Then last year, the Labour-led council significantly cut the bus frequency further, reducing residents' access to vital services. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to help rural villages and areas not only save their post offices but regain the Post Office services that they have lost?

I turn now to the village of Malpas to highlight the issue of access to cash and banking services. In July 2024, the village lost its final bank branch. Thankfully, Malpas post office stepped in to provide some of the services previously offered by the bank. However, in recent months the post office closed without warning, and when it initially reopened there was no access to cash. This situation has caused significant anxiety for residents and local businesses. I am pleased that the service has become more reliable under new management, but this case clearly illustrates the fragile state of high street provision.

There is now not a single bank branch anywhere in my constituency. The services provided by the Post Office are vital. The risk that the situation experienced in Malpas could be replicated across many villages has serious consequences for residents, businesses and the local economy, so will the Minister commit to considering access to cash and vital banking services in any future sustainable model for rural post offices?

I pay tribute to all those working incredibly hard in post offices across Chester South and Eddisbury. I highlight in particular Sandra and Tony, who do a brilliant job running Tarporley post office, which is one of our four main post offices in Chester South and Eddisbury, alongside Sandiway, Westminster Park and Lime Avenue post office in Weaverham. Of those four, Tarporley is the most rural and, as a result, is absolutely critical to the community it serves.

Other branches in my constituency are classified as outreach post offices, which means that they might be part-time services hosted in village halls, for example, or where post office services are an add-on to a shop, providing a more limited service offering. As a main post office, Tarporley provides services that others do

[Aphra Brandreth]

not. It is consistently open, reliably serving customers, offering local businesses a place to deposit takings, providing access to cash and acting as a vital hub for the wider village and surrounding area.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that individuals such as Sasi in Croxley Green and Usman in Maple Cross are not just sub-postmasters but community champions, and that, like the village pub, they remain a critical asset in our communities?

Aphra Brandreth: My hon. Friend makes an important point and mentions the sub-postmasters in his constituency. I echo what he has said and pay tribute to those who work so hard in my constituency.

Although I sincerely hope there will be no future branch closures, if the Government intend to make changes to the network, will special consideration be given to branches classified as main post offices, particularly those serving large and predominantly rural geographical areas?

The final example I will highlight is Wybunbury Village post office, which demonstrates the wider community role that these facilities provide. Wybunbury is a very rural village with just two amenities: the local pub and the post office, which also operates as a convenience store. At a time when our hospitality sector is under immense pressure from rising costs and business rates, the loss of either would be deeply felt.

Currently, approximately 14% of post office branches are the last shop on the high street. That is both a sad reality and a wake-up call to Government about the need to protect what we have left. Again, I say this with respect to the Minister, but the Government have demonstrated, in policy after policy, that they do not understand the countryside and do not see it as a priority. Will he assure me today that rural branches will not be seen as low-hanging fruit and closed, only to be replaced by urban branches? The social and economic impact would be significant, as I know would be the case in Wybunbury, as just one example.

The post office in Wybunbury is a true community hub, brilliantly run by Kirsty and Daniel. The affection in which it is held was demonstrated clearly when, as part of my recent small business competition, nearly 100 residents nominated it for an award. I was delighted to visit just before Christmas to present the team with a certificate, and I place on record my thanks to them for their continued service to the community.

I have used this Adjournment debate to highlight the vital importance of post offices to Cheshire, to my constituents and to our country as a whole. The campaign to protect the post office network has been championed by Conservatives, and I pay tribute in particular to my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) for her leadership in securing 165,000 signatures for our petition, which was delivered to the Prime Minister. As the Minister considers the response to the Government's consultation on the future of the Post Office, I urge him to listen carefully to the voices of my constituents, to recognise the unique role that post offices play in rural communities and to commit to maintaining the network at its current level.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) on securing the debate. In my previous role, she and I travelled the world with the Foreign Affairs Committee, so it is good to be dealing with matters that are closer to home. As she so eloquently argued, no matter is closer to home than the importance of post offices to local communities.

I also thank the hon. Lady for giving me the opportunity, for the first time as the Minister responsible for postal services, to put on record at the Dispatch Box my disgust at the way postmasters were treated in the Horizon scandal. The reputations, livelihoods and lives lost as a result of that scandal shame the country, and it is my responsibility to ensure that postmasters get the redress, justice and recognition that they deserve.

As the hon. Lady rightly argued, post offices are so valued by local communities, and not just because of their economic impact—they root local high streets, bring footfall to high streets and, as she said, in many places are the only shop in the village—but because they are essential community hubs.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Disley in my constituency saw its post office close in July last year in slightly dubious circumstances. The hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) made the powerful case that post offices are really important in rural and semi-rural areas. Will the Minister join me in asking the Post Office to redouble its efforts to reopen the post office in Disley?

Blair McDougall: On this matter, as on all matters in Macclesfield, my hon. Friend is a constant campaigner on behalf of his local community. I will absolutely raise that branch with Post Office management.

The hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury mentioned Sandra and Tony, the local sub-postmasters in her area. In my community, I think of Nancy from Harvie Avenue post office in Newton Mearns. She plays a similar role—she not only serves people, but is the cornerstone of the local community. The network of 11,000 post office branches that the hon. Lady talked about makes it the largest retail network in the country, with an unrivalled reach into our cities, towns and villages, which is why it is so important to have this debate.

As the Minister responsible for postal affairs, I am always happy to, and always do, raise issues with Post Office management on behalf of Members of the House. However, I know that the hon. Lady understands that although the Post Office is publicly owned, it operates as a commercial organisation aside from Government. That means it has the commercial freedom to deliver the branch network, but within the access criteria set by the Government, as she rightly pointed out. Those criteria are so important because they set the minimum level of service that should be provided to everyone across the country—for example, the requirement that 99% of the population live within three miles, and 95% of the total urban population within one mile, of their nearest postal service.

The hon. Lady asked whether the Government will continue with those access criteria. It is some time since the Government have looked at those criteria, but we are doing so through the Green Paper and the responses to it. Our starting assumption was that we would maintain that number of post offices, with one eye on their importance to rural communities, which the hon. Lady rightly raised. However, as it has been so long since those access criteria were set, it is right that we take the time to ask whether they are still right for post offices, communities and postmasters.

On post office provision within the hon. Lady's constituency, 21 branches are operating in her area, serving thousands of customers each month and helping to support the local economy. She raised my Department's research on the economic value of that across the country—some £5.2 billion in social value and about £1.3 billion for local SMEs—which is particularly felt in her constituency and others with large rural areas.

Let me turn to Kelsall post office, which closed after the resignation of the operator, the Co-op. I completely understand the painful impact that a branch closure can have on a community. The fear that the service will never return can be disruptive. The hon. Lady comes from a small-business background herself, so she will know that, in a franchise model, there will be fluctuations, particularly in a network made up of so many small businesses and the commercial decisions behind them.

I hope that the Post Office's advertising campaign to find suitable alternative operators for that branch offers some reassurance to the hon. Lady and her constituents. The time it takes to reopen a branch varies depending on the individual circumstances, but at the end of that process the Government's access criteria will ensure that, whatever form the network takes, services remain within reach of citizens. I hope that we can find a suitable operator for the Kelsall branch.

The hon. Lady said that the Post Office, like any retailer, faces pressure from continually evolving consumer behaviour and all the other pressures that businesses face, and particularly small businesses. Although access to Government services in post offices is important to many customers, services are not utilised as much as they were in the past, and people are sending fewer

letters through the post office network year on year. On the other hand, as she rightly said, cash and banking services have become so important to the Post Office. She asked for reassurance on that. I absolutely recognise how essential that part of the business is for the Post Office. I welcome the banking framework 4 agreement between the major banks and the Post Office, which has come into effect this year. It will mean that the Post Office will be able to increase the income that postmasters receive for delivering banking services, further recognising their important role on high streets.

It is clear that the Post Office must continue to evolve and adapt to shifting needs and trends in local and national economies. That is why our Green Paper, which I mentioned a moment ago, seeks to open a dialogue on the future of the Post Office, from the services that it provides and how we can modernise and strengthen the network, to how we change the culture—particularly with regard to the legacy of the Horizon scandal—and the way in which the Post Office is managed. Thousands of individuals, postmasters and stakeholders have contributed to the consultation, and I thank them for doing so. We will publish our response in the coming weeks.

The hon. Lady also mentioned Malpas post office. I congratulate her on her successful campaign. As she will know, cash services at that branch were reinstated in November.

More generally, we remain completely committed to the future of the Post Office. We are providing £83 million in subsidies for the network this year, and half a billion pounds of investment over the next few years to help the Post Office transform so that it has a sustainable future and to ensure that postmasters are better remunerated, in addition to the subsidy I mentioned, which aims to keep particularly uncommercial and rural parts of the network open. That ambition will, I know, be supported by Members across the House who recognise how important post offices are in anchoring our local communities.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 January 2026

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Glasgow Safer Drug Consumption Facility

1.30 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee, Problem drug use in Scotland follow-up: Glasgow's Safer Drug Consumption Facility, HC 630, and the Government response, HC 1485.

It is a privilege, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I am very grateful to the Liaison Committee for allocating time for this debate on the Government's response to the Scottish Affairs Committee's report on the pilot safer drug consumption facility in Glasgow, known as the Thistle.

The Committee began this inquiry in January 2025, amid ongoing concern that Scotland faces the highest rate of drug-related deaths in Europe. In 2024, 1,017 deaths were recorded, alongside harms including blood-borne viruses and injection wounds. Preliminary figures for 2025 suggest that those numbers are increasing. There is a suspected 8% increase in drug deaths in the first nine months of 2025, compared with the same period in 2024. Those deaths and drug-related harms are very much concentrated in Glasgow, although not exclusively so. To address that, Glasgow City Council Health and Social Care Partnership and other partners launched the Thistle. The Thistle is located on Hunter Street in Glasgow's east end, and it is the first sanctioned UK safer drug consumption room.

In its first 10 months, the Thistle has had 522 unique visitors and has supervised over 6,000 injecting episodes. During this time there were 78 medical emergencies on site. Now, that might sound like a bad thing, but this means that there have been 78 instances where people have received professional medical intervention, which they might not otherwise have received. This medical intervention treats overdoses and potentially saves lives. There have been no fatalities at the Thistle in the year since it opened.

Our Committee heard that, as a single service, the impact of the Thistle is expected to be highly localised. It is unlikely to shift the dial on national drug death figures, and it is not designed to do so.

The question of cost was an ongoing theme throughout the inquiry. The Thistle is being funded by the Scottish Government, and up to £2.3 million per year has been committed for the duration of the three-year pilot. The Thistle is undoubtedly expensive to run. However, evidence suggests that facilities such as the Thistle can provide value for money by generating savings elsewhere in the health service. Such facilities can reduce costs associated with public injecting, including the costs of hospital admissions, ambulance call-outs and treating blood-borne viruses.

Preventing just six to eight cases of HIV annually could potentially generate savings equivalent to the annual cost of the Thistle. It is right that the Thistle's

costs were properly considered in the Committee's inquiry because it is a gold-standard model. That means that the value-for-money and harm-reduction capability of a less sophisticated model remains untested. However, with over 1,000 deaths in 2024 alone, the Committee is clear that the scale of Scotland's emergency necessitates a commensurate response and significant investment.

The report also emphasises how vital a drug checking licence would be in combating drug-related harm. We explained how such a licence would allow support services to better understand drug trends across Glasgow, and to take action in relation to them. That could be key in ensuring that the Thistle achieves maximum effectiveness.

We recommended that the Home Office urgently complete its assessment of Glasgow's application for a drug checking licence at the Thistle, and I was very pleased to see that the application was approved in October last year. With this licence, Glasgow will become the first city in Scotland where people can legally test drugs for dangerous contaminants. We know that applications for further drug-checking facilities in Aberdeen and Dundee have also been submitted to the Home Office, and we await the outcome of those applications.

I will now make some remarks about the impact of the Thistle on the local community, which has quite rightly been the subject of much media reporting. I highlight how our report emphasises the importance of supporting the community surrounding the Thistle. The concerns of the local community must be taken seriously, which is why our report recommended proactive engagement through the community forum and the development of a responsive communication strategy.

Amid the media commentary, we should also bear in mind that it may take time for the local effects of the Thistle to be fully understood. We are reassured that the ongoing independent evaluation is monitoring the levels of discarded paraphernalia, and the pilot's wider impact on the community. That is vital, and it will ensure that debate about local impacts is informed by accurate, objective data.

In November last year we published the Government's response to our report. There is some positive messaging in the response, which we welcome, and the Government have said that they are firmly committed to tackling drug-related harms and to working closely and positively with the Scottish Government. The response also noted "the importance of evidence-based and high-quality treatment, which engages vulnerable people who use drugs."

Both those points very much align with the spirit of our report.

When it comes to the Thistle itself, however, I must express some disappointment at the substance of the Government's response. It states that the Government will "welcome any evidence" emerging from the evaluation of the Thistle. However, it also states that the Government have

"no plans to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971"

to permit the operation of such facilities anywhere in the UK. It is difficult to see how full and proper consideration can be given to the Thistle's evaluation unless the Government are at least open-minded to considering legal changes. As our report says,

"Any intervention found to be effective at saving lives and reducing harm should not be dismissed."

Experts and evidence, rather than preconceived ideas, should determine the facility's future.

[*Patricia Ferguson*]

I directly asked the Prime Minister about this issue during a public session of the Liaison Committee in December. Given the scale of Scotland's drug crisis, I asked whether he would reconsider the Government's opposition to amending the law if the Thistle's evaluation shows it to be effective. He said that the Government had looked at it but does not intend to do so. He also said that legal decisions pertaining to the Thistle are best taken by those in Scotland, and that this should not lead to a UK-wide changing of drugs law. Unfortunately, that response appears not to recognise that drugs law is reserved. In her response to this debate, I hope the Minister will help us to understand how the Government can welcome evidence while remaining closed as to what that evidence might say.

Since the publication of our report, the issues we raised have only become more prescient. Interest has developed in additional safer drug consumption facilities elsewhere in Scotland. In Edinburgh, a feasibility study for a similar facility was undertaken in late 2024. That work confirmed strong local need for a facility, and identified two potential sites in the city. Then, in September 2025, the Edinburgh integration joint board announced plans to launch a formal public consultation early this year as part of developing a business case for a facility.

The Lord Advocate's current statement of prosecution policy, however, would not cover any other sites. It is specifically worded in such a way that it covers the Thistle facility and nowhere else. That prosecutorial statement indicates that it is not in the public interest to prosecute people at the Thistle.

Our report concludes that relying on separate prosecution policies for multiple facilities is undesirable. If there are to be other safer drug consumption facilities beyond Glasgow, it is even more important that the UK Government address the issues highlighted in our report by establishing a clear legal basis that applies across Scotland. That would require legislation by the UK Government and Parliament.

The issues covered in our report are more relevant now than ever, because drug consumption trends in Scotland are changing rapidly. Inhalation is becoming much more prevalent. We highlight the expert medical advice from Dr Saket Priyadarshi and others that shows that inhalation is a safer method of consumption than injection. Introducing an inhalation space could expand the reach of the Thistle by attracting those who smoke and inhale drugs rather than inject them. Dr Priyadarshi describes how it would reduce the appalling physical harm caused by injecting at wound sites.

The Thistle does not currently have inhalation facilities. Such facilities would be prohibited under both reserved and devolved legislation, most notably Scotland's smoking ban. Our report makes it clear that, for the Thistle to be effective, it must be able to meet the needs of the population it is trying to help. An inhalation room could therefore be key to maximising the Thistle's effectiveness, and a fair evaluation of the facility's full potential efficacy could be inhibited without one.

Since the publication of our report, the Glasgow City integration joint board has announced plans potentially to provide an inhalation space within the Thistle. The board has approved plans to develop a full business

case to explore it, and our report calls for any application to enable an inhalation space to be considered by the UK Government on its merits.

In response to our report, the Government said that it "does not support" enabling inhalation. The Government suggest that it would be for the Lord Advocate, rather than the UK Government, to grant an exemption to reserved legislation. I hope the Minister might reflect on the logic that granting exemptions to reserved legislation is best done by the Lord Advocate through prosecutorial discretion rather than by the UK Government, who retain responsibility for drugs law.

I have one further point. The Thistle is already operating, and it may evolve to provide more services in future. Meanwhile, it is becoming increasingly likely that similar facilities may be established elsewhere in Scotland. All of that is happening whether the UK Government approve or not. To a certain extent, that reflects the proper operation of devolution and Scotland's separate legal system, which enables Scotland to take a different path from the rest of the UK.

However, as our report sets out, it would be undesirable for the Thistle or any other future facility to operate, potentially indefinitely, under the Lord Advocate's prosecutorial discretion. The UK Government should recognise these realities, and if the Thistle is deemed a success, they should work with the Scottish Government to ensure that there is a full, sustainable legal framework for such facilities. If they do not do so, the Government would be permitting the current unstable legal position to persist. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other Members and the Minister.

1.42 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and I genuinely mean that in this instance.

Every drug death in Scotland is a tragedy, and the painful reality is that the number of drug deaths remains far too high. The latest figures indicate that 898 people are suspected to have died in the first nine months of 2025. Those are preventable deaths, and the SNP Scottish Government will continue to do everything possible to reduce them. Full figures for 2024 show that there were 1,017 drug-related deaths in Scotland, a decrease of 13%, but I do not think we can take a huge amount of comfort from that, given the trajectory in 2025. It shows that a very stubborn mass of deaths are occurring, and addressing it needs a concerted effort from all stakeholders.

The last Scottish Budget included record funding for the prevention of drug and alcohol misuse, including £13 million for grassroots organisations supporting residential rehabilitation, but drugs law ultimately rests with Westminster. The Misuse of Drugs Act was passed in 1971, and the decades since have shown that the focus solely on criminalisation and a war on drugs is simply not working.

The UK Government have said that they will not make changes to drugs law to pave the way for the creation of more legal drug consumption rooms following the launch of the Thistle's pilot scheme in Glasgow. The Scottish Affairs Committee recommended that the UK Government should change reserved legislation to create a new legal framework for similar facilities to open in different parts of Scotland, if that were deemed to be desirable, but UK Ministers have advised that they will not accept that recommendation.

In a letter responding to the Committee's recommendations, the UK Government said they had

"no plans to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971".

I wonder if the Minister might address that the UK Government may not need to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act, as they could instead pursue mechanisms within the Scotland Act 1998 to allow a section 30 derogation or to devolve elements of the Misuse of Drugs Act to the Scottish Government in a very narrow way. That would be an option for a workaround.

The UK Government's response confirmed that Westminster does not intend to amend the Act to enable the framework for safer drug consumption facilities to be more widespread in Scotland. It is extremely disappointing that the response confirmed that that is the intention even if the independent evaluation of the Thistle deems the pilot to have been a public health success. The Home Office's approach effectively places a ceiling on how the Thistle model can further evolve. Reaching a decision in this way, before the pilot concludes, flies in the face of claims that the UK Government are taking an evidence-based approach.

The Scottish Government continue to urge Westminster to work with Scottish Ministers to ensure that the policy development reflects public health evidence rather than creates legal barriers that risk further avoidable deaths. The Thistle pilot in Glasgow is being comprehensively and independently evaluated by a collaborative of academics and institutions, working with health and social care partners. UK Ministers must take evidence into consideration when they reach a position on safer drug consumption facilities, rather than letting emotional dogma or Home Office convention set the policy.

The aims to reduce drug-related deaths from overdoses and to minimise the impact of public injecting on local residents and businesses are central to the ambitions of the Thistle and the stakeholders behind its creation. The Thistle received international recognition following a visit by the Global Commission on Drug Policy, and last month a report by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland found that the facility had had a "small but significant" impact on reducing drug deaths.

Crucial is a public health rather than criminal justice approach. The Thistle is staffed by a multidisciplinary team including nurses, psychologists, harm reduction specialists, social workers and other medical staff. Records show that in its first 10 months, the Thistle recorded 9,333 visits from 522 people, 6,366 supervised injection episodes, and staff responding to 78 medical emergencies. There are people alive today who would likely not be with us were it not for the Thistle facility.

The Scottish Government are open to considering well-developed proposals for further facilities, and welcome proposals from other parts of Scotland to establish them. That would have to be done while meeting the criteria set by Scotland's Lord Advocate and the constraints placed on her by the unyielding stance of the Home Office and its brittle application of the Misuse of Drugs Act, which is older than I am. The further development of services to prioritise the further reduction of harms in our communities and premature deaths from drugs should be seen as a shared priority for all legislators in Scotland.

I pay tribute to the Scottish Affairs Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), for the way they have approached

this issue, which could easily have descended into a party political mud-slinging session, but in my view never once did.

1.48 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing this important debate, and all the members of the Scottish Affairs Committee, for producing an excellent, conscientious and very serious report.

Our starting point in these discussions must always be that people suffering from addiction must be treated with compassion. It is our moral obligation to help people who are suffering and to help to remove barriers to support for individuals and communities who are affected by addiction. I see the effect of addiction daily in my seat, including in the Calton, where the safe consumption room is located. I see the huge blight that addiction can cause for individuals, families and communities, especially in Glasgow, which sadly has the highest overdose rate in Scotland. We have a moral obligation to support our communities through the devastating impacts of addiction.

Amazing work is being done in my seat to support people with addiction. I see that in the brilliant work of charities such as Back on the Road in Bridgeton, which is close to the facility and recently had its 25th birthday. I see that, too, in the courageous constituents I meet regularly who have recovered from their addictions.

The Committee heard from Dr Shorter, from Queen's University Belfast, that addiction can often be exacerbated and caused by poverty, deprivation and trauma. This is fundamentally unjust, and it is our duty to ensure that all individuals, families and communities in our constituencies are supported to prevent and recover from addiction. Fighting poverty is an essential task of all levels of government, and we must ensure that nobody, no matter where they are from, is caught in addiction and unable to escape. We must recognise that tackling addiction needs wraparound support and a holistic approach to tackling poverty, meaning that we need a serious focus on new housing, better transport, improved education and access to jobs. All these things help to create communities that are fruitful with opportunities, which will help people to recover from addiction and to build positive futures.

We must also support children and people who have suffered trauma and consequently suffered with addiction. The Committee heard evidence on this from Dr Shorter. There is a clear link between how we treated children in Scotland historically—which is the subject of the Scottish child abuse inquiry—and outcomes in terms of addiction. I regret to say it, but it is a disgrace that the SNP has cut essential psychiatric and psychological services in Glasgow. Those services are essential to support those with addictions who need treatment for psychiatric and psychological conditions, and to help them in their recovery. All the wider wraparound factors need to be considered alongside safe consumption, to ensure that support for recovery is wraparound and holistic and that individuals, their families and communities can recover and move towards brighter and more fruitful futures.

We owe it to people with drug addiction, and their families, whom we must treat with compassion and try our best to support, to explore new ways of helping

[John Grady]

with addiction and reducing harm, so I fully support the trial, which is taking place on a sound evidence base. It must of course be evaluated robustly—there is nothing controversial about that.

There is serious talk about expanding the trial to include an inhalation facility. This reflects changing patterns in drug misuse, specifically towards smoking. The timing, so soon after the facility has opened, has come as a surprise to the community, and I can see their point. I am uncomfortable about the proposal—it is a significant change—but I have an open mind. We have to examine every possible way of reducing harm to people who use drugs. Naturally, the proposal must be supported by strong evidence, and the decision-makers need to think about the decision very carefully.

It is essential to listen to and speak to people who have addictions. That is a point that Dr Shorter made to the Committee. Harm reduction will happen only if the people who need the facility trust the facility and the staff in it. It is fair to say that people with addiction are not always treated fairly and justly by the state, and that seriously damages their trust in it.

It is also essential that there is serious listening to the community in the Calton. My constituents are utterly despondent at the increase in used needles and other evidence of drug misuse in the community. I ask anyone: how would it feel to take your four-year-old granddaughter for a walk along a street where there were used needles? My constituents' legitimate concerns are dismissed as being wrong, dismissed on the basis that issues are long standing, and dismissed as misinformation. None of that is any excuse.

I deplore the condescending approach by the SNP council and Government towards the people I am so privileged to represent. The position is simple: the issues need to be tackled. Part 4 of the Scottish Affairs Committee report addresses this fairly and correctly states that

“the concerns of the local community need to be taken seriously.”

I agree. There needs to be a significant improvement in cleaning up the Calton, in encouraging more people to use the facility, and in active listening to my community.

The SNP has now run Scotland for almost 19 years, yet the drugs crisis has got worse, with terrible rates of drug deaths, which are, shockingly, the highest in Europe. As we head into an election year in Scotland, I hope they will take some responsibility for this situation.

1.55 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers.

Every single death linked to drugs is a human tragedy, as we have heard from Members who have spoken already. It destroys families, shatters communities and places immense pressure on our health services and the emergency services. In my constituency, we had seven drug-related deaths in the last year for which figures were available. That is 5.4 deaths per 100,000 people. In Glasgow, there are 41.1 deaths per 100,000 people. That shows the scale of the problem in Scotland, but particularly in Glasgow. It means we need a different approach that meets the scale of the problem and the human tragedies that lie behind those numbers.

I commend the work of the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and the way she introduced the debate, and everyone on the Scottish Affairs Committee for their work to understand drug use in Scotland. The Liberal Democrats welcome the work in Scotland to treat drug deaths as a public health issue, notably through the pilot of Glasgow's safer drug consumption facility, the Thistle. We recognise the complexities of the devolved responsibility and emphasise that matters specific to Glasgow and Scotland are for the Scottish Government to address. However, what happens in Scotland can still offer lessons to all of us across the United Kingdom.

Nationally, we need to move towards treating drug misuse as a health matter. That means moving leadership on drugs policy from the Home Office to the Department of Health and Social Care, and investing sustainably in more addiction services and rehabilitation support so that help is available before people take the misstep that costs a life. This approach is reflected in some excellent state and local private provision across the country. I commend the Priory in my Woking constituency, which I visited last year, for its outstanding work on mental health and rehabilitation related to substance misuse. We must bring drug recovery infrastructure into the 21st century. That means more trained professionals, better community support, more housing for people in recovery, and pathways into employment to rebuild hope and dignity.

Patricia Ferguson: One of the things that is advantageous about the Thistle is that it does not exist in a vacuum. It can refer people on to other services such as housing—many of the people being dealt with are homeless, unfortunately—and it can also address mental health issues and send people forward to the requisite services that they need to access. It can also do basic things such as allow people the opportunity to have a shower and get some clean clothes—the basic necessities that the rest of us take for granted. In that way, it does more than just address the relatively straightforward issue of injecting; it also tries to help people with the problems they experience day to day.

Mr Forster: I am a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and we have found the Housing First programme—with which there are some parallels in this debate—very important and useful. As the hon. Lady said, it is not just about tackling drug use; we need to tackle homelessness for housing problems and we need to tackle drug use for drug problems, and we should do so as part of a package of support measures. I hope we can treat both those problems equally and in a comprehensive manner.

We need to lessen the taboos around drug consumption to allow us to tackle the issue in a far more humane way than we have previously as a country. The current system fails too many people. Far too many die when they are in contact with treatment services, and too many families are left grieving following an avoidable loss. Helping people to avoid that fate requires a fresh approach that prioritises health, harm reduction, social support and rehabilitation, as much as law enforcement.

We must recognise that outdated drug laws are no longer protecting people, especially young people, from harm. The reform of cannabis legislation would take power away from criminal gangs, regulate quality and

potency, and provide safer access for adults while protecting the young. This pragmatic, evidence-based approach should inform our decisions, and we should learn the lessons from what other countries have done.

Drug-related deaths across our country remain unacceptably high, particularly in Scotland and Glasgow, where the situation requires urgent, radical thinking. We must invest more in treatment, rehabilitation, support labs and services to reduce harm, and promote public health leadership that brings us into the 21st century. Above all, we must honour the lives lost by making the change that prevents others from dying needlessly, by taking the evidence-based approach recommended by the Committee's report.

2.1 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank you, Mr Vickers, for chairing the debate, and the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing it.

The prevalence of drug deaths and the broader misuse of drugs in Scotland is devastating. The fall in drug deaths in 2024 was welcome, but the figure remains the highest in Europe. Between March and May 2025, drug deaths actually increased by 15%, with statistics showing that people in deprived areas in Scotland are 12 times more likely to die of drug misuse than those in the least deprived areas. We all recognise that this must change.

Nevertheless, the question of how we achieve that is not simple. We are right to reflect on how we reached this situation. The monumental failure of the SNP Scottish Government is apparent. Former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon admitted that her Government had taken their "eye off the ball". I dare say that turn of phrase vastly understates the scale of the crisis that has gripped individuals and communities in Scotland. When my former colleague, the previous Scottish Conservative leader, put forward his Bill in the Scottish Parliament to address this problem, he said:

"This is a crisis that was made in Scotland, and it is one that can be fixed in Scotland, but not if we do not have willing participants in the Government."—[*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 9 October 2025; c. 106-7.]

I will return to the efforts made by my Conservative colleagues in Holyrood later. However, we believe that approaches to dealing with drug use must go beyond the narrow debate about drug consumption centres.

Let me be clear: both the Conservative party and I respect the independence of the Lord Advocate as the prosecutorial authority in Scotland. The last Government were clear that, provided that power is exercised lawfully, we should not stand in the way. Respect for the institutions that underpin our Union is critical, and I would not desire to undermine them. However, that should not preclude us in this place from criticising decisions made in Scotland or from questioning some of the comments underpinning the Scottish Affairs Committee's report. That is why the Conservative position on drug consumption rooms in England and Wales is simple: we do not support them. That position was set out transparently when the party was in government, and it is appropriate to continue supporting it now.

It is appropriate to offer clarity on this matter. I understand that was a challenge faced by the Scottish Affairs Committee when questioning the former Policing Minister, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson). When she was Chair of the Home Affairs Committee,

she produced a report that backed such proposals. As such, it would be interesting to hear from this Minister whether she or the Government believe that these facilities are now appropriate.

The reason for our concern is that the use of drug consumption rooms condones or even encourages illegal drug use. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), who is a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, stated:

"I cannot ever support the facilitation of addiction as a way of helping to treat addictions".—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 111.]

John Grady: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that one of the key purposes of a consumption room is to reduce harm to people who would, in any event, consume the substances in question? In Glasgow, we have had significant problems with needle-borne viruses, infections and illness, so it is only morally right to help these people, as they struggle with their addictions, to consume in a safe way. Otherwise, people lose their loved ones, their mothers and fathers, and their sons and daughters. It is a question of compassion.

Matt Vickers: I definitely believe that we should be helping people with addictions, but feeding those addictions and allowing the illegal use of drugs is not the way forward. There are many ways in which we should support people with addictions and their families, but we clearly have a fundamental difference of opinion about the role of consumption rooms.

As my colleague on the Committee stated, we can never support the facilitation of addiction as a way to treat addiction. That is alongside the impact of potentially encouraging the continued supply of illicit substances, which invariably happens if there are specific locations at which to consume the products of this trade—a trade that, as we all know, has devastating consequences for our communities. Police Scotland states clearly on its website:

"Drugs can be very dangerous to your health and can kill.

The advice of Police Scotland is simple... There is no 'safe' way to take drugs, there is always a risk... The only way of staying safe is to avoid drugs altogether."

Let me demonstrate why we need an effective police response. The county lines programme—which was started by the previous Government, and which has rightly continued—found a notable impact on drug misuse. Its evaluation, released at the very end of 2025, illustrated that drug misuse hospitalisations decreased by 29% in the exporter areas as a result of the county lines programme, when compared with the control group of areas that receive direct county lines funding. At the same time, the evaluation showed a 15% reduction in drug-related hospitalisations, equivalent to 22 fewer hospitalisations on average per quarter, in the importer forces, which were defined as those police forces most likely to be impacted by spillover effects from the county lines programme. Comparing the data to the 2024 evaluation illustrated that the programme is having a continued and seemingly increasing impact on reducing drug-related hospitalisations. Despite the best intentions of those who work at drug consumption facilities, it is inevitable that those taking the drugs will acquire them by criminal means. When we have targeted police action, the evidence appears to show improved outcomes for those who abuse drugs.

[*Matt Vickers*]

Clearly, enforcement is not and should not be the only approach to the problem. That is why the 10-year drugs plan published by the previous Government set out that any plan needed to be underpinned by enforcement and treatment. I appreciate that it was not focused on Scotland, but I would highlight that the previous Government's drug strategy saw £532 million of additional funding through to 2024-25 to support improvements in alcohol and drug treatment.

Additionally, the previous Government took steps through their consultation—and we have backed secondary legislation while in opposition—to expand access to naloxone to more healthcare professionals and services. As Members will be well aware, the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill introduced by a former Scottish Conservative leader, Douglas Ross, sought to give those diagnosed with drug and alcohol addiction a statutory right to receive treatment from a relevant professional.

Patricia Ferguson: I do not know whether the hon. Member is aware that naloxone is widely used in Scotland by paramedics and the police. As a councillor on Glasgow city council, I had the opportunity to be trained in its use, and I have a vial of it that I can carry around—fortunately, I have never had to use it.

However, I wanted to make the point to the hon. Member that the main driver for considering a safer drug consumption room in Glasgow was the fact that, in 2015, we had one of the biggest outbreaks of HIV infections ever seen in Europe. That was tracked back to the sharing of needles and the fact that people were injecting. That is what sparked the whole discussion about whether Glasgow needed a safer drug consumption room. So this is not just about the criminality or treating those who are already addicted; it is about preventing those blood-borne viruses, which are so harmful to people in their individual lives, but which also have such a devastating effect on our health services. It is about more than just misusing drugs; it is about a whole-society approach.

Matt Vickers: One drug death is one drug death too many. We agree on that, and we agree on the need to treat people. However, I fundamentally believe that there is a role for enforcement. I do not believe that giving people the ability to take these illegal products, in whatever environment, helps to end that addiction. There are very varied views on that, but I fundamentally do not agree.

The robust and costed provisions set out in the Bill introduced by Douglas Ross are essential if Scotland is to turn around its record on tackling the dangers of drug use by setting out the treatments that would be available, and the data and reporting requirements on the Scottish Government. It would provide a Scottish blueprint for reversing the trends that we have seen over the last decade. It was welcome that the Labour party in Scotland supported that Conservative-proposed recovery Bill to give addicts the treatment they need. Unfortunately, the SNP and the Green party in Scotland failed to back it, which was shameful.

In addition, the Scottish Conservatives have set out robust plans to end the drugs trade behind bars, following significant increases in prison drug consumption over the last couple of years. That would be achieved by

installing window grilles, which have been proven to stop drone deliveries, in all prisons, and by investing in drone detection technology, sniffer dogs and X-ray machines. The scope of those proposals shows the variety of approaches needed to tackle drug use.

We know that the Thistle is an expensive experiment. Obviously, we welcome any decrease in drug abuse and drug deaths, but we must ask whether we want our actions to encourage drug use or discourage it. It is right that the Scottish Government take steps to fix this problem, but I am afraid they are not taking the steps that are needed. I would ask the Minister, when she gets the opportunity, to encourage her Scottish Government counterparts to back the proposals put forward by the Scottish Conservatives and supported by Labour. That would ensure that the Scottish Government got back to providing treatment for those diagnosed with an addiction in Scotland.

2.12 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers.

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing this debate, and I thank all colleagues who have spoken today. I think it is apparent that everybody in the Chamber cares very deeply about this issue and about how we deal with the harm done to individuals, communities and society by drugs, and I hope that the same is true of everybody across the Commons. I am also very grateful to the Scottish Affairs Committee for its work in this area and for conducting its inquiry. I thank all those who took part in it and who have given us the opportunity to reflect on the issues that were raised.

In the short time that I have been the Minister for Policing and Crime, I have met families who have lost loved ones through drugs, and in my own time as a constituency MP, I have regularly seen the impact of drugs. I think that we can all agree that we need to do everything we can as a country.

Dame Carol Black, who was appointed under the previous Government to be the independent adviser on drugs, has recently agreed to continue her role, for which I am very grateful. I have had the privilege of talking to her about the strategy that she developed under the previous Government and about how we think it can work. We are delivering, as the previous Government did, on the recommendations of her landmark review, which was wide-ranging. It was not just about the enforcement side—making our streets safer—but about making our communities healthier and making people better, treating them in the right way so that they can recover and thrive.

I also want to welcome Professor David Wood, the new chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. His huge experience and knowledge will be invaluable, and we are really pleased to see him. We are committed to providing people who use drugs with the support that they need. There was some debate about whether we look at the role of drugs through a Home Office or a health lens; to my mind, it should be both. When I speak to the Minister for Public Health, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), she is very clear that she takes a public health approach to drug and alcohol addiction and treatment.

We are investing £3.4 billion over the next three years in treatment, sustainable recovery services and peer networks that can support people in recovery with employment, housing and education. The need for the holistic approach was raised by the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster). I think it is the right approach, and that £3.4 billion over the next three years will help.

There are new treatments and new ways of supporting people. I have spoken to the sector about how we make sure treatments are available not just for the traditional opioid addictions, but for new forms of addiction, whether that is ketamine or other drugs, and how we evolve slightly different approaches over time. The Home Office and the Department of Health meet together; I meet my colleague in the Department of Health who is overseeing all the treatment interventions. We want to keep on top of all the emerging evidence about what treatment is best, and we work constantly with operational partners across the country to make sure we deliver the right treatment.

On drugs harm, the need for interventions and the need to get rid of the criminal gangs that drive that practice, the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), talked about the county lines programme. That programme has had a significant impact in reducing harm as well as arresting criminals, taking them off the streets and shutting down county lines. Since we came to power in July 2024 the programme has led to more than 8,000 arrests and the closure of 3,000 county lines. Importantly, in that period alone 600 vulnerable young people were supported with specialist services to build safer futures. The criminal gangs exploit children and use the drugs trade to make money; by focusing on them through the county lines programme, we have had significant success in terms of drug misuse, hospitalisations and the actual impact on the criminals being arrested.

The National Crime Agency works tirelessly on disrupting and dismantling the networks. At the UK border, through intelligence with other countries and the advanced technology that we use, we are intercepting more drugs than ever. In the year ending March 2024, Border Force seized more than 100 tonnes of drugs—the highest amount on record. We are determined to reduce the number of drug-related deaths throughout the UK. We of course recognise the importance of evidence-based, high-quality treatment, and will continue to take preventive public health measures to tackle drug misuse and support people to live better lives.

In the response to the Select Committee's report, I made the Government's position on Glasgow's pilot drug consumption room clear. We recognise the Scottish Government's need to tackle drug misuse. We have talked already about the statistics on the number of drug deaths in Scotland, so I will not repeat them, but they are incredibly high and we recognise that more needs to be done. We recognise that where responsibility is devolved, the Scottish Government will need to tackle drug misuse in the ways that they see fit.

The Lord Advocate has issued a statement of prosecution policy for the operation of the pilot drug consumption room in Glasgow, as has been talked about. We respect the independence of that decision. I want to be clear that we have no plans to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act to enable the operation of drug consumption rooms

in any part of the United Kingdom, but we are committed to working closely and positively with the Scottish Government.

We meet collectively. The UK Government lead the UK drugs ministerial team, which is a forum for Ministers from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That forum provides the opportunity for all four Governments to talk to one another and to come together to share challenges and best practice. The last meeting was in Edinburgh and hosted by the Scottish Government, and we will meet again this year, enabling us to talk to one another and to share information. Of course we will also work closely with the Scottish Government to enable licensed drug-checking facilities to operate lawfully.

As we have heard, chronic drug dependence plagues the lives not just of individuals, but of those closest to them. It is in all our interests to prevent people from being engulfed by that spiral, and to help those who have on to a better path. There is a determination from this Government to get it right and to look at the evidence. We are not persuaded to make any of the changes that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West and her Committee asked us to make, but that is not to say that we should not carry on talking about these issues.

The evidence-based approach that has been talked about and the review that is being done of the pilot at the Thistle are very important. I very much want to see what the evidence shows. I am committed to making sure we are always learning and always changing our approach. We met as a collective group of Ministers across Government to look at some of the problems in, for example, the prison system—we know it is a huge driver of drug use—and to see what we can do collectively across Government. When the three-year pilot of the Thistle is finished, we will of course look at that and will want to see what we can do in response. I think we collectively agree on the need to tackle drug misuse as a health issue as well as a Home Office and crime issue. This Government are doing both, but I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues in the days and months ahead to make sure we get it right.

2.22 pm

Patricia Ferguson: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for that response. It is clear that, across this room, we all share the goal of tackling the harms caused by problem drug use. However, in the face of the crisis that we have talked about today, I do not think we can afford to dismiss any potential remedy, so I take this opportunity to once again encourage the Government to follow the evidence.

As we have heard, there will be an evaluation of the Thistle published in three years' time, but some interim work is likely to be done before then. As part of our inquiry, the Committee also visited drug consumption rooms in Oslo, Bergen and Lisbon—those in Oslo have been going for more than 20 years. Around the world, there is a lot of hard evidence demonstrating that these facilities have a part to play not only in eradicating drug use, but in controlling the way in which drugs are used.

Drug consumption rooms are not the only intervention available to us, nor should they be. They are complementary to and should work in tandem with vital recovery services, as well as other harm reduction interventions. Our Committee has been clear that these facilities are

[*Patricia Ferguson*]

just one tool available to address problem drug use—and that is what they are about: problem drug use. With Scotland continuing to record the highest rate of drug deaths in Europe, our response has to match the scale of that crisis.

I am very grateful to Members from around the House for their contributions this afternoon. I thank my friend and co-Committee member, whose constituency I cannot remember—the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan)—for his contribution this afternoon. Both he and his SNP predecessor on the Committee, the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), played a very constructive part in bringing together our report. I am sure that he, like me, was very impressed by the mobile facilities that we saw when we visited Lisbon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady), whose constituency name is much easier for me to remember, is obviously a great champion for his community. He is absolutely right that the views of the community must be heard, but the community also need more regular feedback about what is being done to address their concerns. That is one of the things we highlighted in our report, and I want to highlight it again today.

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) was absolutely correct that we need a package of measures and that our approach needs to be evidence-based. I thank the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) for his contribution. He is right that this is not simple, but I ask him to reflect on the fact that in the time the Thistle has been open, 78 overdoses have been dealt with on the premises. If they had not taken place in the Thistle, those overdoses would likely have taken place on the street or in those people's homes, where they would likely have been alone, and might have resulted in increased deaths. One thing we know from the evidence is that there has never been a death from an overdose in a safer drug consumption facility anywhere in the world, and that history now goes back over 20 years. We must remember that and have it at the forefront of our minds when discussing this problem.

Thank you for your steady chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank all hon. Members for their time and thoughtful contributions on this important issue; I hope they will keep an open mind.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee, Problem drug use in Scotland follow-up: Glasgow's Safer Drug Consumption Facility, HC 630, and the Government response, HC 1485.

2.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Myanmar: Religious Minority Persecution

[*CLIVE BETTS in the Chair*]

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered religious minority persecution in Myanmar.

This is something that has been on my mind, and the mind of lots of us, for some time. We may not know very much about Myanmar in relation to religious persecution, but I am glad to see my friend and colleague in the Gallery who, along with Rev. Cecil Rasa, told us all about what was happening.

This debate has also been some time coming. There has been great interest from many hon. Members in holding Backbench Business debates, so it has taken until now for us to have this opportunity, but I am very pleased to have it and I thank the Backbench Business Committee. It is indeed an honour to introduce this debate on Myanmar and to speak once again for those whose voices are silenced by violence, repression and fear. We will hear some of the things—hopefully others will contribute as well—that relate to just how bad the situation is in Myanmar.

I speak today because freedom of religion or belief is not a peripheral concern; it is a foundational human right. When freedom of religion or belief collapses, other rights collapse alongside it: freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, access to justice and, ultimately, the right to life itself. Myanmar today is a stark example of that truth. Since the military coup of February 2021, religious freedom in Myanmar has continued to worsen amid civil war.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing today's debate on Myanmar, because religious and ethnic minorities there are facing some of the harshest persecution. He will no doubt be aware that Christian communities have seen their churches destroyed, their clergy imprisoned and aid blocked, and that long-persecuted Muslim communities such as the Rohingya and the Uyghurs remain stateless, are severely restricted in their movements and face further persecution. Does he agree that international condemnation, co-ordination and action are urgently needed to protect those vulnerable groups?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend—he has been my friend for all the time I have known him—for his intervention. He is absolutely right, and he has outlined, in those two or three sentences, what this debate is all about. It is an opportunity to highlight religious minorities and persecution, with a focus on Myanmar.

Independent monitoring by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom documents the destruction and occupation of religious sites, the killing of clergy and civilians, and the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid by the military authorities. Churches, mosques and monasteries have been affected by airstrikes, shelling and arson. In some cases, places of worship have been occupied or used by troops, turning sites of prayer into military targets. Aid convoys have been blocked or prohibited, even in areas of acute need. Religious leaders have been detained and harassed.

I know there are many issues demanding the attention of this House, and there has just been a debate in the main Chamber about the same thing, but I often think of Galatians 6:9, which urges us not to grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap if we diligently sow. The Bible very clearly gives us a challenge—indeed, it is a directive—about what we should do. We must not allow Myanmar to become a forgotten crisis, where atrocities continue in plain sight. We must continue to do what we can to help the vulnerable and the needy, and there are many of them.

The junta's violence is nationwide, but its impact is especially severe on minority communities and on religious life itself. The USCIRF reports that over 3.4 million people have been displaced in recent years. That includes some 90,000 people displaced in Christian-majority Chin state, and around 237,200 in Kachin state. Alongside this internal displacement, around 1 million Rohingya refugees remain in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, living in prolonged exile, with absolutely no indication of when they will be able to return. That is one of the things we should look at today. I should have said that I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place. I always look forward to the Minister's response. I wish her well in her role, and I look forward to her replies to our questions.

Those figures are not abstract. They represent families torn from their homes, congregations scattered, and communities unable to gather safely to worship. For many, the simple act of practising their faith has become a source of danger. This is not only a freedom of religion or belief issue viewed in isolation; it sits within a much wider framework of state violence. UN-linked reporting has documented systematic torture by Myanmar's security forces, including cases involving children, as well as sexual abuse and sexual attacks on women and girls. I do not know whether it is my age, but I certainly get more affected by the things happening in the world than I ever did before. It is almost inconceivable to comprehend all the horror taking place.

It is important to note that FoRB violations in Myanmar are part of a broader pattern of repression and brutality. They are not isolated incidents. The plight of the Rohingya Muslims remains one of the gravest examples of this persecution. UN fact finders concluded that there were grounds to investigate senior Tatmadaw leaders for genocide and other international crimes, and they explicitly called for criminal investigation and prosecution. Can the Minister confirm whether she is aware of a criminal investigation taking place? Are there grounds for prosecution? Obviously, that would all be built on evidence, but has that started?

Crucially, this issue did not begin and end in 2017. Amnesty International has described a state-sponsored system of apartheid in Rakhine state marked by institutional discrimination, segregation and extreme restrictions on movement and daily life. Rohingya communities are confined, controlled and denied access to basic services. A people stripped of citizenship, boxed in by policy, and punished for trying to move—this is not merely insecurity; it is engineered oppression.

Christian communities have also suffered targeted attacks, particularly in Chin, Kachin and Karenni areas. The USCIRF documents repeated attacks on churches and confirms that the military has destroyed religious buildings and killed clergy and civilians through airstrikes and arson. The USCIRF further reports that at least

128 religious persons have been detained by the authorities, including 113 Buddhist monks, one imam and 14 Christians. These are not random arrests. They reflect a deliberate effort to intimidate religious leadership and community life. There are many examples, but one case in particular brings this into sharp focus: Rev. Hkalam Samson of the Kachin Baptist Convention—a respected Christian leader who is much loved in his area—was arrested, granted amnesty, and then re-arrested within hours. This is injustice. It is harassment, designed to send a message that no religious leader is beyond reach—no religious leader is safe.

More broadly, independent monitoring documents attacks and intimidation affecting multiple faith communities in churches, mosques and monasteries, and across several regions and states. When places of worship themselves become targets, freedom of religion or belief ceases to exist in any meaningful sense in the area—not just for the places of worship themselves, but for the practising Christians, Rohingya Muslims and people of other faiths as well.

We must also be clear about why these abuses occur. Many analysts argue that the Tatmadaw has long instrumentalised race and religion narratives to legitimise repression. It is beyond dispute that independent monitoring documents repeated targeting of religious leaders and religious sites across communities, reflecting persecution linked to identity rather than military necessity. They are being targeted because of who they are—because of their religious beliefs.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. I have come along to learn more about the situation, which is, frankly, puzzling. Is the regime motivated by some form of extreme religion of its own? Is it just ultra-nationalism? Is it doing all this persecution to repress the people and keep them in a form of captivity, or to drive people whom it does not like because of their identity out of the country completely?

Jim Shannon: As always, the right hon. Member brings wisdom to the debate. He is right to highlight that the Tatmadaw and the authorities are using people's religion and race as reasons to legitimise repression. As far as they are concerned, they do not want people to have anything, and by focusing on those things, they take away the very right to express religious belief—to have a race, a different culture and a different history.

Another root cause is Myanmar's discriminatory legal architecture, particularly its citizenship regime, which probably highlights the very point that the right hon. Member just referred to. The 1982 citizenship law embeds exclusion by tying full citizenship to state-defined nationality categories and strict criteria, while granting wide discretion over who qualifies—in other words, it directly discriminates. Amnesty International documents how this framework has left most Rohingya without full citizenship rights, despite generations of residence in Rakhine state.

Citizenship denial is not symbolic; it is operational. Amnesty shows how exclusion from citizenship underpins restrictions on freedom of movement, access to education, healthcare, participation in public life and legal protection. It forms the backbone of the apartheid-like system imposed on Rohingya communities. Amnesty also documents how temporary registration cards, often known as “white cards”,

[*Jim Shannon*]

were revoked, leaving many Rohingya without identity documentation linked to rights or political participation—even further entrenching their vulnerability.

This is not an accident of bureaucracy. When a state writes exclusion into its citizenship law, it builds persecution into the legal system itself—and that is how it pursues its goals. Impunity compounds all of this. The military's long history of avoiding accountability encourages repetition. Atrocities become a tactic, not an aberration. UN fact-finding missions have emphasised the need for criminal investigation and prosecution, yet meaningful accountability remains elusive.

There are also factors that worsen and sustain this crisis. UN investigators have highlighted the role of social media, particularly Facebook, in spreading hate speech and incitement against the Rohingya. That does not absolve the state of responsibility, but it shows how hatred has been amplified and normalised. Doing it so often means that it becomes a way of life that focuses on those who are in a religious minority.

Of course, we cannot point fingers outwards and not look internally. International action also plays a role. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) mentioned Myanmar in the main Chamber debate and referred to the Magnitsky sanctions that need to be in place for some of the Myanmar leaders. With great respect, the Government—this has been going on for a number of years, so it is not just this Government, but previous ones—have not pursued those involved in horrendous things in Myanmar, but they should have.

When decisive multilateral action stalls, the junta itself can outlast condemnation. Annual monitoring shows that detention, attacks on religious sites and the obstruction of aid continues despite years of international concern. Humanitarian obstruction remains a central tool of control. The USCIRF states that the military has blocked or prohibited critical aid from reaching displaced people, worsening their suffering and vulnerability—especially for minorities. All my life I have said that if a person is denied their human rights, they are also denied their religious viewpoint, and if they are denied their religious viewpoint, their human rights are also denied.

The question is: what should be done and what can realistically be done? We cannot solve all the problems of the world—if only we could—but the bit that we can do, we should do. In the immediate term, civilians and places of worship must be protected. Humanitarian aid must be allowed to reach those in need. I am sure that the Minister will be able to confirm where, or if, that is happening. I ask that the Foreign Office tie the substantial funding that we give to Myanmar to the principle of freedom of religion or belief. The UK has provided over £190 million for aid, healthcare and civil society since the 2021 coup, including some £66.45 million in the financial year 2024-25 alone. That was boosted by £10 million for the 2025 earthquake, with further funds for the refugee crisis—always with enhanced due diligence to avoid the military regime benefiting. We must leverage our goodness to them and ensure their goodness to their own.

In the medium term, the international community must constrain the junta's capacity to wage war, including through air power, and strengthen evidence gathering and accountability mechanisms. Those who carry out

abysmal and despicable crimes need to be made accountable, and the evidence needs to be gathered and made ready so that we can at some stage hold them accountable. Diplomacy can be a mighty tool and I believe that we can do more.

In the long term, there can be no durable peace without an inclusive settlement in which citizenship and equality are restored—especially for the Rohingya—so that freedom of religion or belief is protected by law, not dependent on good will or military discretion. For many years, the House has repeatedly raised concerns about freedom of religion or belief and wider human rights abuses in Myanmar. The question now is whether our actions match the scale of the crisis.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. First, will the Government commit to regular, published assessments of freedom of religion or belief and human rights in Myanmar, using independent monitoring benchmarks? It is really important that we have an independent body that is able to assess what is happening in Myanmar specifically. Through that, we will be able to gauge whether persecution is decreasing, or if there is any more action that we could take.

Secondly, what further steps will the UK take with allies to constrain the junta's capacity for attacks that destroy religious sites and kill civilians? The air force has been used to bomb and kill, and to destroy churches and even hospitals and schools—nothing is ruled out in the junta's attacks. Something really needs to be done to ensure that they stop.

Thirdly, how will the Government ensure that humanitarian aid reaches displaced minorities when the military deliberately blocks assistance? We know evidentially that whenever aid was sent from here to Myanmar, the military blocked it, put obstacles in its way and ensured that assistance did not get to the people that it should have.

Fourthly, what additional support will be provided to the accountability pathways identified by UN fact-finding work on genocide and other international crimes? I would love to have the people who have carried out these crimes made accountable in the court of this world, and then jailed accordingly. I am a Christian; I know that whenever they come to the next world, they will be accountable then. We all know where they will end up: they will end up in a place that is very warm—in hell. Still, I would love to see them get their justice in this world, just as they will get their justice in the next—I know that is going to happen, no matter what.

Myanmar's crisis is not only political. It is a crisis of conscience, where identity is punished, worship is targeted, and the law itself—as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said—is used as a weapon. This House must continue to speak clearly, consistently and persistently for those who cannot. Let us not be weary in doing good, and let us do what we can in Myanmar. I believe that with renewed focus, we can reap a harvest of freedom for those living in fear in that place. Our job today is to speak for them. They have no voice; today, we are their voice.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Four Back Benchers want to speak, and I will have the chance to call all of them. We have 40 minutes before the Front-Bench speeches, so that is fairly easy to work out: there are 10 minutes each, if you want to take them.

3.18 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate; he is well known in the House for defending the rights of minority faith groups, wherever they are found. The Backbench Business Committee was right to grant this important debate, so that the House has an opportunity to put a spotlight on one of the worst conflicts currently on the globe—one that does not share as much attention as other conflicts.

I wanted to secure a similar debate myself, but as the hon. Member was successful in securing this one, I was pleased to put my name down to speak, putting on record the importance of civil society in these matters. In my constituency, the human rights group meets every 10 December in Crouch End to have a Write for Rights Day, and Burma-Myanmar is always one of the areas where it highlights the importance of supporting victims of human rights violations, showing that humanity can win. I also put on record my thanks to the Burma Campaign UK, and to other civil society groups, which are so active in this regard.

We know that religious persecution is one aspect of the awful ordeal that the people of Myanmar have endured for far too long. In March 2025, Myanmar was already facing one of the world's biggest humanitarian crises after four years of conflict, with up to 7 million children out of school. The impact of that on every family in Myanmar—and on the fastest growing region in the world in terms of economic growth—is that 7 million children will be out of school and uneducated. That will dog them for the rest of their days, and create many local problems in the region.

Drawing on the intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the Rohingya people and the impact of the mass movement of people over the border has led to a very fragile situation in Bangladesh. In just a month's time, on 12 February, there will be a general election in Bangladesh. The fragile situation could easily be worsened through the further movement of people along that border, which is one of the highly militarised areas in this conflict. I hope the UK can continue to support both Bangladesh with its upcoming election next month, and Myanmar, in any way that it can through the mission in Yangon.

We are also very aware of the catastrophic earthquake that devastated a huge area of the country around the region of Sagaing. Thousands of people were killed; hundreds of thousands more lost their homes. I put on record my praise for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which worked well with a network of partners to deliver support on the ground, despite the challenges. It was just as effective in its intervention as China and a number of other important players in the region, but we need to keep that up. The humanitarian needs remain huge, and this awful conflict rages on.

Sixteen million people will require lifesaving assistance in 2026, nearly five years since the Myanmar military overturned the democratically elected Government. The regime continues to bomb and kill civilians. We have heard of that from personal stories that have come through the many representations made to MPs in this House. The military's blockade of aid has led to severe

food and medicine shortages and brought Rakhine state to the brink of famine. Two million people there are at risk of starvation.

On 10 December 2025 which, as I said earlier, was International Human Rights Day, this awful regime decided to call in an airstrike on a hospital in Rakhine state, killing more than 30 civilians, including health workers, elderly patients and children. I have spoken to people who provide vaccinations for children who have had to resign their posts because they were too terrified to go into villages for fear of aerial bombardments, as well as medics who have provided support and done surgery in trenches while bombs were falling on their heads. Médecins Sans Frontières, which has supported the hospital since 2021, said:

“Bombing of health facilities, patients being killed in their beds, this cannot be perceived as collateral damage in a conflict zone. Hospitals must remain a safe place for patients to receive medical care”.

We know that in 2024, Myanmar ranked fourth for attacks on healthcare workers.

I welcome the UK's financial, trade and travel ban sanctions against the military regime in Myanmar. I argued for them early in 2024 as the shadow Minister for the region. I also welcome the UK's statement at the UN on the military regime's sham elections, which are neither free nor fair. We need the Myanmar military to cease hostilities, respect international law and protect civilians. The people of Myanmar need a peaceful, democratic future, but we are a long way from that. We need to keep hope alive. It is my plea that, in a world so full of uncertainty, we do not forget about Myanmar.

The UK has done such great work in Myanmar, together with our partners, but the people of Myanmar still need us. Can the Minister tell us what funding this desperate country attracts in her regional funding following the Chancellor's statement in November 2025? Could she also provide her assessment of the potential for further sanctions on the Government of Myanmar and third parties, such as energy suppliers, to assist in slowing down the dreadful war machine that is harming so many civilians in Myanmar on a daily basis?

Finally, could the Minister update the House on progress in the International Court of Justice case, led by Gambia with the backing of the UK and the 57 members of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, so that the people of Myanmar can finally see justice in their lifetimes?

3.24 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this vital and unfortunately forgotten issue to the fore with this debate. When we speak about conflict, we sometimes look at the numbers and forget the nuances and the people who matter. As the saying goes, one death is a tragedy but a million deaths is a statistic, and so it goes with this tragedy, because behind every number are real people.

One case particularly puts that into perspective. On new year's day, a Rohingya man by the name of Mohammed Faruque woke up in a bamboo shelter in camp 7 in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. His phone was full of birthday messages wishing him a happy birthday. It was also his wife's birthday, his parents' birthdays, his siblings' birthday, his friends' birthday and the birthdays

[Shockat Adam]

of hundreds and thousands of other people in that camp. We all know it was not their birthday, but when they fled the massacres, arson and rape in February 2017 the poor, frankly overwhelmed care workers just entered 1 January on everybody's refugee cards. Mohammed Faruque said:

"When I see this date, I feel like I am no one."

That single sentence answers the question that the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) asked: why is this being done? It is because the people of Myanmar and the junta are trying to deprive people of other ethnicities of any form of identity. They are erasing their identities and who they are.

In Myanmar, faith and identity are intertwined. Since the coup in 2021, as mentioned by all those who have spoken in this debate, persecution has escalated dramatically. More than 200 religious institutions, including Buddhist monasteries, Christian churches, mosques and even Hindu temples have been destroyed or looted, and at least 41 religious leaders have been killed, including monks, Christian clergymen and Muslim imams, not just because of their faith but because of the overlap between faith and ethnicity.

The Rohingya Muslims have suffered the most extreme violence. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has called their treatment

"a textbook example of ethnic cleansing",

and a United Nations expert has identified "the hallmarks of genocide", but this persecution, as has been mentioned, does not just stop with one community. Ethnic Christian populations, particularly in Chin and Kachin states, have seen churches bombed and pastors killed, and religious identity has become a marker for punishment. They have been tortured, raped and executed on a daily basis. The cause is that the military junta is holding power through fear. It is a regime that has scapegoated minority communities and weaponised religion. That has been in the playbook for brutal and insecure regimes for millennia. It is being employed now in other parts of the world, and I am afraid that it will continue to be used in the future as well.

There may be a light at the end of the tunnel, because the junta has never been weaker. It is only controlling about 20% of the country's territory at the moment and thousands of soldiers have defected. There is a possible future for democracy, but the international community must step in if that is to happen, because in the meantime, civilians are paying the price. Overall, more than 2.6 million people have been internally displaced in Myanmar and about 1.3 million have fled abroad. Nearly 1 million Rohingya now live in Bangladesh, a country that already has 170 million people of its own, while 40,000 Rohingya—the number may be even greater than that—have sought refuge in India. Therefore, in addition to all the incredible aid agencies and aid workers who deserve recognition, India and Bangladesh also deserve some credit, because they have accepted large numbers of refugees despite facing their own population pressures and resource constraints.

Those pressures have unfortunately led to horrifying consequences, as was maybe to be expected. There have been stories of refugees being pushed back into the sea and of families being separated. There have been reports

of Rohingya men, women and children allegedly being forced to jump from a naval vessel and asked to swim for their lives in the Andaman sea. Camps in Bangladesh are dangerously overcrowded, and fires, disease, violence and rape are unfortunately becoming routine. This is a failure not just of humanity and compassion, but of international burden sharing.

That brings me to our responsibility. I want to put a few of the issues to the Minister. First, we must confront the enablers of the crisis. The junta survives because it is propped up militarily, diplomatically and economically by external actors. Some of those countries may even have veto powers at the United Nations. The proxy enablers must be named, challenged and pressured. Secondly, we must seek justice. We should actively support the international legal action, joining Gambia's case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, backing the ICC investigation to ensure that the junta is held accountable for genocide and crimes against humanity. Thirdly, we must support democracy wherever we can. I feel that the future depends on a genuine federal democracy, which protects religious freedoms, recognises ethnic equality and ends decades of civil war.

Finally I say to the Minister, we must match our words with actions and resources. Cutting the humanitarian aid to the Rohingya refugees and other displaced communities will have, and is having, catastrophic consequences. Aid to the region has dropped by 85% in the past five years, from more than £112 million to just £16.9 million. That is why we must make a commitment to ringfence overseas aid for that region, not just out of charity, but as prevention—prevention of further displacement, further regional instability and future atrocities.

This is not just a moral issue, but a strategic one. We should ensure that Britain remains a reliable partner, that the humanitarian system does not collapse, and that countries such as Bangladesh, India, Thailand and Vietnam are not left to manage the international crisis alone. I ask the Minister, what aid will we provide for the crisis? Mohammed Faruque does not want a different birthday; he wants recognition that his life, his history and his identity matter.

3.31 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing the crisis in Myanmar to our attention and I congratulate the other Back-Bench speakers in the debate so far on their eloquent and important contributions.

I declare my long-standing membership of the Burma Campaign UK. I joined because, about 20 to 25 years ago, I heard testimony from two Burmese refugees at my local Labour party meeting. I asked what I could do, and they said that I should sign up to the Burma Campaign. That is part of the reason I am speaking today, having received their updates and understanding what is going on in the country. I also commend the Burma Campaign on the consistency of its support for human rights. Whatever the changes—the political twists and turns in society in Myanmar, or whichever individuals ended up on different sides of the debate—they have not mattered, because the campaign has consistently advocated for fundamental human rights.

As we have heard, Myanmar is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Since the military coup in 2021, the Christian and Muslim minority populations of Myanmar have encountered greater violence and tighter restrictions on their freedom. In Rakhine state, about 630,000 Rohingya Muslims remain subject to systematic abuses and crimes against humanity. About 150,000 are held in open-air detention camps. The Rohingya are one of the largest stateless populations in the world, in effect having been denied citizenship since 1982. As we heard from the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam), about 1 million Rohingya live in overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh, after fleeing Myanmar in 2017, showing the tangible impact of the persecution that we are highlighting, with the displacement of swathes of people, condemning them to a poor quality of life.

As conflict rages in this part of Myanmar, the Rohingya have been caught between the junta and the Arakan Army, which the UN has documented committing multiple violations of international law. Both sides have indiscriminately attacked civilians since hostilities between them resumed in November 2023. I therefore ask the Minister whether she can assure us that aid to Rohingya refugees and the people of Myanmar will not be cut in the context of the overall UK aid budget. The Arakan Army also pursues its agenda of oppression by less direct means. It limits freedom of speech, censors access to international media and communications, arrests journalists, and threatens civil society organisations in the area it controls.

For Christians, the situation is similarly bleak. Believers have been killed and churches have been indiscriminately attacked. Nowhere has that been more intense than in the landlocked state of Chin—the poorest of Myanmar’s 14 states and regions. More and more Christians have been driven out of their homes, finding refuge in churches or displacement camps. Some have even been forced to flee to the jungle, where they are deprived of access to food and basic healthcare. Last year, Myanmar rose two places on the Open Doors world watch list, an annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution. It now scores in the extreme category for persecution. That categorisation puts the situation facing Christians in Myanmar on a par with that in places such as Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Myanmar is currently in the process of holding a set of elections that no observer could characterise as free or fair. They will be an opportunity for the Burmese military to rebrand and put forward a false narrative that it is reforming. Frankly, it will not concern the Burmese military that we can see the elections for what they are: a sham. The military junta has said it itself that, in its view,

“Whether the international community is satisfied or not, is irrelevant.”

These elections are vital in understanding this issue. They will be passed off as a front for the appalling human rights abuses and the persecution of minorities we have heard about today. We must stand steadfast against that and reject the idea that these so-called elections give any legitimacy to a malign regime.

In April 2025, the UK supported a Human Rights Council resolution calling for the protection of civilians and all minorities. It has also been clear that it does not regard the military regime in Myanmar as a legitimate Government. I am pleased that the Government have

committed to taking any steps they can, including sanctions, to bring about peace. Today is an important chance to strengthen our resolve and stand up for persecuted people who need our protection. Will the Minister therefore explain why it has been more than a year since any new sanctions were imposed to cut off money and arms going to the Myanmar military? Will she assure the House that we will resume imposing such sanctions?

We must not allow the religious minority communities of Myanmar to suffer in silence. I join colleagues across the House in urging the Government to keep standing up for the rights of those persecuted people by expanding targeted sanctions against those committing atrocities, directing humanitarian aid towards those who need it the most and working through international institutions to hold the military junta and other forces waging war in the region to account. Today, we must reaffirm that the UK will never stand by as religious freedom is crushed and human rights are denied.

3.37 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts, for this important debate on religious minority persecution in Myanmar. As I have done so often over the years, I sincerely thank and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the driving force behind the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, for securing this debate and ensuring that people who have been persecuted for professing their beliefs or—just as importantly—those exercising their human rights not to believe or practise a faith, wherever they are in the world, are not forgotten about. With the world on a seemingly endless cycle, stumbling from crisis to disaster and back again, it would be all too easy to forget or choose to ignore issues such as the persecution of religious minorities, but it is vital that we do not do so or allow others to forget or choose to ignore such a fundamental human rights issue.

No one would wish us to forget or ignore this issue more than the military regime in Myanmar, where for decades a deliberate policy of religious and ethnic cleansing has been pursued as they seek to Burmanise the country. Burmanisation is the belief that true Myanmar citizens are both Burman and, of course, Buddhist. That is why the citizenship law was introduced in 1982 to strip Rohingya Muslims of their citizenship, rendering many of them effectively stateless and making them foreigners in their own land. That hideous, racist, sectarian policy excluded minorities from the political process and limited the social and economic development of ethnic minority communities by curtailing their cultural and religious freedoms.

The attempt to erase the identity of anyone who is not both Burman and Buddhist has resulted in the most appalling oppression of religious minority communities. Notably, as we have heard, Rohingya Muslims and Christians have been the primary victims of this ethno-religious Burmese nationalism. As we just heard, this year the charity Open Doors declared that Myanmar has risen up its world watch list rankings, and is now deemed the 13th most dangerous place in the world in which to be a Christian. Since 2021, Open Doors has recorded a steep rise in murders, destruction of places of worship and forced displacement, and has now put Myanmar in the extreme category for religious persecution.

[Brendan O'Hara]

State-sponsored religious persecution—as we have heard from every speaker in this debate—has caused Rohingya Muslims to flee, predominantly over the border to refugee camps in Bangladesh, where they are having to endure some of the worst living conditions on the planet, because they are fleeing what the United Nations has described as an “ongoing genocide” at the hands of the Myanmar military. So fearful are they of returning that appalling squalor and overcrowded camps are deemed preferable to the fate that would await them should they return home. Displacement, murder, repression and widespread endemic gender-based sexual violence are every bit as real a threat there today as they were in 2017, when over 1 million Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh. It is worth remembering that in 2019, the United Nations described gender-based sexual violence as the hallmark of the Burmese military’s operations in Myanmar.

The Rohingya are stuck in what has been described as a hell on earth. For the benefit of Members who were not here the last time we debated Myanmar and the situation in Cox’s Bazar and Bangladesh, I will repeat what the journalist and documentary filmmaker Simon Reeve said after he visited one of those camps. He said it was

“like nothing I have seen anywhere on Planet Earth. This speaks of a Biblical exodus of an entire people terrorised into fleeing.”

Yet for those people, living in that unimaginable horror is deemed preferable and safer than returning home.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) is right that the situation for Rohingya Muslims living in the camps is only getting worse. Minister, that is in no small part due to the shameful decision by this Government to ape the previous Government and slash UK overseas aid, leaving Bangladesh—already one of the poorest countries in the world—to shoulder a massively disproportionate share of the costs of looking after more than 1 million refugees. When helpless, homeless refugees are dumped on impoverished countries, it leads to the crisis in Bangladesh that was alluded to earlier. We have a moral responsibility to do something about that.

As much as the Rohingya may wish to return home in a safe and dignified manner, such a return is not possible while the military in Myanmar is pursuing its reign of terror. The stark truth is that the Rohingya will be able to return home only when a Government committed to human rights, religious freedom and the rule of law are established. That prospect is unfortunately a long way off, because Myanmar, as we have heard so often, is in the grip of a man-made humanitarian crisis. The situation for the country’s religious minorities who have remained continues to worsen and the regime ramps up its persecution of those communities by attacking places of worship, forcibly conscripting minorities into its military, and continuing its genocide of the Rohingya Muslims.

As we also heard earlier, there are other armed players in this conflict who are also perpetrating abuses that disproportionately affect religious minorities—notably, the Rohingya Muslims and Christians. It is a dire situation. I desperately urge the Government to reassess the short-term, counterproductive and frankly inhumane decision

to cut overseas aid; every single penny taken out of that aid pot has real-life, real-world consequences for men, women and children.

Although the return of UK aid would undoubtedly help considerably, so too would allowing refugees in Bangladesh the right to work and thereby to support themselves and their families. Of course I can understand why the Bangladesh Government would be reluctant to make legislative change that would, in their eyes, encourage 1 million or so refugees to stay within Bangladesh’s borders. But the reality is that these people cannot return home until it is safe for them to do so, and that is not happening any time soon.

Last month, I visited Thailand and Malaysia with the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief to meet many of those refugee communities who have been fleeing persecution—chiefly the Ahmadiyyas, Vietnamese Christians, Uyghurs, Chinese Christians and Iranian Christians, but also many more. Like Bangladesh, Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention. Legally, in Thailand, there is no such thing as a refugee, despite hundreds of thousands of them living there.

The largest group of refugees in Thailand are from Myanmar, and they have lived in the camps along Thailand’s northern border for decades. With no legal right to work they obviously make a living in the black market, but in recent months the Thai Government have recognised the reality that such people are unable to return home and could well be an economic asset, and so have loosened the rules to allow them to work legally in Thailand. Perhaps, at least, the Government of Bangladesh might look at that—and indeed, why would the UK Government not look at it as well? What is happening in Thailand could happen in Bangladesh, and here. Refugees can be that economic asset. Allowing them to work will allow them to contribute, better themselves and benefit us all.

I again thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing this debate. I hope the Government can see that, although the persecution of these communities happens so far from our shores, we have a moral and a humanitarian obligation to help—because we absolutely, certainly do.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We move on to the Front-Bench speakers.

3.47 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, and for all his work. I also thank all the hon. Members, from across the parties, who have spoken in this debate with such clarity and conviction, and so powerfully.

Next month marks four years since Myanmar’s military junta launched its brutal coup against the country’s elected Government. In the years since, Myanmar has been plunged into a brutal, bloody civil war. The consequences have been devastating, with mass killings, widespread displacement, economic collapse and profound human suffering across the country. Myanmar’s military junta has long been the principal driver of repression, including in the sham elections, and particularly in the

persecution of religious minorities. What we witness today in Myanmar is not random unrest between non-state militias; it is systematic state violence with airstrikes on civilian areas, arbitrary detention, torture and collective punishment. It is a deliberate, large-scale system of repression, which has deep roots.

For decades, the Rohingya Muslim population has been subjected to sustained persecution, stripped of citizenship, denied basic civil rights and subjected to repeated military attacks. Over 600,000 Rohingya remain trapped in Rakhine state, stateless, confined to camps and facing severe restrictions on movement, healthcare and livelihoods.

More than 1 million Rohingya have fled the country, primarily to neighbouring Bangladesh, as we have heard. They face appalling conditions: the largest refugee camp in the world is in Bangladesh, just across the Myanmar border. Christians in Myanmar have also faced growing repression. Around 4 million Christians live in the country, many of them in ethnic minority regions that have borne the brunt of military violence. Churches have been damaged or destroyed, religious leaders have been detained, and entire communities have been displaced by airstrikes and ground offensives. Those are clear violations of the most basic freedoms—freedom of belief, freedom of worship and freedom from fear.

That brings me to the central point that I want to make today. The persecution of religious minorities in Myanmar does not occur in isolation; it is part of a far wider assault—an attack on not just specific communities but civilian society itself. Nearly a decade ago, when the Rohingya Muslims were subjected to large-scale military operations that drove them into a corner of the country and across borders, that moment should have been a turning point for international resolve. Instead, it became something else entirely. It became a test, and the world failed it.

What happened to the Rohingya was not an aberration but the tragic rehearsal of what was to come next. The tactics first deployed against the Rohingya, including collective punishment, mass displacement and the criminalisation of identity and dissent, have since been expanded and used by the junta against a broader section of Myanmar's civil society. Today the junta targets not only particular ethnic or religious groups but anyone who stands outside, or stands up to, military control—pro-democracy activists, journalists, human rights defenders, teachers, doctors, nurses and aid workers. The common denominator is no longer faith or ethnicity; it is defiance, independence and the mere refusal to submit to a brutal military regime. The civilians' bravery in the face of this is astonishing.

The humanitarian picture today is dire. Millions of people are internally displaced, and entire communities have been cut off from food, healthcare and shelter. Civilian infrastructure has been deliberately attacked; aid is obstructed; local humanitarian workers are criminalised; and starvation and displacement are used as weapons of war. This is a political strategy and a man-made humanitarian crisis, which brings me to the international response, particularly the UK's. The case for action could not be clearer. There is an urgent need for cross-border humanitarian aid, for sustained support to local partners and for far less deference to junta permission that is never given in good faith.

However, the Government's cuts to the aid budget, with spending projected to fall to 0.3% of national income by 2027—the lowest level this century—pose dire problems for Myanmar. Four years on from the coup, 22 million people require humanitarian assistance. That rise in need has also been partly driven by overlapping crises, such as the devastating earthquake this year. The Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs has warned that 16 million people now require lifesaving assistance and protection, yet the programme budget for Myanmar fell in 2025-26 to £47 million.

The international response is failing to keep pace with the need. The UN humanitarian response plan for Myanmar is only 17% funded, a dramatic fall from the already inadequate 36% reached at the end of 2024. Does the Minister have plans to increase the assistance to Myanmar? Where does Myanmar sit in the bilateral priority list of the FCDO, and does that not underscore the point? Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine, Yemen, Bangladesh and Myanmar—I could go on and on. In the midst of all this conflict, why are the Government now cutting aid to such a low level? The Government must get back to their legal commitment of 0.7%. As the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) said, to pile conflict upon conflict makes us less secure.

The UN has found localisation extremely difficult, unlike the UK and FCDO, whose localised approach is very welcome. The UN agencies themselves acknowledge that Myanmar is a context in which local actors are indispensable, because international access is so severely restricted. Military interference through visa delays, travel authorisation refusals and access constraints has significantly hampered UN operations since the coup.

The UK has avoided some of those obstacles by consistently supporting a localised approach—funding local actors outside the UN system, working through intermediaries and supporting informal delivery models, as well as working with local partners, including in areas beyond military control. The Liberal Democrats strongly support that approach. However, continued cuts to funding will inevitably undermine localisation, particularly when local actors are left without sufficient backing from the UN system. Can the Minister lay out how that support will continue?

The Government's sanctions regime also reflects a troubling lack of urgency. Sanctions have been piecemeal, slow and insufficiently co-ordinated with international partners. We need the Government to co-ordinate and enforce a new round of targeted sanctions, to cut the flow of funds and arms to the junta in Myanmar and of the aviation fuel that enables the military there to conduct airstrikes against civilians.

Key economic enablers of the junta remain untouched, while accountability for atrocity crimes remains distant and uncertain. If we are serious about protecting religious minorities and about defending democracy and civilian life, that must change. The Government must support international accountability efforts and name those responsible for atrocities, rather than hiding behind diplomatic caution. Why will the Government not expel Myanmar's military attaché as the representative of a regime committing war crimes? Given that the UK remains the penholder on Myanmar at the UN Security Council, it is in a unique position to lead the global response to the crisis in the country.

[*Monica Harding*]

It is disappointing how little sustained attention the crisis receives, both internationally and in this House—the only substantive debate about it in this Parliament followed the Government's own statement on the earthquake. Will the Government seek a new resolution on Myanmar at the Security Council to stop attacks on civilians and on religious freedom?

The Government have stated that they stand in solidarity with those calling for a return to democracy in Myanmar and they have urged the military regime to engage in dialogue with opposition groups representing the Myanmar people, including the national unity Government. I would welcome an update from the Minister on what engagement has taken place with pro-democracy actors, including the national unity Government, and on what steps the UK has taken to support efforts to achieve a ceasefire so that humanitarian aid can reach those who need it most.

Finally, if the junta were to fall—we have heard today how weak it is—is the UK prepared politically and operationally, with the requisite resource to respond quickly, to scale up humanitarian assistance and help support a civilian-led democratic transition in Myanmar?

The persecution of religious minorities in Myanmar is not a side issue but a warning—a warning about what happens when authoritarian regimes learn that the world will look away: first from one group, then from everyone else. We owe it to the Rohingya, Christians and other religious minorities in Myanmar, and to the millions of ordinary people in the country who continue so bravely and against all odds to resist repression and to hope for a different future, to take action. We must stand with them, not step back.

3.57 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

Like other Members, I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate and on his long-standing and tireless commitment to defending freedom of religion and belief around the world. This debate is the latest example of those efforts. Once again, he has brought before the House an issue of grave moral urgency and deep international concern, which too often escapes the sustained attention of hon. Members across this House. For that, he deserves our sincere thanks.

In my capacity as a shadow foreign affairs Minister, I have stood in this very place on a number of occasions to raise the vital importance of defending freedom of religion and belief. Sadly, it is abundantly clear that the assault on the right to believe, to worship or simply to think freely is not receding. I regret to say that in many parts of the world it is intensifying, and Myanmar is the most tragic and alarming example of that. It is, sadly, a depressing way to start 2026: to hear that such tragic circumstances in a country continue in the second quarter of this century.

However, I find it reassuring that today we have heard from MPs from about six different political groups who all had the common theme of wanting to see the tragedy in Myanmar end. I thank all Members who have helped to play a part in that process over many years, some of whom have spoken today.

The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) spoke about the importance of upholding the rights of religious minorities and about the need for international action in Myanmar. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) hit on a very important point about the motivation behind all this, so there are still questions to be answered. Why is there such severe repression against religious minorities in that country? The hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), who served as a Minister until recently and who worked on this issue as a shadow Minister, spoke about the fragile situation on the border with Bangladesh and the importance of remembering that issue as part of the overall tragedy taking place in Myanmar.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) for highlighting that the issue is not about one religion; it is about all religions that are persecuted. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians are all being persecuted, and he particularly highlighted the plight of the Rohingya. I was not aware that the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) had been so involved in the Burma Campaign over the years. I commend him for that. He also spoke about the appalling humanitarian crisis and the tragic failure of the global community to highlight it more seriously. We look at so many other issues going on in the world, but we rarely talk about that. The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), made a similar point.

Finally, the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) spoke about erasing identity and culture—exactly what is happening in Myanmar today—and Burmese nationalism. I think there is unity among all Members this afternoon, but there is a lot more to be said on this. Religious persecution is at the very centre of the wider conflict taking place in Myanmar. The military junta has deliberately targeted religious minorities—whether they are Muslims, Christians or others, as hon. Members this afternoon have mentioned—simply because of their faith, identity and ethnicity, which are so deeply intertwined in that country. The result is a campaign of terror that has displaced millions of innocent people and destroyed so many places of worship.

Independent human rights organisations such as Fortify Rights have documented deliberate aerial attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools, churches and hospitals, in the run-up to the sham elections, blatantly indicating how systematic and widespread the military junta's violence is. The latest report shows multiple airstrikes targeting civilian areas, many of which may constitute war crimes under international law.

Muslim communities, particularly the Rohingya, continue to suffer what many have rightly described as crimes against humanity. Hundreds of thousands remain in refugee camps in Bangladesh, a nation that has its own international issues to overcome, while those still inside Myanmar endure what Human Rights Watch has described as apartheid-like conditions, arbitrary detention and systematic deprivation of their most basic human rights.

Christians, too, often from ethnic minority communities and most starkly in Chin state, have been brutally targeted. Churches have been bombed, clergy have been killed and congregations have been forced to flee into jungles or makeshift displacement camps. Nor has

Myanmar's religious and cultural patrimony been spared, with historic cathedrals and churches damaged or destroyed in a deliberate attempt to erase identity as well as faith. That amounts to a sustained pattern of persecution carried out by the Tatmadaw armed forces with impunity.

As a country, and particularly in this place, we cannot look at Myanmar without recognising our own historical connections to that country. During the period of British administration, Burma was, as it remains today, home to a remarkable tapestry of peoples, languages and faiths. In its latter years as a Crown colony, there was at least a recognition, imperfect though it was, that diverse communities could co-exist under the protection of shared institutions and the rule of law. That pluralism was and is very much still being violently dismantled by the current regime. The very sense of cultural multiplicity that once defined Burma is now treated by the military junta as a threat to be eradicated. That should matter to us in Britain, given our role in establishing what is now Myanmar but, perhaps more importantly, because Britain's standing in the world rests on our willingness to uphold the values that helped to hold that country together, with the borders that it still has today, in the first place.

I acknowledge that the United Kingdom, under Governments of both colours, has taken a strong stance on Myanmar. Successive statements at the United Nations have rightly condemned the violence and reaffirmed support for freedom of religion or belief. However, we all know that in the second quarter of the 21st century, eloquent statements in international forums are not enough when entire communities are being erased before our eyes. The International Court of Justice case involving the Rohingya continues at a glacial pace while atrocities persist on the ground, so I say this to the Minister: what further support are the UK Government providing to the independent investigative mechanism for Myanmar to ensure that evidence is preserved and that perpetrators are identified and, we hope, brought to justice?

Beyond judicial mechanisms, what discussions has the United Kingdom had with counterparts in the region, particularly countries such as China and India, to ensure that those responsible, particularly within Myanmar's military leadership, face real political and diplomatic pressure today and not at some indeterminate point in the future? Action is required immediately. Despite the UK's imposition of sanctions, including on aviation fuel suppliers, airstrikes against religious sites continue. Does the Minister believe that the current sanctions regime is sufficient, or should we go further? What concrete steps are being taken to close the loopholes—particularly on jet fuel, arms transfers and financial flows—that continue to enable these atrocious attacks?

The UK Government rightly state that freedom of religion or belief is a core human rights priority, but how is that reflected specifically in our Myanmar policy? Is there a dedicated strategy to support persecuted religious minorities both in Myanmar and among refugee populations in neighbouring countries? We know that aid is being deliberately blocked from reaching displaced religious minorities, particularly in ethnic and Christian-majority areas, so what pressure are the UK Government exerting, bilaterally and through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those for whom it is intended, without interference or manipulation from the junta?

Will the UK Government commit to raising once again at the UN Security Council the crisis facing religious minorities in Myanmar? Will the Minister work with international partners to build a stronger coalition in defence of freedom of religion or belief across south and south-east Asia more broadly? We have seen the United States take a strong stand in defence of persecuted Christians in countries such as Nigeria, and the US Congress's work on freedom of religion or belief in Myanmar. Although the findings are grim, they have been instructive, so what discussions has the Minister had with counterparts in Washington? Is she pressing for deeper American engagement on this issue?

The United Kingdom has long been a world leader on freedom of religion or belief. When dealing with religious regions that have modern political foundations tracing back in part to this very building, I believe that we have a particular responsibility to show leadership—if not for the sake of those suffering today, to ensure that Britain is seen not as an irrelevant observer in global affairs, but as a nation that still stands up for justice, freedom and the rule of law, as our forebears have always done.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I ask the Minister to leave at least two minutes at the end of the debate for the mover to wind up.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate, and I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful and powerful contributions.

As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), said, there has been real consensus across the House today. With the continuing horror of the situation in Myanmar, it is important that we have a strong sense of our responsibilities in the international community. Given Britain's history with Burma, we must do all we can to support Myanmar to move forward to a more positive future and to keep hope alive.

The persecution of religious minorities and the freedom of religion and belief are important areas that go across the work of the Foreign Office. Indeed, earlier this week I met our special envoy for freedom of religion or belief to talk about the overall strategy, and why it is so important that we uphold these values and continue to be champions for freedom of religion or belief across the world. I will respond to as many as possible of the points that have been raised today, but first I will make a few opening points.

First, religious persecution in Myanmar is a grave violation of fundamental human rights. As my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) powerfully stated, we must speak with one voice in condemning these injustices and must work together to ensure accountability and protection for the most vulnerable, so let me say that the UK remains steadfast in its commitment to defending the freedom of religion and belief for all. As hon. Members have rightly highlighted, Myanmar's religious minorities have faced decades of persecution, from discriminatory laws such as the 1982 citizenship law to long-standing restrictions on worship,

[Seema Malhotra]

on movement and on citizenship. Indeed, since the coup in 2021, religious freedoms have deteriorated even further. This debate has raised the issues of attacks on religious sites, confiscations of places of worship, widespread destruction, families torn apart and communities displaced.

The regime continues to exploit religious tensions, particularly in southern Shan and Rakhine, where ethnoreligious nationalism fuels hostility, particularly towards Christian and Muslim minorities. We are also seeing the military weaponising online spaces to spread hate. The UN's independent investigative mechanism for Myanmar has highlighted how disinformation has driven identity-based violence, including against the Rohingya, as the hon. Member for Strangford has referred to. For the first time, we have seen brutal violations taking place in predominantly Buddhist regions. Sagaing is now one of the hardest-hit areas, facing daily airstrikes, village burnings and mass displacement.

In the face of those challenges, I want to address some of the points that were raised in the debate, particularly around the support we are giving. It is the case that, in the light of unprecedented global humanitarian need and the current fiscal situation, the UK has adjusted its annual official development assistance allocations. However, the plight of those in need and fleeing Myanmar remains a UK priority.

In 2024-25, the UK increased humanitarian support to Myanmar to £66.5 million, and the UK is providing £80 million this financial year. This year, as we provide that £80 million in lifesaving humanitarian assistance, we are supporting emergency healthcare and education for the most vulnerable. We are also working very closely with faith-based organisations, which are trusted actors with deep community ties that are often first on the scene in crises.

UK-funded education initiatives are helping to make schools more inclusive by supporting minority languages and cultures, so that every child feels able to learn. It is important to reiterate the point that no UK aid goes to the Myanmar military. This year, through the John Bunyan fund, we have supported organisations that tackle hate speech, misinformation and online harms that drive discrimination and violence. We have also trained religious and community leaders to challenge harmful narratives, strengthen civil society and develop practical tools to help communities respond.

Jim Shannon: Just one thing to confirm, Minister, and I think it is something that each and every one of us who has spoken has raised: we have all highlighted the issue that the aid the Government are sending to Myanmar is not getting to the refugees, that the junta—the military—is stopping it and is an obstacle to it getting there. We are all seeking an assurance that the aid will get to the refugees, which is where it is needed, and that the junta will not try to stop it. Please.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Member is right to highlight what the junta continues to try to do. That is why it is incredibly important that we are continuing to work to make sure that humanitarian aid is not prevented from reaching where it needs to go. It is also why it is so important that we continue to work with local organisations and actors on the ground, so that we are able, as much

as possible, to reach the frontline through trusted organisations with deep community ties. I am happy to continue dialogue with the hon. Member on how we are working in Myanmar on these very difficult challenges.

I also want to mention the incredibly important role that Bangladesh is playing, and to commend Bangladesh for the accommodation of 1 million refugees. We know the challenge that has been. The UK is the second largest donor to the Rohingya crisis response in Bangladesh, contributing £447 million since 2017, including an additional £27 million announced in September, just a few months ago.

My colleague Baroness Chapman was fairly recently in Bangladesh, talking to the Government, visiting Cox's Bazar and looking at what more can be done to support further skills development and other productive activity for those in the refugee camps. She also looked at how we can keep alive the hope that it will one day be safe for return, and how we continue to work as an international community towards that future.

Over 150,000 Rohingya in Myanmar, however, have been confined to camps for over a decade, with no freedom of movement, no civil liberties and limited access to services. Since 2017, the UK has provided £57 million in assistance to Rohingya communities in Rakhine, delivering water, food, cash, sanitation and health support. We continue to press the regime to stop attacks on communities and places of worship.

Sanctions have been raised by a number of colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), who I want to thank for catching me in the House in relation to this issue. Since the coup, we have imposed sanctions on 25 individuals and 39 entities, including those responsible for human rights violations. We are using our role at the United Nations Security Council to keep this firmly on the agenda. At our last meeting, we condemned attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure.

We also continue to keep all evidence and potential designations under close review. It would not be appropriate to speculate in this debate about potential future sanctions and designations, as to do so could reduce their impact. However, I say to my hon. Friend and other Members that we are clear that sanctions remain an important tool to maintain pressure on the Myanmar military. Since the coup, the sanctions that I mentioned have targeted the regime's access to finance, arms and equipment.

Sir Julian Lewis: The Minister mentioned the UN Security Council, and we heard earlier from the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) about what he perceives to be a potential weakness in the regime, which is being propped up by outside forces. Is it true that Russia has been most supportive of the regime, has supplied most of its aerial capability to bomb, strafe and kill civilians, and has been blocking moves against the regime on the Security Council? What assessment have the Government made of the survivability of the regime without military support from Russia?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the right hon. Member for his contribution. I will make some references to the UN Security Council in my further remarks, so I will hopefully be able to address some of his points.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I am concerned about time, so I will continue my remarks.

We continue to raise discrimination against minority communities at the UN Human Rights Council. We also know that pressure alone is not enough, and that there must be accountability, which is essential for breaking the cycle of impunity and violence. That is why the UK has provided over £900,000 to the independent investigative mechanism for Myanmar to collect and preserve evidence for future prosecutions. We have also established the Myanmar witness project to verify open-source evidence, and to train civil society organisations to do the same. We will go on to advocate for increased protections for minority groups, and for inclusivity, with opposition actors. That remains critical for a future transition out of conflict, and it is key to delivering the aspirations of the people of Myanmar.

I want to make a couple of remarks. First, in relation to criminal investigations, which the hon. Member for Strangford referenced, the UK is clear that there must be accountability for atrocities committed in Myanmar. We condemn ongoing serious human rights violations by the military regime, and those actions require further scrutiny. The UK is supportive of any attempts to bring those issues before the ICC. We support the prosecutor's initiative to investigate these acts. It remains our assessment that there is not sufficient support among United Nations Security Council members for an ICC referral, but as penholder on Myanmar at the United Nations Security Council we convened five meetings in 2025 and will continue to maintain international focus on the crisis.

In 2025, the UK submitted written observations to the ICJ in the case brought by Gambia against Myanmar for alleged breaches of the genocide convention, alongside Canada, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Denmark. It remains the UK's position that a determination of genocide should be made by a competent court or tribunal. The UK's intervention at the ICJ presents legal arguments regarding the interpretation of certain provisions of the genocide convention, and we are closely monitoring these proceedings, which begin on Monday. We reaffirm our commitment to accountability and to the international legal order. We also stress the Court's vital role in the peaceful settlement of disputes.

Shockat Adam: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I am sorry, but I have to wrap up.

I know that there are matters that I have not been able to address today, but I am sure that we will continue to have these debates. In conclusion, the courage of Myanmar's communities in the face of persecution must remain at the forefront of our minds. I thank those in the Burma Campaign and others who are here today, who continue to bring a lot of information to Parliament. The UK Government and the UK will

continue to stand with Myanmar communities, defending freedom of religion and belief, supporting those at risk and pressing for accountability, and we will continue to work internationally for a more just and peaceful future for Myanmar.

4.26 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, including those who have now left. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), as always, very clearly highlighted the issue of the Rohingya Muslims; the fragile peace, if it is such a thing as peace; and the fragile conditions in which they live.

We all look forward to contributions from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), because they are always very applicable to the issues. His question was who is behind this and what their purpose is. Quite clearly, the junta is focusing on race and religious beliefs.

It is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) in her place. I thank her for her well-known interest in the issue. We can almost see how de-stressed she is as a result of not being the Minister any more, but we very much welcome her contribution. She referred to the need for sanctions, and I will come to that point in a wee minute.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) voiced the intelligent thought that the junta is holding power through fear, propped up by others outside. A really important question, which may have been raised in the intervention from the right hon. Member for New Forest East, is "If the junta falters, do we step in or does somebody else?" If the Minister does not mind, perhaps she could come back to us on that point.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) told me earlier today about his particular interest in the subject. We thank him for his contribution and his interest for all those years as a Labour party member. He referred to the fact that the elections will not be free or democratic, and to the need for sanctions.

My good friend the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara), who brings great knowledge of the world to these debates, referred to sexual violence. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) spoke about mass killing and economic collapse. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), put things very clearly in his contribution and referred to perpetrators being made accountable.

My very last ask is whether the Government will commit to publishing regular assessments of freedom of religious belief and human rights in Myanmar, using independent monitoring—I think we need an independent person to do that. Once again, I thank the Minister and everyone else for their contributions.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 8 January 2026

CABINET OFFICE

Memorandum of Understanding between the ICO and the Government

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): This Government are today publishing a memorandum of understanding between the Information Commissioner's Office and HMG.

It is essential that we have strong public trust in the Government's protection of sensitive personal information. This memorandum of understanding sets out a shared understanding of how Government and the ICO will work towards better Government data security and use.

The memorandum of understanding will help ensure that the measures we have in place to protect sensitive data are robust and support this Government's ambition to use new technologies to transform public services, create a modern digital Government, and drive economic growth.

I have placed a copy of the memorandum of understanding between the Information Commissioner's Office and HM Government in the Library of each House. The memorandum of understanding will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS1228]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

SSEN Transmission Orkney Link

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I wish to inform the House that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero intends to undertake a contingent liability under the statutory spending authority under section 50 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. It is a bespoke, time-limited, capped policy indemnity offered by the UK Government to SSEN Transmission to satisfy the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's permit requirements for SSENT's Orkney transmission link project, under the Environmental Authorisations (Scotland) Regulations 2018. Upgrading and expanding the grid is critical to the Government's clean power mission and growth objectives. The project was granted initial regulatory approval by Ofgem in 2019, and final regulatory approval in 2023, and was awarded a marine licence by the Scottish Government in 2020, which was extended in 2022 and 2024. This indemnity will enable the project to proceed, and avoid potential delays, by satisfying a regulatory requirement, subject to SSENT obtaining the necessary permits, ensuring long-overdue progress in connecting Orkney to the GB transmission grid. This critical grid infrastructure will unlock significant clean power capacity that Orkney possesses—including community renewable projects—and bolster security of supply for the islands, helping support a stronger local economy and delivering a more efficient grid for GB consumers which is fit for the future.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability that is novel, contentious or repercussive to present Parliament with a minute, in line with "Managing Public Money". In line with this guidance, the liability will not be entered into until 14 parliamentary sitting days have elapsed following the laying of the minute.

The indemnity covers the extremely unlikely scenario where SEPA determines that an intervention is required, by virtue of SSENT's construction activity resulting in a statistically significant increase in irradiated particles washed up onshore from disturbing irradiated particles on the seabed, and that the required intervention is beyond the scope of the Nuclear Restoration Services' existing particle monitoring and recovery programme. The indemnity is time-limited for 20 years. Due to the extremely remote probability of this risk materialising, it is highly unlikely that this full cost would crystallise. HM Treasury has approved this proposal.

A departmental minute has today been laid before Parliament setting out full details of this contingent liability. In accordance with "Managing Public Money", the liability will not be entered into until 14 parliamentary sitting days have elapsed following the laying of the minute. Subject to satisfaction of the relevant conditions precedent, the Orkney indemnity will become live as soon as practicable after 14 parliamentary sitting days have elapsed following the laying of the minute.

[HCWS1227]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Farming: Profitability and Sustainability

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): Farmers are at the heart of our national life—for what they produce, the communities they sustain, and the landscapes and heritage they protect.

Since becoming Secretary of State, I have seen first hand the resilience farmers show in the face of increasingly unpredictable weather and volatile markets, their innovation in finding new ways to farm productively and sustainably in a changing climate, and their determination to build businesses that they can pass on to the next generation.

Today, at the Oxford farming conference, I have announced a package of measures that show that we are serious about partnership with the farming sector, that we are committed to giving farmers clarity and stability, and that we are backing farmers to grow their businesses with confidence and resilience.

We recognise that when British farming thrives, consumers benefit through affordable, high-quality food on their tables. We are ensuring that modern British agriculture is productive, profitable and sustainable.

This was a key theme in the recommendations from Baroness Batters' farming profitability review. In response to the review, we are establishing the farming and food partnership board, which will give farmers and food businesses a seat at the table when policy is developed. This is part of our ongoing commitment to work in partnership with farmers to make decisions that stand for the long term—not just for the life of one Parliament, but for the future of British farming.

At the heart of this partnership is listening. I have listened to farmers and stakeholders about their concerns on proposed changes to inheritance tax. That is why we are increasing the inheritance tax threshold for agricultural and business property relief from £1 million to £2.5 million. This means that couples can now pass on up to £5 million without paying inheritance tax on their assets. That is on top of the existing allowances such as the nil rate band. Around 85% of estates claiming agricultural property relief, including those also claiming business property relief, will pay no more inheritance tax in 2026-27. The reforms will still ensure that the wealthiest estates do not receive unlimited relief.

Today's package of announcements include:

An update on the sustainable farming incentive—This includes our plans to simplify the scheme and make it more focused, with fewer actions and less complexity. Previously, 90% of SFI spending went on fewer than 40 of the 102 actions available. A quarter of SFI money goes to just 4% of farms. This is not fair. We will improve fairness and accessibility, including by initially opening the scheme to small farms and those without an existing agreement. We are committing to greater stability following lessons learned from last year, including regular updates on uptake. These reforms will also help us to meet our ambitious environmental improvement plan target to double the number of farms delivering for wildlife, while recognising that food production is the core of farmer's businesses. SFI needs to work alongside food production, not displace it, so we will also review how much land can be put into certain actions and review payment rates for others.

£30 million Government investment in the Farmer Collaboration Fund, funding peer-to-peer networks and advice—We are developing a new approach that will provide funding for existing and new farmer groups and networks. It will help those groups to connect with experts and create strong partnerships on everything from environmental action to business growth.

A long-term transformation of England's upland areas—Our uplands provide over 70% of our drinking water, support rural livelihoods and are home to precious wildlife and beautiful landscapes; and they produce food in some of the most challenging conditions anywhere in the country. For too long, upland communities have faced a perfect storm of economic fragility, social isolation and environmental pressures. We want to change that. Over the last year, we have started working with social entrepreneur Dr Hilary Cottam on a new approach—an approach where we get out on the ground and talk directly to upland communities. This has been the beginning of what is a long-term partnership, starting with communities in Dartmoor, then Cumbria. Working with Hilary, our next step will be to develop a place-based approach for what these communities need, co-designing solutions to specific problems—for example, by developing a common understanding of how land can be best used for food production and the public good. Together, we will look at pooling public, private and third sector resources, laying the foundations for new income streams, and creating the skills and networks that let communities lead their own transformation.

Extending the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme for another three years, with £30 million in funding next year—This locally led programme has farmers and FiPL advisers working side-by-side to deliver projects tailored to their landscapes. This extension means farmers in our most precious landscapes can continue delivering for nature, climate and their communities.

We will continue to work alongside farmers to deliver these changes through our new farming and food partnership board, through peer-to-peer networks, through community-led change, and through engagement on the detailed changes to SFI.

We will provide the certainty farmers need to plan, giving clear timelines and a clear way forward with the farming roadmap later this year.

And we will deliver growth built on strong foundations: profitable farming and a thriving environment—not as a trade-off, but as two sides of the same coin.

[HCWS1230]

JUSTICE

Murder and Manslaughter Abroad: Family Information Guide (England and Wales)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I am today announcing the publication of the family information guide for families bereaved by murder and manslaughter abroad.

I recognise how deeply distressing and traumatic such events are, and the Government are committed to ensuring that such victims can access the help that they need. This guidance sets out the support available from agencies and specialist services in England or Wales.

Until now, there has been no single, victim-oriented guide, which has often led to challenges for families in understanding what is available to them. This new guidance consolidates existing information as to the services available to support families, and signposts support in a way that is clear and accessible. Through this guidance, we aim to improve awareness of the support available, offering reassurance to families at a difficult time.

The guidance sets out:

What families can expect in the immediate aftermath of a death abroad, including initial contact and support from agencies in England and Wales;

The ongoing support available to family members to help them through this difficult time and which meets their individual needs. This includes access to emotional support, legal guidance, financial assistance and referrals to specialist services.

The roles and responsibilities of agencies and support services with which families may engage, in order to ensure families understand who is involved, what each agency does and how they can help.

Clear information on how to access services and what to expect at each stage of the process.

I am grateful for the commitment of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council in preparing this guidance.

I also wish to thank the Victims Commissioner's Office and the charity Murdered Abroad for their invaluable support in making this guidance as helpful as possible for victims, and for their continued commitment to improving services for bereaved families.

I pay tribute to the late Baroness Newlove, whose advocacy for families bereaved by murder and manslaughter abroad was instrumental in shaping this guidance.

The guidance will be available online, at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/murder-and-manslaughter-abroad-family-information-guide>

[HCWS1229]

TRANSPORT**Pavement Parking: Consultation Response**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): This statement provides the House with an update on steps the Government are taking to tackle pavement parking. In short, we are giving local authorities the powers they need to address pavement parking more effectively, while ensuring consistency, clarity, and fairness for all road users.

I am today announcing the publication of the Government response to the 2020 public consultation, “Pavement parking: options for change”. The response demonstrates our commitment to improving transport users’ experience, ensuring that our roads and pavements are safe, reliable, and inclusive.

The Government are taking forward a new, devolved approach to pavement parking, reflecting our commitment to decisions being made closer to the communities they affect. Local leaders know their communities best, so they are in the strongest position to meet local needs effectively. Our overarching objective to make pavements accessible and safe remains unchanged, but rather than introducing a “one size fits all” national prohibition,

which was one of the consultation options, we will instead enable local transport authorities to prohibit pavement parking across their areas at the next legislative opportunity.

In strategic authority areas outside London, the power will be vested in the SA as the local transport authority. In non-SA areas, the power will be vested in the LTA, which is either the unitary authority or county council. This will support more responsive and inclusive transport planning in the interests of local communities.

In the meantime, secondary legislation will be introduced in 2026 to enable local authorities to enforce against unnecessary obstruction of the pavement. This provides a practical and proportionate interim solution, allowing councils to act where pavement parking is observed by uniformed civil enforcement officers. This power will sit alongside existing traffic regulation order making powers, enabling councils to enforce pavement parking restrictions both where TROs are in place and in other areas where obstruction occurs. The Department will issue statutory guidance to support local authorities in using this power.

Taken together, these steps will give local authorities the powers they need to address pavement parking effectively and fairly in their areas, and I commend the Government response to the House.

[HCWS1226]

Petitions

Thursday 8 January 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning applications in Stourport-on-Severn

The petition of residents of Stourport-on-Severn,

Declares that the community of Stourport-on-Severn has been severely impacted by excessive building applications on agricultural land; and further declares that the first site which crossed district boundaries was refused by both Wyre Forest and Malvern Hills District Councils but was overturned by the Planning Inspectorate, resulting in speculative building applications causing stress to our community and placing severe pressures on our medical, educational and highway resources.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Malvern Hills District Council to prioritise the protection of agricultural land in its Local Plan, to reject multi-dwelling planning applications within one mile of Areley Kings, Stourport-on-Severn, and to secure a full highway impact assessment for the historic Stourport Bridge crossing for any future developments.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mark Garnier, *Official Report*, 11 November 2025; Vol. 775, c. 130.]

[P003122]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

It is a statutory requirement for local planning authorities to prepare a local plan. Local plans are the best way for communities to shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development their areas need. In the absence of an up-to-date plan, there is a high likelihood that development will come forward on a piecemeal and speculative basis, with reduced public engagement and fewer guarantees that it will make the most of an area's potential. In order to deliver the homes and growth the country needs, we expect all local planning authorities to make every effort to get up-to-date local plans in place as soon as possible.

In preparing a local plan, local planning authorities must consistently apply national policy and guidance, while taking account of local circumstances. As the joint south Worcestershire local plan—covering Worcester city, Malvern Hills district and Wychavon district—is at examination, it is for the relevant independent inspectors to examine the plan publicly and impartially to ensure that it is legally compliant and sound. Local planning authorities can only adopt a plan that is sound.

The national planning policy framework makes it clear that planning policies should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and safeguard the best and most versatile agricultural land, which is the land most valuable for food production. Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer-quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality.

By law, planning applications are determined in accordance with the local development plan, which includes the local plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Each application is judged on its own individual merit and the weight given to these considerations is a matter for the local planning authority as the decision taker in the first instance.

The NPPF also sets out that transport issues should be considered during plan making, using a vision-led approach to identify transport solutions that understand and address the potential impacts of development on transport networks. The NPPF outlines that all developments that will generate significant amounts of movement should be required to provide a travel plan, and that planning applications should be supported by a vision-led transport statement or transport assessment so that the likely impacts of the proposal can be assessed and monitored.

The Government are currently consulting on a new NPPF that includes clearer, rules-based policies for decision making and plan making. The consultation includes policies on agricultural land and promoting sustainable transport. It can be found on gov.uk—<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system>—and will remain open for responses until 10 March 2026.

Proposed Development and Road Layout Changes in Crawley Down

The petition of residents of the constituency of East Grinstead and Uckfield,

Declares that the proposal to potentially demolish the existing dwellings in Woodlands Close and to create a significant new access road serving potentially 48 additional homes is inappropriate and would cause significant harm to the wider local community; further declares that the scale of the proposed development is out of keeping with the surrounding area, that residents would be subjected to noise and disruption, that the affordable housing mix of the proposed development is inadequate, that Woodlands Close could not accommodate the volume of traffic that would arise from the development, that the development would risk harming the heritage asset of Grade II listed Burleigh Cottage and the natural environment, and that public consultation regarding this proposal was inadequate and has not taken into account significant flooding risks and topography.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Mid Sussex District Council to withhold planning permission for this development to protect the wider local community in Crawley Down and in particular any homes impacted by this significant road layout change which will isolate one dwelling in particular.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mims Davies, *Official Report*, 19 November 2025; Vol. 775, c. 812.]

[P003136]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

Due to the role of Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers in the planning system, I am unable to comment on individual cases. By law,

planning applications are determined in accordance with the local development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Each application is judged on its own individual merit and the weight given to these considerations is a matter for the local planning authority as the decision taker in the first instance.

Proposed Solar Development in Wisborough Green

The petition of residents of Arundel and South Downs,

Declares that the proposed site on land to the south, south-west and north-west of Malham Farm and north-west of Oakwood Farm, Wisborough Green is inappropriate for the construction of a 20MW solar farm by Renewable Connections, due to its scale, location, and associated impacts on the rural setting and residents; further declares that there are no exceptional circumstances that require a solar farm to be built there, and that the local harms far outweigh the merits of this proposal.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to engage with local residents' groups and to encourage Chichester District Council to refuse planning permission for the proposed 20MW solar farm in Wisborough Green.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Griffith, *Official Report*, 2 December 2025; Vol. 776, c. 962.]

[P003140]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

Due to the role of Ministers in the planning system, I am unable to comment on individual cases.

By law, planning applications are determined in accordance with the local development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Each application is judged on its own individual merit and the weight given to these considerations is a matter for the local planning authority as the decision-taker in the first instance.

Where relevant considerations are raised by local residents within the 21-day statutory publicity period, these must be taken into account by the local authority. However, the weight attached to a particular consideration is a matter of judgment for the local authority as the decision-maker in the first instance.

Regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Shields

Declares that the uncontrolled growth of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) within the constituency is having a detrimental impact on communities, leading to overcrowding, crime, anti-social behaviour, parking pressures, and the erosion of family housing availability; notes that HMOs are subject to different licensing regimes under housing law, including mandatory licensing, additional licensing, and selective licensing; further declares that while these licensing schemes provide oversight of management and safety, the planning system remains the main safeguard against over-concentration; and further declares that without strengthened legislation, HMOs can proliferate unchecked.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to introduce new legislation to regulate and lessen the proliferation of

houses in multiple occupation; and to ask that each local authority publishes their strategy and policies on HMOs.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Emma Lewell, *Official Report*, 03 November 2025; Vol. 774, c. 728.]

[P003124]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

Houses in multiple occupation provide relatively low-cost accommodation for rent and can play an important part in the housing market.

National permitted development rights are a grant of planning permission for certain types of development set out in legislation. Under the planning system, a permitted development right allows a house (the C3 dwellinghouse use class) to change use to a small HMO (the C4 use class) for up to six people sharing facilities without the need for a planning application. Larger HMOs require an application for planning permission.

Local authorities already have planning powers to limit the proliferation of small HMOs within their locality. Where there is sufficient evidence of the need to do so, a local planning authority may withdraw a permitted development right in a specific area using an article 4 direction, after consultation with the local community.

This would mean any change of use to both large and small HMOs would require an application for planning permission, which is determined in accordance with the development plan for the area and provides an opportunity for local people to comment. It is important that local areas have relevant, up-to-date policies in place against which any planning applications or appeals will be determined.

The national planning policy framework requires local authorities to plan to meet housing needs. The size, type and tenure of housing needed for different groups in the community should be assessed and reflected in the development plan and other planning policies which are publicly available.

In relation to HMO licensing, under the Housing Act 2004 local authorities have powers to license HMOs to ensure they are safe, well-maintained and properly managed. Local authorities must license HMOs where five or more people from two or more separate households share facilities (“mandatory licensing”). Following consultation, local authorities can also choose to licence smaller HMOs where three or four people from two or more separate households share facilities (“additional licensing”).

A licensed HMO property must meet mandatory conditions around fire safety, minimum room size and provision of amenities. The licence holder—and manager, where relevant—must undergo a fit-and-proper-person test. Local authorities can also add bespoke licence conditions, for example to improve facilities, and have the power to inspect licensed HMOs without notice where they believe an offence is being committed under HMO legislation.

All HMOs, regardless of whether they require a licence, must also comply with the HMO management regulations. These impose duties on the manager of an HMO, typically the landlord, including providing adequate bins and waste collection.

Where a landlord fails to licence an HMO, or does not comply with HMO licence conditions or the HMO management regulations, local authorities can prosecute them, impose civil penalties of up to £30,000 as an alternative to prosecution, or seek a banning order. A landlord who commits a serious offence, such as failing

to obtain a mandatory licence could also be subject to a rent repayment order, where they can be ordered to repay up to 12 months of rent to a tenant or local authority.

The Government keep the powers to regulate HMOs under review.

Written Corrections

Thursday 8 January 2026

Ministerial Correction

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Topical Questions

The following extract is from Business and Trade questions on 11 December 2025.

Jessica Morden: Last week I met Community union representatives representing steelworkers across Wales, including in Llanwern—I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. They support the welcome movement on energy costs, and they know that the Government are working on procurement and that there will be a steel strategy, but the most urgent ask is on the EU's steel import quotas and tariffs. Can the Minister please give us an update on those?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise the issue of Llanwern; sometimes we focus on some of the other steelworks in the UK, but this is about the whole sector. I met Commissioner Šefčovič yesterday; we are very much on the case of trying to sort out precisely where we land with the EU safeguard, but we also need to ensure that the UK has a steel safeguard after the end of June. We will do everything we can to ensure that we have a strong and prosperous steel sector across the whole of the UK, including in Llanwern.

[*Official Report*, 11 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 480.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant:... I met Commissioner Šefčovič yesterday; we are very much on the case of trying to sort out precisely where we land with the EU **trade measures**, but we also need to ensure that the UK has **such trade measures** after the end of June. **This will** ensure that we have a strong and prosperous steel sector across the whole of the UK, including in Llanwern.

Other Correction

SIR GEOFFREY CLIFTON-BROWN

Rural Communities

The following extract is from the Opposition day debate on rural communities on 7 January 2026.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: A further threat is to the shooting industry. Shooting directly contributes £3.3 billion to the rural economy and £9 billion to the wider economy. Last year we saw a staggering 245% increase in shotgun and firearms certificate bills. What is worrying the shooting community at present, however, is the moving of shotguns from section 2 to section 1 of the Firearms Act 1968, which will involve a huge amount of extra bureaucracy. A petition opposing the move, organised by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, now has well over a million signatories. I urge the Government to reconsider that damaging proposal.

[*Official Report*, 7 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 350.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown):

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:...A petition opposing the move, organised by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, now has well over **100,000** signatories. I urge the Government to reconsider that damaging proposal.

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