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19 January 2026

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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 19 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.

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 779

TWENTY EIGHTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2026

House of Commons

Monday 19 January 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's proceedings, may I extend a warm welcome to the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States of America and his delegation, who are with us in the Gallery?

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

SEND Support: Access

1. **Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to ensure that families of children with SEND have early access to support. [907310]

7. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that families of children with SEND have early access to support. [907316]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): In December, I announced at least £3 billion in high needs capital, which will support local authorities to deliver high-quality places for children and young people

with special educational needs and disabilities. However, while places are necessary, alone they are not enough. We know that high-quality teaching is essential to achieving the best outcomes for all pupils and students. That is why I am delighted that we are investing £200 million over the course of this Parliament to deliver more SEND training than ever before, to upskill staff in every school, college and nursery and ensure that more children and young people receive the right support at the earliest opportunity.

Rachel Blake: The families that I am speaking to in the City, in the west end, in St John's Wood and in Pimlico through my special educational needs group tell me that they are concerned by a lack of accountability for parents and children when those children are not getting the support set out in their education, health and care plan. What certainty can the Secretary of State give to those families about what is coming forward on accountability, so that those families are not reliant just on mainstream support, but have confidence that their individual needs will be addressed through their education, health and care plans?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all the work she is doing to make sure that the voices of parents and children are heard during the reform that we intend to bring forward. As she will have heard through those conversations, the system just is not working for children and families. Through that national conversation on SEND, I have heard directly from parents, educators and experts across the country, and they echo the themes that my hon. Friend has just set out from parents in Pimlico and elsewhere in her community. Accountability is an issue that I take extremely seriously, and we will set out more detail in the schools White Paper.

Darren Paffey: We all know that early support for children with SEND depends on getting the co-ordination right among parents, schools, local authorities and the NHS, but we also know that is not always happening. Some of the children I have been supporting in Southampton Itchen are spending months out of education

and taking years still to get an EHCP, all of which compounds the challenges for them and their families. What can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that SEND families across the country will not have to wait until the end of the White Paper process to see better joined-up working for children who need that support now?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful for all the work he has done in this area. He is right that parents should not have to wait. Even though we need to see a longer term shift in the system overall, we need to see change now. That is why we have taken action. One of the very first things I did as Secretary of State was to restructure the Department to put SEND right at its heart. We are investing billions to create more special needs places and also more places in mainstream settings, alongside improved programmes to support teachers and that £200 million of investment that I just mentioned. My hon. Friend is also right that early support and early intervention are critical. That is why I am delighted that we will make sure that there is a SEND professional in every Best Start family hub as they roll out.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Early access costs money. Last year, children with special needs in the East Riding of Yorkshire were funded to less than £1,000 per capita—the lowest level in England. Camden received £3,565 a head. The Government's grant proposals increase East Yorkshire by £30 a head. They increase Camden by £267 a head, nearly 10 times as much. How on earth does the Secretary of State expect East Yorkshire to provide early access or anything else, when funding is as tight as that?

Bridget Phillipson: The right hon. Gentleman makes an understandable appeal on behalf of his constituency and his region. We are looking carefully at questions of funding. They are not easy questions, and he will recognise that many of the ways that funding has previously been allocated have continued because of the necessary timescales around that. However, his constituents will also benefit from the big investment that we are putting into capital and into extra training and support for all teachers, early years professionals and college staff. I want us to try, across the House, to find the ability to work together to tackle this big and deep challenge that we all face: support for children with SEND.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): In my constituency, the challenge that has been highlighted over and over again by the schools that I speak to is not necessarily about early identification, but having the resources and the places available for students once they have been identified. Will the Minister explain how the Government's approach to early access will ensure that early identification is matched by a suitable vision in an environment that meets the child's stated needs?

Bridget Phillipson: I have had many conversations of a similar nature with school leaders and others. The hon. Lady is right about the need for not only early identification but early access; they are not always the same thing. That will apply beyond the school gate, to speech and language support, occupational therapy support and much more besides. I can assure the hon. Lady that everything she has mentioned is central to

our thinking in respect of the reform that we intend to introduce through the schools White Paper, and I should be more than happy to continue to work with Liberal Democrat Members on areas of concern so that we can seek to get this right and build a consensus.

A-level and T-level Enrolments

2. **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate her Department has made of the number of young people enrolled on A-levels and T-levels in September 2026. [907311]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): More than 260,000 state-funded pupils took at least one A-level in the summer of 2025, and we expect that to remain steady in the future. T-levels continue to grow: at the last count more than 25,000 students embarked on them, which represents an increase of nearly 60% on the previous year's figure. We are committed to offering post-16 students even more choice through V-levels, a new vocational qualification sitting alongside A-levels and T-levels.

Gareth Snell: As the Minister will know, the uptake of T-levels is behind where we expected it to be and where many colleges would like it to be. At this point I should declare an interest, as a governor of my local sixth-form college.

Given that the Government are still intending to defund BTECs during the current academic year, given that T-levels are not having the uptake that they should have and given that V-levels are not coming on track until 2027, is the Minister confident that every young person will have access to a relevant course this September, and if not, what can he do about it? Will he consider pausing the defunding of BTECs until such time as V-levels come on line?

Josh MacAlister: I thank the hon. Member for his leadership on these issues through the all-party parliamentary group on sixth form education, and for his local leadership as a constituency MP. I can reassure him that we will manage the transition carefully as these changes are introduced. We stand behind T-levels, which are a good option for many students, and we want to see the numbers increase. We have run a consultation which has now closed, and we are analysing the responses to ensure that all students experience a smooth transition.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Minister rightly paints an optimistic picture of more people enrolling for A-levels and T-levels, which is wonderful for our young people, but I have noticed in recent days that some politicians keep talking down Britain and saying it is a broken country. That is simply not true. Education, for instance, is vastly better than it was 15 years ago. If we indulge in grievance politics, what does that say to the young people who are starting their journey in life? Let us be positive, and say that Britain is great.

Josh MacAlister: I thank the right hon. Member for his read-out of the discussion that took place during the most recent shadow Cabinet meeting, where this was a lively topic of debate. Britain is not broken; it has huge and deep potential, best found in our children. We were

pleased to see the last Conservative Government take forward many of the reforms initiated under the last Labour Government, and this Labour Government will be doubling down on the measures that are needed to break down barriers to opportunity at every stage.

Teacher Retention

3. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve teacher retention. [907312]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Labour is boosting teacher recruitment and retention in order to put 6,500 new expert teachers in front of our classrooms. We have boosted teachers' pay by nearly 10% and have taken action to improve wellbeing, and we continue to offer the targeted retention incentive, which is worth up to £6,000 after tax. Under the Tories, teachers were leaving schools in droves; under Labour, we have seen one of the lowest leaver rates since 2010.

Caroline Voaden: A speech about teacher retention that I made in Westminster Hall recently has been seen by more than 135,000 people on Instagram, and there have been hundreds of comments from teachers. They speak of pay not rewarding experience and far too much time being spent on administration and tests, but it is also clear that safeguarding incidents and poor pupil behaviour are driving teachers out of the profession. We know that both those improve radically when pupils spend less time on social media, so will the Secretary of State commit herself to looking carefully at the Liberal Democrat proposal to introduce film-style age ratings for all social media platforms, not just to help our teachers but to protect our children?

Bridget Phillipson: We will look carefully at any sensible proposals to ensure that we can keep our children safe online. I recognise the broader issues that the hon. Lady has raised, about behaviour being a factor that affects teachers' experiences and about some of the wider pressures including those relating to safeguarding. I am proud of the fact that we are expanding free school meal provision and ending the two-child limit, lifting more than half a million children out of poverty, because we know that poverty is a big driver of many of the challenges faced by our brilliant teachers and school staff.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I am particularly concerned about teacher retention at a school in my constituency, St Peter's in Ruddington, which was condemned just before Christmas following an emergency evacuation due to structural issues. I put on the record my sincere thanks to staff, parents, children and local organisations for their support. May I please push Ministers for a swift decision about what will happen next? It is very destabilising for parents and teachers to not know what form a rebuild will take, so I will leave this with the Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to push us on this issue. I know he has been working very closely with my ministerial colleague who is responsible for this area, and I can assure him that we will move as fast as we can. We understand the pressure that this is placing on the school and on the local community, and I will make sure he gets an update following this session.

School and College Assessments: Integrity

4. **Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the integrity of school and college assessments and examinations. [907313]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): I know how hard students around the country work for their exams, and how important it is to ensure consistency and fairness. Ofqual, the qualifications regulator, secures the safe, fair and resilient delivery of qualifications by regulating awarding organisations. As Ministers, we work closely with Ofqual, when needed, to support its work.

Steve Yemm: At West Notts college in my constituency of Mansfield, a significant number of learners requested that their English papers be remarked, because an unusually high number of students missed their expected grades. In fact, more than 50% of the papers that were remarked were given a higher grade, with some improving by two grades. The exam board, Pearson Edexcel, told the college that this was due to human error and the marking of one examiner, but later said that it was more widespread. The exam board has now refused to carry out a wider remark of the papers. Will the Minister join me in urging it to ensure that all students receive the grades that they deserve?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue; I am really sorry to hear about the uncertainty that it has caused students at West Notts college. He will understand that I cannot comment on individual cases, but I can say that Ofqual requires all awarding organisations to follow rigorous quality assurance procedures to ensure that marking is consistent and accurate. I understand that Ofqual issued enforcement action against three Pearson cases in December, resulting in a total of £2 million in fines.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): When I was studying for my A-levels, I had to work really hard to get the grades I needed to go on and study veterinary science at the amazing Liverpool University. Had social media existed at the time, I think it is really unlikely that I would have got the grades necessary, given that there are so many addictive algorithms that are distracting and bad for mental health. Will the Minister look seriously at the Liberal Democrat proposal to effectively ban social media in its current form for children? It is hugely distracting, and we want to ensure that every child can reach their educational potential.

Mr Speaker: That was a bit of stretch, I must admit. I do not know whether the Minister wants to stretch herself or not.

Georgia Gould: I cannot believe that you were not at university when social media existed—you look young enough to have been around—and I am amazed that you are able to concentrate in this Chamber. In all seriousness, we take the safety of young people incredibly seriously, which is why we are implementing the Online Safety Act 2023. We want to ensure that the opportunities of the internet are available to young people, but that they are kept safe online.

Mr Speaker: I gently say to the Minister that “you” refers to me. I certainly do not want to be held responsible.

Georgia Gould: You look young enough to use social media, Mr Speaker!

Ukrainian GCSE

5. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What steps she is taking to introduce a Ukrainian GCSE. [907314]

Georgia Gould: Decisions about which GCSEs to offer are taken by independent awarding organisations, rather than central Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to these organisations to ask them to consider introducing a Ukrainian GCSE, and discussions are ongoing. Alongside that, we are also considering alternative ways of supporting Ukrainian language learning.

Joe Powell: I thank the Minister for her answer. Ukrainian children, including 2,500 under the brilliant Ukrainian St Mary’s Trust, headquartered in Kensington and Bayswater, have been warmly welcomed, yet they still lack access to formal qualifications in their language. Alongside educators and my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), I recently met representatives of the AQA exam board, who told us that some children even have to take exams in Russian, which obviously undermines their national identity and standards in their native language. Can the Minister look at expediting the welcome commitment to reintroducing the Ukrainian GCSE and explore giving formal recognition to some of the Ukrainian language classes already out there, and will she agree to meet me and Ukrainian educators to discuss this campaign further?

Georgia Gould: I am so grateful for all the brilliant educators who have worked so hard to welcome Ukrainian children to the UK, including the team at St Mary’s school. I was really pleased to hear about the positive conversations my hon. Friend has been leading, and I am grateful to him for championing this important issue. I would be delighted to meet him and educators to look at how we can support taking this forward.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Bath has proudly welcomed hundreds of Ukrainian refugees, and we stand in full solidarity with the people of Ukraine, especially in Oleksandriya, which is our partner city. It has been concerning to hear that, in some parts of the country, Ukrainians have been encouraged to learn Russian as a GCSE, which can retraumatise children, as we have just heard. Does the Minister agree with me that until a Ukrainian GCSE is rolled out, no Ukrainian refugee should feel pressured into learning Russian?

Georgia Gould: I absolutely agree that all children should get to choose their GCSEs. I also agree about the importance of pushing forward with qualifications that support Ukrainian children, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to exam boards asking them to consider this.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Last week, the Education Committee heard from the chief regulator at Ofqual about the demand for GCSEs in both Ukrainian and British Sign Language. He stated:

“There is no legal obstacle to a new awarding organisation that is not currently recognised to deliver GCSEs coming forward and asking to be recognised... That could happen.”

Given the strength of demand for GCSEs in both Ukrainian and British Sign Language, what is the Minister doing to identify, encourage and equip organisations—outside the four main awarding bodies for GCSEs—to step up to deliver these important subjects if there is continued reluctance from the existing exam boards?

Mr Speaker: That was another good way of crowbarring something in, but I call the Minister.

Georgia Gould: We absolutely support the development of a British Sign Language GCSE. As I have said, we also support the development of a Ukrainian GCSE. We are taking this up with exam boards, and we will continue to do so.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Does the Minister agree with me that any Ukrainian GCSE should also include teaching on the importance of national sovereignty and the international rules-based order? If so, does she agree that Donald Trump should be the first to sit that GCSE, so that in relation to Greenland, he can learn to keep his hands off a country that is not his?

Mr Speaker: I do not think the Minister even needs to worry about answering that. Let us move on.

Statutory SEND Duties: Intervention Powers

6. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of powers to intervene where local authorities are not meeting statutory SEND duties. [907315]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): Where a council does not meet its special educational needs and disabilities duties, the Department will take action to prioritise children’s needs and support rapid improvement. The support and challenge offered are based on what works in SEND learnings and expertise from independent chairs, SEND advisers and SEND commissioners. The effectiveness of actions taken will be assessed by Ofsted monitoring inspections and robust monitoring by the Department.

Chris Bloore: I thank the Minister for her answer. She knows that Worcestershire county council has repeatedly failed children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families. Many parents report persistent failures to meet statutory duties and experiences of being dismissed or gaslit, causing prolonged distress to families already under extreme pressure. Can the Minister assure me and families in Redditch that, as part of the schools White Paper, she will be looking at how we can properly hold local authorities to account, and where there is failure, drive swift improvement?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I have travelled around the country talking to parents and, sadly, the story he has set out in his

constituency of parents having to battle for support is one we hear in too many communities. We want to ensure that the voices of children and their parents are at the heart of reform, and we want a system based on partnership and collaboration, but we know that it has to be underpinned by robust accountability. In the meantime, we will continue to work closely with Ofsted to ensure that performance is monitored and, where it drops, that we are taking action.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): In the Secretary of State's letter to me of 11 January, she said that the much-needed special educational needs school, Lime academy in March, could proceed if the Lib Dem county council responds by 27 February to say that it is a priority. Could the Minister confirm from the Dispatch Box that funding will be allocated for that priority school if the local authority, run by the Lib Dems, confirms to the Government its desire to do so?

Georgia Gould: We have set out that that special school can continue. In most cases we have given local authorities a choice about whether they want to build a special school or come forward with places that would be fully funded. We can follow up with a letter, but our intention is to provide that support, which is why we have written to the right hon. Member.

Flu Vaccination: School Absences

8. **Dr Becky Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of flu vaccination levels on rates of school absence in autumn 2025. [907317]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): Flu arrived earlier than usual this year, with increases first seen in children and young people. Despite the flu vaccination programme in schools getting off to a strong start in the autumn, with 4 million children vaccinated by early January—an improvement on last year's figures—attendance levels have been impacted, and the data does show high illness-related absence.

Dr Cooper: As flu circulation in children normally starts before adults, and protection through the vaccine lasts much longer in children, the children's programme should be under way across schools as early as possible from September 1. In my constituency of Worthing West, some schools were vaccinating children in the final weeks before Christmas last year. Will the Minister therefore undertake to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to review the timeliness of flu vaccinations in all schools, and to ensure that they are given as early as possible in the upcoming 2026-27 winter season?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her hard work for the people of Worthing West. I agree entirely about the importance of schools starting the vaccination programme as early as possible, and I want to reassure her that the Department is working closely with our colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care, so that next year we can get under way as quickly as possible and in as many schools as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland there is only a 52% uptake in flu vaccinations. There are two reasons for that: first, parents want to be sure that it is okay and safe for their children; and secondly, schools sometimes show reluctance to let it happen. Will the Minister share the policy that the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) just outlined with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland, Paul Givan, to ensure that we can do better in Northern Ireland?

Olivia Bailey: The hon. Member will be pleased to know that I will be meeting with the Minister he mentioned later this week on a visit to Northern Ireland, and I will be happy to discuss this matter with him.

School Support Staff Negotiating Body

9. **Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on establishing the School Support Staff Negotiating Body. [907319]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): In 2010 the Tories scrapped the School Support Staff Negotiating Body. In Labour's first 100 days in government, we legislated to bring it back. With the Employment Rights Act 2025 now passed, we expect the SSSNB to start operating later this year. We on the Government Benches value the vital role that support staff play. They deserve a voice at the table and, under Labour, they will get one.

Laurence Turner: I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my chairship of the GMB parliamentary group. The School Support Staff Negotiating Body, established under Labour's landmark Employment Rights Act, will make a real difference for more than 1,600 people in my constituency who have been undervalued and denied decent wages and terms and conditions for too long. Can the Secretary of State, who has been a determined champion of this policy, update the House on what progress has been made to establish the SSSNB in recent months, and on when my constituents can expect to receive published information from her Department on what this policy will mean for them?

Bridget Phillipson: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work to make the SSSNB a reality, both before he was elected to Parliament and in his time here—he is a real champion of working people. We will publish our consultation response in the spring, confirming which staff are in scope and what it means for them. We are also developing wider guidance for employees and for employers to be shared before the SSSNB starts operating. We expect outcomes to come into effect from April 2027.

SEND Funding Shortfall

10. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What plans her Department has to tackle the special educational needs and disabilities funding shortfall identified in the Office for Budget Responsibility's "Economic and fiscal outlook" of November 2025. [907320]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould):

The autumn Budget made it clear that future special educational needs and disabilities funding will be managed as part of overall Government departmental expenditure. We have subsequently set out new investment, including £3 billion for creating 50,000 new specialist places, and £200 million for SEND training for education staff.

Gregory Stafford: In Surrey, the high needs block deficit is forecast to rise to £165 million by 2027. Although Conservative-run Surrey county council has earmarked £144 million in reserves to ease that pressure, that cannot be a long-term solution. Can the Minister confirm whether and when Surrey's safety valve agreement will be extended?

Georgia Gould: We recognise that the size of deficits that councils are accruing while the statutory override is in place might not be manageable with local resources alone. We will be setting out more information in the local government settlement this year.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for visiting my constituency last year, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education for visiting last week, when she came to see an expanded school nursery at Uplands primary in Sandhurst. She took the opportunity to speak to some fantastic hard-working teachers, and to hear their concerns about the level of SEND need and the need for more support. I welcome the announcement of £200 million extra funding for SEND training, which will be vital for teachers who need that extra support.

Georgia Gould: I was delighted to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and to see some brilliant work, including a new SEND resource base that means children who would otherwise have to travel for miles are instead being educated in their community. As my hon. Friend sets out, I heard from teachers who wanted to put in more support but did not always have the tools to allow them to do so. I am delighted that we are able to invest in teacher training, which will support teachers in his constituency and across the country.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): In Kirklees, where my constituency sits, three quarters of EHCPs—education, health and care plans—took more than 20 weeks. Some 46% took over one year, which is six and a half times higher than the 2024 national average of 7.3%. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure timely access to legally entitled support for children with SEND in Kirklees?

Georgia Gould: As I set out, we have heard that too many families across the country are having to fight for, and wait for, support. That is not acceptable, which is why we are bringing forward the investment in early intervention that we have talked about today: the £3 billion for specialist places, the £200 million for teacher training, and the Best Start hubs. But we know that more needs to be done, which is why we are having a national conversation about SEND and will be bringing forward reforms.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I note that the Minister has not been to Harlow yet. *[Laughter.]* Families in Harlow have completely lost faith in the SEND system that we inherited. I do not think that it is too

much of a stretch to suggest that parents are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after battling to get support for their children. Will she outline, based on the specialist places she mentioned in a previous answer, what the Government are doing to ensure that we have a system that does not pit families, and indeed education professionals, against a system that is broken?

Georgia Gould: I will make sure that that oversight is corrected as soon as possible—although, I am not sure that my hon. Friend has actually invited me to Harlow yet, but I know the Prime Minister has been. My hon. Friend has written to me with stories of parents fighting the system—I have heard many like them—completely exhausted and often having to give up their jobs in order to fight for support for their children. It is just not good enough. We recognise that support needs to be available much earlier, we are investing in it, and that is the basis of the reforms that we will be bringing forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I note that the Minister, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), said that the Budget gave much clarity, but the reality is that the Office for Budget Responsibility analysis highlighted a £6 billion funding gap. I almost feel sorry for the Education team, because the Chancellor has backed them into an uncomfortable corner with her own Back Benchers with nowhere to turn, but they do need to be honest with parents and teachers who rely on these provisions. So again we ask: how do they intend to fill the £6 billion black hole hanging over the Department? Will there be cuts to services or to schools?

Georgia Gould: The Chancellor and the Secretary of State have been crystal clear that any remaining deficits will come from across Government. Opposition Members know that but are seeking to spread fear among parents. As we have heard across the House, there is already enough fear about the system. As I have travelled across the country, I have heard from so many families who have been failed—failed for years under the hon. Member's Government. That is the reality. If I was them, I would come to this Chamber with an apology or with some answers, but we hear neither. We are acting. We are putting £3 billion into desperately needed specialist places. We are putting £200 million into teacher training, which is something that has been asked for across the House. We have changed Ofsted. We are putting money into early intervention for children. We will back children and families across the country.

Academy Trusts: Governance

11. Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help improve the governance of academy trusts. [907321]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): Robust governance is crucial to achieving a strong schools system and helping every child to achieve and thrive. The Department has set out new guidance, including the academy trust handbook, setting out core expectations

and providing essential support to governors, trustees and governance professionals in fulfilling their strategic and statutory roles.

Rachel Taylor: Financial mismanagement by the Arthur Terry Learning Partnership trust has led to disputes with the National Education Union and, currently, strikes, which is disrupting the learning of students across the west midlands, including at the Coleshill school and Curdworth primary school in my constituency. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that academy trusts are well managed and build positive relationships with staff so that students and parents do not have to endure this disruption again?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend and other colleagues who came to see me a few weeks ago about this issue and the impact it is having on their communities. We continue to work with the trust. The work of multi-academy trusts is crucial for children, families and school staff, and it is right that they are subject to transparent accountability. We are delivering our manifesto commitment by legislating to introduce Ofsted inspections of academy trusts and related intervention powers for the Secretary of State, which will support strong governance across the sector, ensuring that the interests of children always come first.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Pressures on schools to convert to academy trusts are considerable and widespread, but academising at all costs is not always in everybody's interests. Some parents in Glastonbury and Somerton have told me that they are concerned that where decisions are taken across a number of schools, performance could diminish as a result. What steps is the Minister taking to monitor trusts and hold them accountable, especially where a school that has joined with an academy has failed to improve?

Georgia Gould: I have seen real benefits from collaboration in saving money and sharing best practice to support children in their learning. However, as I have just set out, it is crucial that there is strong accountability, and we are legislating to bring in inspections for multi-academy trusts to ensure that there is strong governance and accountability.

Gender Questioning: Guidance in Schools

12. **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): What recent progress she has made on publishing guidance for gender-questioning children in schools. [907322]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): The Department for Education is currently reviewing the draft non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges on gender-questioning children, looking carefully at the consultation response. We are clear that children's wellbeing must be at the heart of this guidance.

Rosie Duffield: The Secretary of State told the House that the guidance for schools would be published by the end of 2025, yet here we still are without the guidance anywhere to be seen. There is immense pressure on schools, colleges, children's homes and other settings to socially transition children, often irrespective of parents' wishes, with the obvious potential risks of long-term

psychological harm to the children, many of whom, like Keira Bell and some taking part in the upcoming puberty blockers trial, will go on to change their minds over time. When can schools expect the guidance?

Georgia Gould: This is about the wellbeing of children and young people, and it is critical that we get it right. It is therefore important that we consider the consultation responses and evidence carefully alongside the view of stakeholders and the Cass review, in order to get the guidance right for young people.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): That was a disappointing answer. The Government have been hiding behind the Cass review, which was published more than two years ago, for months. In April last year, the Education Secretary promised to publish the guidance by the end of the year, to give schools and teachers much needed clarity on these sensitive issues. That deadline has been spectacularly missed, and schools have been left in limbo to figure this out themselves. I implore the Secretary of State and the ministerial team to put ideology aside and finally act to protect our children. Will they do that?

Georgia Gould: This is a really serious issue that requires deep thought. We are working to ensure that we listen to the consultation and to experts to get this right for children. We make no apology for taking this decision carefully.

SEND: High-quality School Places

13. **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure high-quality school places for children with SEND. [907323]

14. **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure high-quality school places for children with SEND. [907324]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The Department has announced at least £3 billion in high needs capital between 2026-27 and 2029-30 to support local authorities to deliver sufficient high-quality school places for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. This will create provision within mainstream schools that can deliver more flexible support, adapted to pupils' needs.

Daniel Francis: I draw attention to the fact that my wife is employed by our local authority as a special educational needs co-ordinator. At the start of this school year, my local authority, the London borough of Bexley, rolled out a number of new resource provisions, adding an additional 122 SEN places in mainstream schools. They are in addition to some fantastic established resource provisions, such as the one at Mayplace primary school in Barnehurst. I invite the Secretary of State to visit the school to see how it is delivering high-quality school places for children with SEND.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend rightly identifies that there are pockets of brilliant provision right across our country, and our schools White Paper will ensure

that we spread that best practice and make it a reality for all children. Through the £3 billion of investment, we will deliver 50,000 more specialist places for children with SEND to ensure that children get the education and support that they need close to home. It was wonderful to visit my hon. Friend just last year at Peareswood primary, another school in his community that is doing fantastic work, but I would be delighted to go back and see some of the work that is under way to support children with SEND in other provision in his constituency.

Jacob Collier: Parents in Burton and Uttoxeter tell me that, under Reform-run Staffordshire county council, their pleas for help are too often ignored, leaving children in unsuitable settings or out of education altogether. Communication is extremely poor, and too often meaningful action comes only at the point of crisis. What action is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that councils such as Staffordshire act earlier and are properly held to account when they fail children with SEND?

Bridget Phillipson: We are backing councils with extra capital investment, including in Staffordshire, but we need councils to work with us to create the provision that children desperately need. We are also strengthening accountability. We have heard from parents time and again that their voices are not heard and that change does not happen quickly. That is why making inclusion a key area of Ofsted inspection for the very first time is central to building parents' confidence.

It would be remiss of me not to remind the House what Reform has had to say about support for children with SEND and their parents: it has said that this is about naughty children, bad parenting, and "a class of victims". That is just some of the language that Reform Members have chosen to use. I invite them and others to go and speak to parents of children with SEND, and understand just how desperate things have become and the change that is needed.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that cancelling an £18-million, purpose-built, 152-place SEND school in Buckinghamshire, due to open in 2028, and replacing it with just £8 million over three years will inevitably increase reliance on high-cost independent placements, worsen outcomes for children with the most acute needs in Buckinghamshire, and ultimately cost the taxpayer more, while failing some of the county's most vulnerable children?

Bridget Phillipson: We are giving councils significant extra capital investment to create places and provision much more quickly than many of them would otherwise have been able to. We are offering most local authorities a choice between continuing with their free school or accepting some alternative funding to deliver the same number of specialist places. Some projects without trusts appointed, which had opening dates very far into the distance, would not have created the places that we need as quickly as we need them. This is about bringing forward the places, giving parents confidence, and making sure that we are not sending children far away from home, which, as the hon. Member correctly identifies, we should not be doing. Children should be able to go to a great local school with their friends, and not travel long distances in taxis.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I agree with the Secretary of State that children should be able to go to an appropriate placement within decent reach of their home. North Herefordshire is one of the most rural constituencies in England, yet her Department wrote to Herefordshire council shortly before Christmas, cancelling plans for a school that would have provided specialist places for children with autism spectrum disorder and replacing it with a grossly inadequate allocation of high needs funding, and not progressing the rebuilding of Westfield school. Will the Secretary of State visit my constituency to meet families of children with special educational needs, and understand the specific need in rural areas for those local, state-funded positions?

Bridget Phillipson: I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards will be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss those particular cases. We are investing more in support for local authorities, including through capital budgets. The hon. Lady will know that local authorities have until 27 February to tell us whether they wish to proceed with the projects or whether they intend to create the places in other ways. This is about bringing forward investment and making sure the places are created much more quickly than they are right now. That runs alongside more investment into our schools through the high-needs budget and £200 million of extra investment for training that, again, is sorely needed.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): That example, and the example mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), illustrates Labour Government spin perfectly. That £3 billion is short-changing parents and children with special educational needs. The decision to cut schools was rolled out without scrutiny, slipped out before the Christmas recess. Some 46 free schools and 18 special schools have been axed, with a further 59 in doubt. Why did the Secretary of State cancel the much-needed special schools and make life harder for families and children with SEND?

Bridget Phillipson: That is simply not right. We are investing billions into creating much-needed places for children with SEND. We did take the decision not to proceed with a number of mainstream free school projects where we had determined that the places were no longer needed. These were projects that, in some cases, provided questionable value. We are making sure that we are prioritising investment for children with SEND to create more than 50,000 places so that children can go to school much closer to home. On the wider question around reform of the SEND system, the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) recognise, as I do and as Members across the House do, that this is a huge challenge facing communities up and down our country. I would be delighted to work with them to make sure that we can get this right for children and young people. Yes, of course they will push us on certain areas, but I would like us to build a consensus, to take this forward and to make sure that children get the support that they need.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Shortly before Christmas, the Secretary of State announced to the media, rather than the House, welcome capital investment in specialist provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, children for whom mainstream provision is simply not appropriate. However, digging into the small print, that included the forced cancellation of 18 free special schools and the jeopardising of a further 59, despite two thirds of state special schools being at or over capacity. With children being sent many miles away to privately run provision that is costing taxpayers eye-watering sums in transport and fees, why does she not give all local councils both the resources and the flexibility to decide whether they should go ahead with a special school in their area, because councils know what is best for the families in their areas, not Whitehall?

Bridget Phillipson: We are giving councils a greater role in this process because we recognise that many will be able to create places much more quickly through a different way of allocating funding. We want children and young people to receive the support they need in a local school, not a long distance away. In some cases, that can involve expanded specialist provision in mainstream schools, but I also recognise the critical role that the specialist sector plays—the needs of some children can be met only in specialist provision. That is why we have taken the approach of prioritising funding, and that runs hand in hand with much wider investment running through the system. The hon. Lady knows that I will work with her to make sure we get this reform right and to make sure that children and their education are right at the heart of it.

Children's Care Home Providers: Financial Oversight

15. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential impact of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill on levels of financial oversight for children's care home providers. [907325]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will introduce a financial oversight scheme for children's social care. That will increase the transparency of children's social care providers so that we can make accurate, real-time assessments of financial risk so that local authorities can step in and take swift action in the interests of children.

Sarah Olney: Last Friday, the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, published its report into the financial sustainability of children's homes. The report highlights that there is very little financial and governance oversight of private companies, which run 84% of children's homes in the UK. Given that the 15 largest private children's homes providers make average profits of 22% on an average charge per child per year of £318,000, what more can the Government do to ensure that children's homes have appropriate financial and governance oversight?

Josh MacAlister: I welcome the hon. Member's interest in this issue, and the reports from the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. Children's social care issues looked at through the prism of profit making in children's homes demonstrate how much radical reform we need for children's social care. That is

why we are putting £2.4 billion into resetting the system overall so that it intervenes earlier. We will also bring forward plans very soon to set out an expansion of fostering. That is in addition to measures in the Bill that is currently going through the other place to introduce a financial oversight mechanism and a profit cap to address the issues that the hon. Member has mentioned.

SEND: Blind and Partially Sighted Children

16. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of SEND provision for blind and partially sighted children. [907326]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): I thank my hon. Friend for her efforts in so brilliantly representing the interests of visually impaired young people and the time that she has spent with me on this important topic. I am delighted to be attending a roundtable this week that she has organised with the Royal National Institute of Blind People to hear the personal testimonies of young people. All schools have legal duties to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils, and special schools must ensure that they cater for those with complex needs. I am really pleased that the teacher training announcement includes support for visually impaired children.

Marsha De Cordova: I welcome the work that the Minister is doing, and I look forward to our roundtable meeting. Research by Guide Dogs has found that 69% of non-specialist teachers said that they lacked the confidence and the skills to support disabled children, including children with visual impairments, so I welcome the Government's new SEND announcement on teacher training, which I know will include blind and partially sighted children. However, training alone is not enough, so can the Minister set out what steps the Government are taking to ensure that schools and local authorities properly understand and implement their legal obligations on reasonable adjustments, so that blind and partially sighted children and young people are not put at a disadvantage?

Georgia Gould: We have commissioned research to strengthen the evidence base of what works to improve inclusive practice in mainstream settings, including for sensory impairment, and I look forward to discussing what more we can do together later this week.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Blind and partially sighted children in the East Riding of Yorkshire receive lower funding through the higher needs block than anywhere else in the country, yet in the settlement the East Riding will receive the smallest increase in the country at just 2%, compared with an average of over 6%. How can it possibly be justified that children in the rural, coastal East Riding of Yorkshire, who are already the worst funded in the country, are going to see the gap widen? Minister, please explain.

Georgia Gould: Revenue funding for young people with complex SEND has increased by £1.8 billion since July 2024, bringing total high-needs funding to well over £12 billion. Will be setting out more in the schools White Paper around further funding and how that is distributed.

Topical Questions

T1. [907335] **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): As we have heard today, we know that the system to support children with SEND and their families is not working. Our schools White Paper will deliver change that lasts, informed by our national conversation with parents, staff and experts, but critically, we are putting in place the foundations for change right now through £3 billion of investment to create tens of thousands of specialist SEND places and £200 million to deliver the most ambitious SEND training package in our history from early years through to college. Great local schools where every child can achieve and thrive, needs met, parents involved, children thriving, and support without a fight—that is Labour's vision for a renewed SEND system.

Blake Stephenson: Following the curriculum review, will the Secretary of State outline how the Government will support teachers to deliver financial education in the constituency of Mid Bedfordshire and, of course, right across the country? Will financial education form part of initial teacher training?

Bridget Phillipson: We are continuing to review initial teacher training, but we want to make sure that, through our curriculum review and its outcomes, children receive stronger education around financial literacy, budgeting and saving. There are some fantastic examples of schools that are already doing this well, but we want that to be the reality for all young people, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his interest in this.

T2. [907336] **Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): There is concern in the hospitality industry that the Government are reviewing funding for some important level 3 and level 4 apprenticeships, such as those used to train chefs. Hospitality is a key means by which we can tackle the challenge for those not in education, employment or training, but to deliver positive long-term change, we must have an apprenticeship system that allows young people to progress, rather than just giving them a foot in the door. May I urge the Minister to continue to support these apprenticeships, which should be a high priority for both our labour market and our economy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): The hospitality industry is hugely important. Nothing has been decided on defunding apprenticeships yet. I recognise all my hon. Friend's points, and we share her ambition that the apprenticeship system in the future is entirely designed around progression, as well as one-off learning.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): It is a disgrace that a Jewish Member of this House had his visit to a school cancelled following pressure and intimidation from pro-Palestinian protesters. That is abhorrent antisemitism. Over the weekend, the Secretary of State announced a welcome investigation into the trust, alongside Ofsted action. She said that she would "leave no stone unturned".

In that spirit, what is the right hon. Lady doing to address the role of the National Education Union in trying to prevent the visit?

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Let me update the House: I am crystal clear that schools must be a place of safety and that no MP should ever be stopped from doing their job, but sadly, this is not the first concern about antisemitism in schools and this alone is not the only challenge we face. We will leave no stone unturned, as the right hon. Lady said. I have asked the trust to commission an independent investigation into what happened. I will launch a review to ensure that all schools and colleges have the right systems and processes in place. I will set out more in due course as to the shape of that, but we will of course consider any area in which antisemitism needs to be tackled. I would be happy to meet her to discuss this further because this is an issue, when it comes to tackling antisemitism, that all of us right across the House must show leadership on.

Laura Trott: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's words. Bristol NEU publicly celebrated the cancellation of the visit from the hon. Member for Bristol North East (Damien Egan), describing it as a "win" and boasting that it sent a "clear message". Over the weekend, the head of the NEU claimed that the visit taking place "at the height of the genocide in Gaza" was a mitigating factor for excluding a British Jew from the school. That is inexcusable. I will gladly meet the right hon. Lady. Will she also back my call for the Equality and Human Rights Commission to look into the NEU, and will she ask it to investigate these outrageous statements?

Bridget Phillipson: Teachers are under clear duties around political impartiality, and that is extremely important and serious. In parallel, I have also been concerned as to some of what we have seen recently around the Teaching Regulation Agency's approach. That is why I have asked the permanent secretary to review what has happened there and to ensure that we have the right processes in place, because no one who glorifies terrorist organisations should be teaching our children. Antisemitism has no place in our schools. We are investing more, but there is always more to do, and I look forward to discussing it in more detail with the right hon. Lady.

T3. [907337] **Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): Towards the end of last year, I held my second High Peak careers, skills and jobs fair in Glossop. The event was a huge success. There was a real buzz around the opportunities on offer for local young people at companies like Street Crane in Chapel-en-le-Frith, Buxton Water, and Swizzels in New Mills, all offering high-quality apprenticeships. As I plan this year's jobs fairs, will the Minister update the House on what more we can do to support businesses to offer fulfilling apprenticeships—

Mr Speaker: Order. One of us is going to sit down, and it is not going to be me. Can I just try to help? I have a load of Members who all want to catch my eye. This is topicals, and we need short and punchy questions and answers. We will get a good example from the Minister.

Josh MacAlister: I compliment my hon. Friend's local leadership in High Peak. To support our ambition of 50,000 more young people into apprenticeships, we are expanding foundation apprenticeships, launching a

£140 million pilot with mayors to better connect young people with local apprenticeships, and fully funding small and medium-sized enterprises to deliver apprenticeships for eligible 16 to 24-year-olds.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The evidence is undeniable: social media and the addictive algorithms that feed it are harming our children's physical and mental health and impacting their sleep and their concentration and behaviour at school. With parents, children themselves and teachers crying out for change, and with cross-party consensus growing on this issue, will the Secretary of State work across Government, instead of launching a consultation, to ban under-16s from harmful social media through a film-style age rating system and approach the 42 children's charities and experts—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, I am trying to help Members from the hon. Lady's party and others. You have got to work with me. This is topicals.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We are always willing to work across the House on this critical issue, because nothing is more important than our children's safety. That is why we are proceeding with world-leading action through the Online Safety Act 2023 and why, as the Prime Minister made clear this week, no action is off the table when it comes to children and social media.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) that it is no use shaking her head and pointing at others? I have to try to help everybody in the Chamber.

T4. [907338] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): Many schools with SEND provision, including Beechwood primary school, would benefit from a sensory room and more family workers, while staff at Woodlands secondary school need more resources to enable them to work safely and support students. Will the Minister commit to better resourcing for SEND, and join me in visiting one of our brilliant schools to see the difference the funding could make?

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): I thank my hon. Friend for our recent discussion about this issue. The £3 billion we are investing in schools is precisely for sensory rooms and other investments to make schools more accessible for young people. I would be delighted to join her on a visit.

T6. [907342] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Secretary of State and I have had a number of exchanges over the past 18 months about the historical formula that leaves children with SEND in the East Riding as the worst funded in the country. I am sure she understands my frustration about the latest settlement, which will increase that inequality—our frustration is reflected in the fact that I am the third Member of Parliament from the East Riding to raise this issue today. Will the Secretary of State assure

the House that this is not the end of the matter, and will she meet me and East Riding colleagues to find a constructive way forward?

Bridget Phillipson: I would of course be happy to meet, or to arrange for a Minister to meet, the hon. Gentleman and colleagues. He will appreciate that changes of the manner he describes will often take time, to make sure we get them right. It has been necessary, because of the timelines available to us, to provide funding on the basis on which it was allocated previously, but we are considering other options through the schools White Paper.

T5. [907340] **Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): The decision by the University of Essex to close its Southend campus has sent shockwaves through my city. Students deserve continuity of study and staff deserve job security. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to secure an alternative provider for the courses that are currently offered in Southend?

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend has been leading local efforts on this issue, for which I pay tribute to him. The Government stand ready to support local higher education institutions where challenges are present, and I will of course extend the offer to continue that support, as will my noble Friend the Minister for Skills. The Office for Students has responsibility for ensuring that such transitions are managed carefully.

T7. [907343] **Carla Denyer** (Bristol Central) (Green): I have heard from constituents who are worried that the updated guidance on relationship and sex education encourages but does not actually require primary schools to teach about same-sex relationships. Will the Minister set out how she will ensure that all children learn, in an age-appropriate way, about a diverse range of relationships if it is left to schools' discretion? The charity Just Like Us found that only 19% of LGBT parents say their child's school openly discusses diverse relationships.

Georgia Gould: The new guidance sets out inclusion for all children and the recognition of those relationships. As the hon. Member will know, that is mandatory in secondary school, and we continue to take that work forward.

T8. [907344] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): As in many communities across the country, in Dartford there is a real need to improve access to places and spaces where people, especially children, can be physically active, including through play and sport. What plans are there to increase the use of facilities on school sites, including through enrichment and increased community access? What role can the forthcoming school sport partnership networks play?

Georgia Gould: We are committed to opening up access to school grounds and sports facilities; that is a key part of the school sport partnership work we are developing. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to develop it.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): The guidance for complaints in children's social care was issued 20 years ago and has not been updated since.

Those who work in the system say that it is out of date, and the ombudsman echoes their concerns. Will the Minister outline what steps the Department is taking to ensure that the guidance is up to date? Will he meet me to hear the concerns that have been shared with me?

Josh MacAlister: I share some of those concerns; this is an important issue. I have asked officials to meet the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to better understand the issues in the current complaints process, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady. Separately, we will soon publish updated statutory guidance on advocacy services for children. The points the hon. Lady raised are important.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The household income threshold for the maximum maintenance loan for students has not changed since 2008. If the threshold is not increased, by 2028 a child from a single-parent household with a parent working full time for the minimum wage will not qualify for the full maintenance loan. What are we doing to end this scandal after 18 years and raise the quota?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. The Government are focused on protecting support and increasing it for those who need it most, which is why we are increasing loans in line with inflation, reintroducing maintenance grants and, crucially—something I am very proud of and which the Secretary of State recently announced—giving care-experienced students automatic access to the full loan entitlement.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): A year ago the Secretary of State dropped the statutory free speech complaints scheme from the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. According to a letter published in *The Sunday Times* from 370 academics, including three Nobel prize winners, this has totally negated the whole point of the Act, thus imperilling freedom of speech on university campuses. When is the Secretary of State going to do something to correct this mistake?

Bridget Phillipson: The Government and I are absolutely committed to freedom of speech and academic freedom. It was a Labour Government who first enshrined freedom of expression into law through the Human Rights Act. I cannot comment on what might or might not be considered for future legislation, but I will act to protect freedom of speech and academic freedom, and we are considering options.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Children are entitled to 30 hours of free childcare from the term after they turn nine months old, meaning that in practice some children are actually 13 months old before they get the funding. I thank Mr P and my constituent Joeli Brearley for raising this issue. Will the Minister meet me to see whether we can fix this injustice?

Olivia Bailey: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and his constituent should he wish. As he knows, our record expansion of childcare means that more than 400,000 children benefited from additional childcare

this September, and working families are saving up to £7,500 per year. I appreciate the concern that my hon. Friend describes, but termly deadlines enable local authorities and childcare providers to better plan and ensure that sufficient early years places are available.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): There is growing evidence that smartphones in schools are harming behaviour, concentration and outcomes, but leaving it up to headteachers is driving inconsistencies, and only 11% of senior schools have an effective mobile phone ban. Will the Secretary of State publish an assessment of the impact of a statutory ban of smartphones in schools?

Olivia Bailey: The Government are completely clear and Government guidance is completely clear that mobile phones have absolutely no place in schools at any point throughout the day. Obviously, we continue to look closely to ensure that the guidance is enforced properly across the country.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know about the horrific sexual abuse case in one of my local nurseries. Will she introduce mandatory CCTV in nurseries so that we can use it as a safeguarding tool?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her advocacy for her constituents in what has been an absolutely appalling case. My thoughts remain with all the children and families who have been affected. The safety of our children comes first, so we are considering the mandatory use of CCTV in early years settings through the review we are getting under way rapidly.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Victims of convicted paedophile Neil Foden, the former headmaster of Ysgol Friars, are furious that he is still in receipt of his pension even though he is in prison. The forfeiture panel has met and come to a conclusion; when will that conclusion as to whether he continues to receive his pension be published?

Bridget Phillipson: I expect that to happen very rapidly.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Alex Foster, a 17-year-old from Aylesbury, has shared his experiences of social media with me. He says that “thankfully I was one of the very few who had my phone checked”—

by his parents—but

“my friends told stories of watching beheadings, terrorist material, explicit photos of them being shared”.

Does the Minister agree that we must go further to protect and educate young people when it comes to online harms?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her advocacy on behalf of her constituents. I agree that nothing is more important than the safety of our children. We are already taking world-leading action with the Online Safety Act 2023, and we have been very clear that nothing is off the table when it comes to children’s safety.

Business Rates: Retail, Hospitality and Leisure

3.39 pm

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if she will make a statement on the planned changes to business rates for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): Colleagues will have heard what the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have said on this matter in recent days. I will not add further comments on the specifics in responding to this urgent question. When there are further comments to be made, I am sure they will be made in the usual way.

At the Budget, the Government announced a comprehensive set of reforms to business rates. We have created a new, sustainable system with permanently lower multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. Business rates are, in line with the usual timelines, revalued every three years, and new valuations that were set in train by the previous Government come into effect in April.

It was right to support businesses during covid, but the previous Government went into the election with plans to scrap the temporary support entirely in 2025. If they had won re-election, they would have removed that support overnight last April. If the Opposition had intended to extend the relief, why did they not say so and why was that not included in their forecast or projections?

We on this side of the House have chosen a different path: we extended the support at a lower rate in 2025-26 and are slowly unwinding it over the coming three years, with the help of £4.3 billion of transitional support. I think all Members can agree that it would not be sustainable for a £1.7 billion annual temporary covid tax relief to remain fully in place at the end of the decade. At the same time, our reforms—*[Interruption.]* I am glad someone is enjoying them. Our reforms to rebalance the underlying design of the business rates system towards high street businesses will be implemented in April.

The new, lower tax rates will be introduced for 750,000 RHL businesses, funded by a higher rate on the most valuable properties, including for the online giants. That is worth almost £1 billion and means that smaller high street businesses will have a tax rate that is 25% lower than businesses with the largest properties. That is being supported by a significant support package, as I said, worth £4.3 billion over the next three years. As a result, over half of ratepayers will see their bills flat or falling next year, and around a third of properties pay no business rates at all, as they receive 100% small business rate relief.

I look forward to supplementary questions from the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride), and other Members, and I look forward to seeing whether the shadow Chancellor can keep a straight face, given that he knows his Government never did enough for our high streets: 7,000 pubs closed over the 14 years the Conservatives were in power; shops were shuttered on high streets up and down the country; the council services that keep our high streets

clean and vibrant were cut to the bone; investment was down; and the public suffered from the longest squeeze on living standards on record. That is the legacy for our communities—one that we are turning around.

Sir Mel Stride: That was a complete non-response. The Minister says he will make a statement in future in the usual way; we can only assume that that will be via the media, not this House.

Of all the excuses for a U-turn that we have heard from the Government, this one beggars belief. The Minister expects us to accept that the Government simply did not know what the impact of the changes would be when they announced them. That is astonishing. Why did they announce crippling rises in business rates without bothering to check who would be hit the hardest?

Worse still, we now know from the chief executive of the Valuation Office Agency, who appeared before the Treasury Committee last week, that Ministers were provided with the data on revaluations before the Budget. We are left with questions not only about whether the Government's excuse is reasonable, but about whether it is indeed correct. Can the Minister clarify what specific information was given to Ministers on the level of increases that businesses would be facing, and when?

Businesses are now in a terrible limbo over what their bills will look like in the coming years. The Government have indicated that changes will be announced for pubs at least, but there has been no official statement, which is why we have had to drag the Minister to the House this afternoon, so will he answer the following additional questions?

Can the Minister at least make it clear which sectors will be in line for further support? Will it be just pubs? If so, why are the Government refusing to help businesses in the wider retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, some of which are seeing even higher rates increases? Will the new support be a temporary or permanent cut in bills, as we have called for? How much will it cost, and will it be funded by yet more Government borrowing? Will the Minister apologise now to the thousands of local businesses up and down our country that have been so sorely let down by this shambolic Labour Government?

Dan Tomlinson: The shadow Chancellor said that I was dragged to the House, but that is very much not the case; I am very happy to take questions from him and from Conservative and Government Members.

Mr Speaker: May I help the Minister a little bit? I did grant this urgent question. This discussion would not have happened if I had not done so. I am not quite sure that his statement and mine are compatible.

Dan Tomlinson: I fully respect your decision to grant an urgent question, Mr Speaker. It was—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I certainly do not need any help from Opposition Members.

Dan Tomlinson: It was the word “dragged” that I had some objection to. I did not mean to comment on your decision to grant the urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Let me answer some of the questions asked by the shadow Chancellor. The key thing is that we are implementing the revaluations that his Government set

[*Dan Tomlinson*]

in train. Treasury Ministers holding a similar role to mine a good few years ago undertook the process for the revaluations that will be in place from April 2026. Those are set on property values from 2024.

Yes, there is an unwind from the pandemic, in terms of increases in businesses' property values as a result of businesses recovering from the pandemic. We were aware of the impact of the valuation, and of the fact that the previous Government did not have any plans whatsoever to extend the temporary pandemic support. We extended it for one year, and over the course of the next three years we are phasing it out, with the support of Government decisions worth £4.3 billion, and our transitional relief scheme.

I will not comment on speculation, but the shadow Chancellor referred to borrowing. Over the course of this Parliament, we will see the fastest reduction in borrowing of any G7 economy. Borrowing is set to fall in every single year of the forecast because of the decisions that the Chancellor took at the Budget. We have doubled our headroom against our fiscal rules, and we are seeing a warm response from private sector investors and the markets as a result of the decisions that the Government have taken.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Many pubs in my constituency are seeing eye-watering increases in business rates. We know from the Valuation Office Agency, which gave evidence to the Treasury Committee last week, that the formula used is the same formula that has been used for 20 years. This should have been no surprise, as the shadow Chancellor said, yet we learned in that meeting that more than 2,000 pubs have had their business rates doubled. This Government came in with a mission to transform business rates, and they came in part way through a valuation cycle. Aside from the question of what will happen to the hospitality sector, where are the plans for the reform of business rates in the medium to long term?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her leadership of the Treasury Committee. At the Budget, we set out the first significant fundamental reform of the business rates system that we have ever seen. For the first time, there is a very significant divergence in the tax rate paid by businesses on our high streets and by the very largest businesses, including online giants. The tax rate is around 13p lower for high street businesses than it is for the largest businesses. That is a 25% reduction, which cost around £1 billion. It is a £1 billion reduction for businesses on the high street, paid for by higher taxes on those who can most afford it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): These business rates changes will hammer high streets, and with the jobs tax on top, many businesses have already decided to shut up shop. Getting data out of the Government has been like getting blood from a stone; every question I am about to ask, I have asked before, but let me try again. Why did the Government set the expectation that they would reduce the business rates multiplier by the full 20p discount for retail, hospitality and leisure, and then not use the

maximum power that they gave themselves to do that? Do they accept that lots of small businesses have made investment and hiring decisions based on the expectations that this Government set, and will they apologise to those businesses for raising their expectations and then dashing them? Can the Government finally tell us how many business premises have been brought into paying business rates for the first time?

Last Tuesday, we learned that that the Valuation Office Agency had sent the Treasury data drops regularly over the past 12 months. What did Ministers know, and when? The VOA also confirmed that it had told the Treasury that more than 5,000 pubs would see their business rates double, so how is it possible that Ministers did not know that this would happen? Finally, whatever the Government are considering, can they confirm that it will apply to all hospitality businesses and not just pubs, and will they consider our fully costed Liberal Democrat plan for an emergency VAT cut for hospitality?

Dan Tomlinson: On the point about 20p versus 5p, we legislated for a reduction in the multiplier of up to 20p for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, but that did not set an expectation that we would go that far; it set the bounds within which the Government could choose to operate. As the first step in our significant reform to the business rates system, we chose to reduce the multiplier by 5p, which reduces the total taxes paid by RHL businesses by almost £1 billion and increases the tax take from the largest businesses by an equivalent amount.

The answers to many of the questions that hon. Members ask are very easy to find in the data published by the VOA. Detailed breakdowns of the change in the value of properties between the different revaluation periods are published on the Government's website. I will not take—I will not say “lectures”—suggestions from Liberal Democrat Members on VAT, given that when they were in power, they and the Conservatives chose to whack up VAT, a decision that pushed up inflation and added to the cost of living for people up and down the country.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): The £4 billion package in the Budget is very welcome, but the manifesto commitment was to replace the business rates system, not tinker with it or subsidise it. Pubs alone will see bill increases of 4% this year. Alongside that, VAT thresholds are strangling hospitality businesses on the high street, and that is on top of a tax compliance bill of £25 billion for small business, not least because His Majesty's Revenue and Customs does not answer 4 million phone calls a year. I repeat the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Treasury Committee: when will the Government table comprehensive, radical reform that meets the test of the manifesto commitment?

Dan Tomlinson: At the Budget, we published further updates on our broader work to transform the business rates system. There are things that we want to look at—for example, a switch from a slab system to a slice system, which should support and encourage investment. As was confirmed by the Chancellor at the Budget, we have already extended small business rate relief, so that

businesses do not face a disincentive to expand from one premises to two premises, but there are more things that we want to look at that are in that consultation. Of course, we will continue to engage with businesses on our high streets up and down the country, and with businesses large and small, to see what more we can do to continue our work of reforming and improving the business rates system.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Some of my publicans are facing a threefold increase in rates. They have seen the speculation that the Treasury has briefed out to the newspapers, but they are still waiting. They do not have long to wait before they have to pay these increased bills, though, so can the Minister give some indication of when there will be clarity—not just for publicans, but for retailers?

Dan Tomlinson: It is important to be clear that no pub will see their business rates bill go up by three times this year. *[Interruption.]* No, it is simply not the case. It is true that some businesses have seen significant increases in their valuations, but this year the Government are capping the increase in business rates bills at either £800 or 5%, 15% or 30%, depending on the size of the property. Yes, bills may be higher, and it could be by a large percentage if the rate is moving up by £800, but for the vast majority of businesses, the increase in their bills this year will be limited, due to the Government having intervened and provided more than £2 billion of support this year.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I welcome noises from the Department about additional support for pubs, but this is not just about pubs; it is about all hospitality businesses, including music venues such as Claptrap the venue and Katie Fitzgerald's in my constituency. They have been massively impacted by a perfect storm of new valuations by the Valuation Office Agency, the end of covid-related reliefs and rising energy costs. I also want to mention service-based industries, such as hair and beauty salons and indoor play centres. These businesses have limited opportunities to claim back VAT, as labour is their highest cost. When the Government consider additional support measures for hospitality, please can they ensure that all businesses are included?

Dan Tomlinson: Hospitality businesses are the cornerstone of our communities, providing life and vibrancy to high streets up and down the country. The Government are committed to continuing to support their growth and their success. We value the work that employees in that sector do—I believe that around 2 million people work in hospitality across the country—and the work of business owners who seek to grow and expand their hospitality businesses. Precisely because we value their work and the work of businesses on the high street, we fundamentally redesigned the transitional relief scheme, so that it takes the 40% reduction in bills as its jumping-off point. That reduction is a result of this Government's decision to extend the pandemic-related relief. The previous Government had not costed or funded that, and they would have ended it overnight if they had won the general election in 2024.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The problem is that the November Red Book stated:

"The high street will benefit from permanently lower business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure".

Businesses up and down the land think that was entirely misleading. We have had briefings to the newspapers that there will be a change, but the Minister is saying that that is not happening, and that change will be made through the normal processes, which I interpret to mean in the next spring statement. Those in businesses are lying awake at night, worried about these increases, so can the Minister tell them when relief will be on its way?

Dan Tomlinson: The changes at the Budget led to a reduction in the tax rate paid by businesses on the high street. That was a result of the reforms that this Government have brought in. We have been clear about the need to start the work to rebalance the business rates system to support our high streets. Because the pandemic relief is being unwound over the coming years—something that the previous Government would have done overnight in 2025, had they won the general election—and because of the increase in business rate values as we come out of the pandemic, some businesses are seeing increases in their bills. We have capped those increases significantly this year and over the coming three years, providing £4 billion of support. On the hon. Member's point about updates being made in the usual way, it is of course possible for Ministers to make statements in the House.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Opposition have no credibility on this issue. We know that had they won the election, either we would have seen these increases quicker, or the black hole would have been even bigger. None the less, it is true that many pubs are really concerned, and are under the impression that further help is coming. They are trying to make accounting decisions right now. Can he say any more about whether their bills will be exactly what they are expecting right now, or whether further help will come before April?

Dan Tomlinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making the important point that the last Government had no plans to continue to extend the pandemic support. As for his other question, I will not comment today on the speculation. He and others can see the words that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have said about this matter at the Dispatch Box and during various media interviews, and I have no more to say about it.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): As has been mentioned, in its manifesto Labour committed itself to reforming the business rates system, and the Red Book for the Budget referred to

"permanently lower business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure".

That will have given business owners the impression that their bills would be lower. The Government's get-out about the rates being low, when they knew that transitional reliefs were being phased out and rateable values were rising substantially, is not cutting it with businesses that made plans accordingly. Last week, we on the Treasury Committee heard from the Valuation Office Agency that the Government had known for more than a year about the size of the increase in rateable values, so why has this backlash taken them by surprise?

Dan Tomlinson: As I have said, the Government were aware that a revaluation was taking place. That revaluation, which was initiated by the last Government, took account of property values in 2024, and will be in place from

[*Dan Tomlinson*]

April this year. We were also aware—and Members in all parts of the House would probably agree on this—that by the end of the decade it would not be appropriate to retain the full pandemic relief almost 10 years after the height of the pandemic. In the round, as a result of those decisions, we came forward with a significant package of £4.3 billion of protection for businesses across the country—large and small, high street and non-high street—to help them adjust to the potential for higher bills that some are experiencing. Let me add that, as I said in my opening remarks, the business rates bills of about 50% of businesses are either flat or falling.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Pubs have a powerful lobby, unlike the independents on our high streets such as cafés and retail outlets. I have been poring over the spreadsheets showing the impacts that this will have on York. Some little retail outlets are seeing their business rates rise by 93%, and they simply do not have the resilience to deal with it. What will the Minister do for independents to ensure that they survive past March this year?

Dan Tomlinson: York high street, in my hon. Friend's constituency, is a beautiful and wonderful place where there are many fantastic businesses. I worked there for a time. I know that Members in all parts of the House value the businesses that keep their high streets vibrant and thriving. We are taking steps, and we took steps in the Budget, to support high street businesses through our £4.3 billion of support, and we will continue to engage with Members and with businesses on the further steps that we can take to support them.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): The Minister is talking in numbers, but out there on the doorsteps and in the streets and high streets, I have met a café owner and a publican whose businesses are busier than ever—they are selling more drinks and more food—but whose top line is shrinking because of the decisions being made by this Government. One landlady was in tears as she spoke to me about whether she should carry on, directly because of this Government's policies. What advice would the Minister give her?

Dan Tomlinson: I hope that when the hon. Member was conversing with businesses in his constituency, he explained that this year, if a pub has a rateable value of less than £100,000, the policy as set out in the Budget will have capped those increases at 15%. I think it important for Members to do all that they can to help business owners pick through the complexities of the business rates system. It is a complicated system: there are many different reliefs, and there is a difference between the tax rates that are paid, the relief that is applied and the rateable value of the property. Of course some businesses are seeing their rateable values increase as we unwind from the pandemic, but that is precisely why the Government included that package of support in the Budget.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The hospitality and leisure sector in Liverpool is one of the largest employers and contributes significantly to the local economy. However, it is facing significant challenges at

the moment, with the average hospitality business facing an increase of more than £48,000 in business rates over the next three years—double the national average, and a serious threat to sustainability. That is compounded by a 20% VAT rate, which is one of the highest in Europe. By comparison, Germany has reinstated a rate of 7% to support its sector. Can the Minister explain what targeted support will be provided to safeguard jobs, and to prevent closures and redundancies, in the hospitality and leisure sector in Liverpool? Will he please come to Liverpool to speak to business owners?

Dan Tomlinson: When I am up at the Labour party conference, I like to enjoy the pubs and hospitality available in Liverpool. It is a fantastic and vibrant city, and I know that the constituencies and areas in the middle of the city have some of the highest numbers of pubs and hospitality businesses in the country. Like me, my hon. Friend really values those businesses, the work that business owners do and, of course, the work that their employees do—they can be quite tough and demanding jobs.

We want to support hospitality, which is why the Government redesigned the transitional relief scheme at the Budget so that it applies a 40% reduction as the baseline, rather than unwinding the support in full, as the previous Government would have done overnight. We also said at the Budget that we will appoint a retail, hospitality and leisure envoy, and I look forward to that announcement in due course.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are going to run this session for an hour from the start, so it will end at 4.40 pm. If the Minister can help Members to get in, that will be really useful.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Perhaps the Prime Minister, on his much-heralded cost of living tour, might like to visit the pubs and cafés in my constituency of Esher and Walton, if they let him in. They are being squeezed to breaking point by this Government, while constituents watch their wallets because of tax rises. Hospitality venues are the lifeblood of my high street and create the jobs we need for young people. Will the Government act now by fully using business rates relief and introducing an emergency VAT cut for hospitality to protect jobs, pubs, restaurants and the lifeblood of my constituency?

Dan Tomlinson: One of the things that the Government are doing to support businesses up and down the country is bringing back economic stability. Under this Government, interest rates have been cut six times, which will reduce borrowing costs for businesses small and large, and we are doing all we can to boost living standards, so that people have more money in their pockets to spend in hospitality businesses. We have seen faster increases in wages in the first year of this Government than we did in the first 10 years under the Conservatives.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I find it a bit rich that the Conservatives are raising this issue, given that around 7,000 pubs and bars closed on their watch, which is felt in Blackpool and across the country. Will the Minister continue to engage with the hospitality sector,

UKHospitality and small businesses to ensure that we get this right? Many are struggling after 14 years of Conservative government, and especially after covid. We need to support our high streets, which have been forgotten about for far too long.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement on this important issue, and for the work that he does on the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism. Yes, the Government will continue to engage with sector bodies such as UKHospitality on this and other matters that are important for the hospitality industry.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister does not have to defect to Reform to get a pint, and I am very happy to show him round the pubs in Shropshire's villages and market towns. I will show him that pubs are not just about having non-alcoholic and alcoholic drinks; they are often at the very heart of village communities. Local charities, the women's institute, pensioner groups and others meet there because the post office or the shop has closed. May I genuinely invite the Minister to get out of London—out of the beltway and out of the bubble—and come to Shropshire? He will not be allowed inside pubs, of course, but I can bring him a pint outside when the warmer weather comes. I appeal to him to join me in Shropshire and hear at first hand what pub landlords and owners have to say.

Mr Speaker: We're at last orders. Come on, Minister.

Dan Tomlinson: I do not know what the current Government position is on whether pubs are allowed to sell takeaway pints, but I hope that would be allowed in Shropshire if I were to visit. However, I have about 30 pubs in my north London constituency, and I have many conversations with publicans both locally and in my role as Exchequer Secretary.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and to my chairship of the all-party parliamentary beer group. Does the Minister accept that pubs are anchor employers on our high streets, and will he please ask the Chancellor to expedite a package of rates relief and duty reduction aimed specifically at sustaining these really important jobs in hospitality?

Dan Tomlinson: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that pubs are important anchor institutions. I know that she cares deeply about the businesses in her constituency, and she is a strong representative for them. Under the previous Government, we saw more than one pub closing every single day—7,000 fewer pubs in our communities. This Government will do all we can to continue to support publicans and institutions that are the lifeblood of communities up and down the country.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): There has been an absolutely shambolic, chaotic furore around these business rates since the Budget. When will the Minister do the right thing and confirm to the House exactly when we are going to get some clarity on these changes? Is he aware just how despairing businesses are in my constituency of Boston and Skegness and around the country because of the uncertainty and the increased

costs? Is he also aware that pubs are reducing opening hours and employee hours? Will he do the decent thing and apologise?

Dan Tomlinson: I was not sure what the hon. Member was referring to when he said there was a “shambolic, chaotic furore”, but it was probably his own party, which would not be able to run anything in any brewery, let alone a whole country.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that it is the job of MPs to help publicans and hospitality businesses understand the system. I gently say to him that they do understand it. Their frustration comes not from not understanding the help that is available, but from the system they are working in. Several things can be true at once. It is true that there is a permanently lower rate and that there is a £4 billion package to soften the blow for those with increased business rates, but it is also true that, when that goes away, breweries such as Titanic Brewery in Stoke-on-Trent will have an overall business rates increase of 130%, with some of its venues seeing a 400% increase. Can the Minister set out what specific support they can look forward to in the next three years, or can he give them clarity on what they need to budget for, because as a result of these changes some pubs around the country will close, and we need to avoid that?

Dan Tomlinson: I totally agree with my hon. Friend that we need to avoid the situation we saw for 14 years, when 7,000 pubs closed under the Conservatives, with about 4,000 closing in the first five years when the Lib Dems were in coalition with them. This Government will do all we can to support pubs, hospitality businesses and our high streets, which is why we set out a really strong set of proposals at the Budget, as he mentioned, including £4.3 billion of support.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): When is a U-turn not a U-turn? I would suggest it is when the Government realise that they have made a terrible mistake, brief that they will change the policy and then send a Minister to this House to explain that nothing is changing at all. Does the Minister realise how much despair people are feeling? This is not a problem about a transition; this is a fundamental flaw in the whole concept of business rates that hits the smallest businesses the hardest. We need our policy, which is to leave the transitional rates relief permanently in place until there is a new system that exempts smaller businesses from this punitive tax.

Dan Tomlinson: The Conservatives had 14 years to implement significant reforms to the business rates system. They could have changed the system with significant underlying reforms, meaning that the tax rate paid by high street businesses was lower than the tax rate paid by the largest businesses, but they did not. I do not think we can trust a word they say when it comes to reform of the business rates system. They did not take the opportunity when they had their chance. It is easy to say things, but the Government are getting on with the job of reforming and improving our business rates system.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement so far on this issue. It will come as no surprise to him that we need a cut to VAT and the maximum 20p discount for business rates applied across hospitality, not just pubs, because nobody wants to drink in a pub surrounded by boarded-up cafés, restaurants and B&Bs. Can I urge the Government to act quickly and, as a gesture of their intent, withdraw the statutory instrument that enforces the much lower 5p business rate discount this April?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her sustained and important engagement and advocacy on behalf of high street businesses in her constituency, from hospitality venues such as cafés and pubs to independent shops. She has explained to me really clearly the impact of various changes that previous Governments and this Government have announced on the businesses in her constituency. I will continue to engage with her and other strong advocates of the hospitality industry on this and other important issues that affect our high streets.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Government have already imposed additional employment costs on our small businesses and those on our high streets. They are still struggling with sky-high energy costs that the Government have yet to alleviate, and now we have these massive increases in business rates. Is there anything at all that the Minister can say that will give hope to the small and medium businesses on our high streets that are wondering whether they can continue, or to our entrepreneurs who are wondering if they can get started?

Dan Tomlinson: The Government back small businesses and our high streets. We want to do all we can to continue to support businesses up and down the country. That is why we announced significant reforms to business rates at the Budget, making sure that we could have a permanently lower multiplier for high street businesses and providing significant support worth £4.3 billion over the coming three years.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Libraries and community centres are central to communities like mine in Lewisham East, and they make an excellent contribution to the local area. Can the Minister say whether there are any planned changes to their business rates and tell us how else they can be supported in our local community?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the role that libraries and community centres in her constituency and across the country play in providing places for people to socialise, to learn new skills, and to grow and develop. I think of the libraries to which lots of parents in my constituency take their children in order to get their first books. The reforms to the business rates system that we set in place at the Budget will protect any businesses or premises that are seeing large increases in their rateable values, but I am always happy to have conversations with hon. Members on what other steps, more broadly, the Government could take to support important institutions such as those my hon. Friend raises.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): We all look forward to whatever it is that the Government have decided to change here, but can I ask the Minister

to look at two points? First, can he look at when appeals can be made to valuations? At the moment, businesses have to wait until 1 April, and that simply is not giving the sector any confidence. Secondly, can he look at wedding venues? They suffered enormously during covid and are likely, as things stand, not to benefit from any relief that he will announce in the next few weeks.

Dan Tomlinson: The process for businesses that are not satisfied with the valuation provided by the Valuation Office Agency is to go through the “check, challenge, appeal” process. In my role as the Minister with responsibility for His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, I will of course be doing all I can to make sure that the performance of the VOA is as good as it can be to help businesses get through that process. That is very important, not least given that we are seeing a rebound in the values of many businesses across the country following the pandemic.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I hope the Minister will join me in congratulating Bristol East’s Lost and Grounded Brewers, which has just appeared on the list of the eight best breweries in Britain in *The Times*. He may recall that just before the Budget, I brought another Bristol East brewery, Left Handed Giant, to meet him and other Ministers at No. 11, where it made very clear the pressures facing the hospitality sector. Can he give me assurances that, as a first step, we need to sort out the revaluation shambles? Can he also ensure that the consideration of a differential rate of VAT, as we see in so many other countries on the continent, is also on the Treasury’s radar?

Dan Tomlinson: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the brewery in her constituency. I know there is a vibrant small and independent brewery sector in Bristol, with lots of fantastic places where people can choose to have a drink if they so wish. Just the same as her, I want to make sure that this Government do what they can to continue to support businesses such as the one she mentions and those operating up and down the country. This Government are seeking to ensure that people have more money in their pockets so they can go out and spend it. That is why I am really glad that under the first year of this Labour Government, we saw faster increases in wages than we did in the whole first 10 years under the Conservatives.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): As well as pubs, hotels and restaurants, is the Minister aware that many grassroots music venues, some of which have never been liable for rates, now face demands for thousands of pounds? The Music Venue Trust has said that these are not bills but “closure notices”. Will he ensure that grassroots music venues are included in any relief he provides, and are recognised as critical creative infrastructure?

Dan Tomlinson: We considered before the Budget the matter of businesses being brought into business rates for the first time. We set out at the Budget the supporting small business relief scheme, so that businesses that are paying no business rates at the moment but which are coming into business rates for the first time will have their increases capped at £800.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on music. The vast majority of live performance venues have alcohol licences. Many are pubs, but the vast majority are not. Leeds Arena in my constituency is being dragged into the highest rate of business rates, alongside some large retailers. Without live performance venues, we will not have any future Ed Sheerans, Darcy Bussells, Idris Elbas or Simon Armitages bringing in the export income that the Treasury desperately needs. Is the Minister considering live performance venues, not just pubs, when he is thinking about the changes?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of live performance venues. They not only support our economy directly, through people visiting the venues and enjoying a good night out and a good performance; they also support the local economy more broadly, with people travelling to and from, and choosing to go out for a meal before the event. He and I value the contribution they make to our national life and to our economy.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Business rates in Scotland are, of course, devolved, but businesses, particularly in the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors, are not immune to the impact of these measures as they spread across the United Kingdom and undermine the economy. Has there been any effort to sit down with Scottish Government Ministers to discuss a national strategy on how we can help businesses throughout the United Kingdom?

Dan Tomlinson: The hon. Member is right that business rates policy is devolved. I am in conversation with the Governments in Scotland and Wales about a number of changes to taxation policy that were announced in the Budget, and I will of course be happy to continue those conversations. We need to ensure that we continue to support these vital businesses up and down the country, which is why the Chancellor set out the package of support at the Budget.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Over 20,000 people, including the likes of James McAvoy and Benedict Cumberbatch, have rallied around to try to save the local cafés on Hampstead Heath. I recently spoke to one of the owners, Alfonso, who brought home to me the importance of having local cafés that are affordable and accessible. As a fellow north London MP, is the Minister going to join the campaign to save the local cafés on Hampstead Heath? Will he reassure my constituents that protecting small businesses is at the heart of Government policy?

Dan Tomlinson: If I get time and the parking permits in Camden allow it, I do like to drive down and have a walk in my hon. Friend's constituency. I have not yet been made aware of that campaign, but I look forward to talking more with her about it. On a personal level, I will do all I can to get my tea and coffee from those establishments.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I am speaking to loads of business owners across South Shropshire in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, who are telling

me the polar opposite of what the Minister is saying from the Dispatch Box, showing that the Government are completely detached from reality. There is a U-turn coming on this policy, but many business owners are lying awake at night worrying about how they are going to get through this. Can the Government make that U-turn quickly?

Dan Tomlinson: It is worth pausing to note that while some businesses will see increases in their bills, more than half of rate payers' bills will either remain flat or will fall in the next year. That, in part, is because of the support the Government have provided to businesses, as set out at the Budget.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Hospitality and leisure businesses in the City of Durham are incredibly concerned about their future. Does the Minister agree that if we are truly to level the playing field between the high street and the online giants, it is time we show our much loved pubs, cafés, restaurants and hotels the same level of support that distribution warehouses, office blocks and supermarkets are receiving?

Dan Tomlinson: We are seeking to give even more support to those businesses than to the very largest ones. Under previous Governments, there would have been the same tax rate for those businesses, but, because of the changes we put forward at the Budget, the business rates multiplier for the smallest businesses on high streets in Durham and across the country is 25% lower than the tax rate paid by the largest businesses. This is the first significant, fundamental reform to the underlying tax rates in the business rates system in a very long time.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Whether it is retail, hospitality or pubs, businesses right across the United Kingdom, especially small businesses, are failing. That is due in no small part to action by the Government—increased taxes, increased energy prices and increased regulation. Rates play a big part in that, too. Can the Minister assure us that if there is to be further additional money for support, it will be ringfenced and not given to the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland, where the Sinn Féin Minister has taken the money but spent it on something else?

Dan Tomlinson: The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of small businesses. It is worth noting that a third of properties pay no business rates at all, as they receive 100% small business rate relief, and that a further 85,000 will benefit from reduced bills as this support tapers away.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): Hospitality is the UK's third largest employer; when the sector is hit, jobs are affected at scale. Pubs sit at the heart of the hospitality industry. In Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr, we have 136 great pubs, employing more than 1,100 across the constituency, including the Eagles in Acrefair, where my wife used to work behind the bar, and the brilliant pub, the Hand, in Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog. What steps is the Minister taking to support jobs in the hospitality sector?

Dan Tomlinson: I must say, I am very jealous that my hon. Friend has over 100 pubs in his constituency; I have only 27 in mine, and I have not made it round all of them yet. He is right to highlight the importance of

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the employment and job opportunities that can be provided by the hospitality sector, with around 2 million people working in it. Many people's first job is in hospitality, helping them to get their foot on the career ladder and progress in their careers. That is why the Government provided significant support for hospitality businesses at the Budget, and it is why I will continue to engage with my hon. Friend and other Members on the issue of business rates and other matters where we can support our high streets.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Retail, hospitality and leisure businesses are at the heart of my constituency, yet family-run village pubs such as the Blue Boar in Walsham le Willows face significant increases in business rates from this April. If the Minister does recognise that the current system is failing businesses, when will he commit to meaningful reform and action, including giving local authorities greater powers to support socially and economically essential local businesses, which village pubs in rural areas undoubtedly are?

Dan Tomlinson: I will happily talk further with the hon. Member about any changes that we can make to give councils more powers in relation to the issue he raises. It is not a topic that has crossed my desk before, but I would be happy to receive some correspondence on it.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Two weeks ago, I held a roundtable for hospitality businesses in Tamworth to discuss the broken business rates system, and I then wrote to the Department about their preferences for support. The rates are crippling, and those businesses asked me to ask the Minister when reform is coming and how they will receive support in the interim, which is essential for my constituency and our businesses.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for the engagement that she has carried out with businesses in her constituency, as a strong representative of the businesses and people of Tamworth. The Government set out some significant reforms in the Budget. We lowered the tax rate that is paid by businesses on our high streets by 5p compared with what it would otherwise have been. That means that the tax rate paid by businesses on our high street is a quarter lower than that paid by the very largest businesses, which can afford higher taxes. That is why we rebalanced the system, transferring £1 billion of extra tax revenue from the largest businesses to high street businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The tables to which the Minister refers show that the median rateable value for pubs and wine bars is increasing by a third. He visited the Prince of Wales, a pub in his constituency, to help it reopen last spring. Its rateable value is going up from £49,200 to £62,500, which will push it into the higher band and higher bills. When we have the inevitable U-turn, will he ensure that it genuinely delivers lower business rates, and not just for the Prince of Wales in his constituency but for all hospitality venues across the country?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for giving me a chance to talk about the Prince of Wales in my constituency, a fantastic pub that I am glad I and colleagues in Barnet council were able to save. I was there just a couple of weeks back, after a canvassing session out on the doorsteps. He is right to point out that some pubs are seeing increases in their rateable values as a result of the unwind from the pandemic. That is precisely why we have come forward with support, capping the increases in business rates bills this year and in subsequent years. In general, the point about pubs being at the heart of our communities is totally true. From the Prince of Wales in East Barnet to the Griffin in Whetstone—I could go on—there are some fantastic pubs in Chipping Barnet, as I am sure there are in his constituency too.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I am a bit surprised by the mock rage coming from the Opposition, given that, over the past decade and a half, thousands of pubs have closed. I thank the Minister on behalf of Stroud publicans for agreeing to review the system so that we can get a really practical solution for pubs. Can I confirm that all business rates, including those on the high streets, will be reviewed, so that we can have a proper level playing field with the out-of-town institutions?

Dan Tomlinson: It is really important that we level the playing field for business rates paid by high street businesses in Stroud—for which my hon. Friend is a strong and active representative—and those paid by the largest online retailers and those with warehouses and distribution centres. That is why we implemented the reforms in the Budget to rebalance the system through a lower tax rate on high street businesses and a higher one on those that can afford it. I thank him for raising the point that Opposition Members want to keep dodging, which is that on their watch 7,000 pubs closed across the country, hollowing out our communities and making our high streets and the places where we live less vibrant and less sociable.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I have heard from many struggling businesses across my constituency about the increasing pressures that they are facing. To give just one example, under the Government's original plan, a small independent shop in Exmouth would have seen its rateable value rise by about 50%, wiping out the benefits of the lower small business multiplier, stripping it of eligibility for relief and leaving it facing extra costs of around £600 a month. Does the Minister understand how damaging that is for business confidence and viability, and will he please set out a timeline for when those types of small businesses can expect to receive support?

Dan Tomlinson: One of the challenges with the questions I am being asked by Opposition Members is that they seem to be suggesting that the Government should not have gone ahead with the post-pandemic revaluations. Those revaluations were set in train by the previous Government. I do not know about the hon. Member, but I think that, if businesses in his constituency or mine have seen a decrease in their rateable values since the pandemic, for whatever reason, it is right that the system is updated to reflect their post-pandemic values. That is what we have done. He cites a particular example.

Of course there will be businesses that see increases in their rateable values, and that is precisely why we have stepped in, with the Chancellor announcing £4.3 billion of transitional support at the Budget last year.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I welcome the assurance that half of businesses will see their business rates flat or falling, and that is even after the end of the covid-era support and the post-pandemic review initiated by the previous Government. Research by the Music Venue Trust estimates that 600 grassroots music venues may see quite significant rises, probably because of the revaluation. Significant areas backstage are dedicated to production and performance and cannot be used for revenue raising. Will the Minister meet me and sector representatives so that we can understand the issue better together?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Many grassroots music venues are valued as pubs. Intricacies and complexities in the business rates system mean that, when we think of pubs, it is important also to think of grassroots music venues up and down the country. We must provide support to them and to other businesses. That is why the Government stepped in with the £4.3 billion of transitional protection, over £2 billion of which will be in place this year.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Those who run pubs in my constituency are really worried about the Budget and its impact on their business rates bills. Last week the Business Secretary said that there was no way the Government could have known about the impact of their decisions, but the valuation office then confirmed that it had told Ministers about the impact of their decisions, which I think the Minister has confirmed. He also confirmed that that data was easily accessible, so why did that happen? Was it wilful ignorance, was it incompetence or did they just go ahead anyway?

Dan Tomlinson: I am glad that the hon. Member was able to ask the exact same question as the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride). I am not going to comment on the policymaking process in the run-up to the Budget.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Most fair-minded businesses recognise that covid-era subsidies could not last for ever, yet many in hospitality, including in my constituency, are worried about what bill will come through for their rates in April. Can the Minister reassure those businesses and outline what transitional support we are putting in place in the short term and how we are reforming rates in the long term?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her continued representation for the small businesses in her Bournemouth constituency, where I know there is a vibrant and growing hospitality and leisure sector. We have implemented reforms to the system to rebalance business rates away from the high street and towards the online giants. I look forward to continuing to engage with her and other Members of Parliament on business rates, other issues and other steps that this Government can take to continue to support the high street and businesses in her constituency.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): This morning I met Roly May, the landlord of the Russell Arms pub in Butlers Cross. Government Members might recognise it: it is the closest pub to Chequers, where they can drown their sorrows after an audience with the Prime Minister. The pub has seen as £17,500 business rate increase. I have heard similar horror stories from pubs such as the Cock and Rabbit in The Lee, the Dinton Hermit in Ford and many others. Will the Minister at least accept that there is no more money to squeeze out of pubs that are absolutely on the brink of financial catastrophe under this Government?

Dan Tomlinson: This Government understand the pressures that hospitality businesses, and pubs in particular, are facing. One of the pressures, which I have heard about very clearly, relates to the fact that the previous Government did not invest in our energy security, which would have ensured that businesses and families had lower energy bills and certainty about future bills, and as a result those businesses and families have seen their energy bills surge. In 2022, under the previous Government, we saw inflation hit 11%, and it is things like that that have made it difficult for small businesses up and down the country.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): We all know that we are where we are precisely because of the disastrous legacy that we were left by the Conservatives, who made unfunded promise after unfunded promise. I welcome the Minister's reassurance about transitional relief and the caps on the increases, but cafés and small hospitality businesses in Southampton are concerned not just about the future, but about the now, so what message would he give them to assure them that this Government are pro-business and have their back?

Dan Tomlinson: When it comes to support for businesses, we are making sure that we bring back economic stability to this country, with six interest rate cuts that will reduce the cost of borrowing for businesses and households. The economic stability that we have provided has meant that wages went up faster in the first year of this Government than they did in the whole first 10 years of the previous Government. We are supporting people up and down the country with the cost of living and providing stability for businesses in the corporation tax system, keeping it at the lowest rate in the G7 as part of our commitment to our corporate tax road map.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): One of the worst things for business owners in my constituency is the unpredictability of running a business. They need to know, and it is simply killing them. They already have to deal with poor parking, a rise in antisocial behaviour and rises in national insurance contributions, wage costs and energy costs. Now, when they thought that they were going to have a reduction in business rates, they are possibly going to have a rise instead. Can the Minister alleviate their fears and put them out of their misery? What is it going to be? Is it going to rise or is it going to stay the same?

Dan Tomlinson: We want to provide stability in our taxation system, and one of the things that the Government are seeking to do in the coming years is to continue to have economic stability—something that was lacking

[Dan Tomlinson]

for so long under the previous Government. That is why we are focusing on getting Government borrowing down in every year of the forecast, and it will fall faster in this country than in any other G7 economy. When it comes to business rates, the reforms that we set out in the Budget will rebalance the system to provide a permanently lower tax rate—the multiplier for those small businesses on the high street.

Iran: Protests

4.43 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office if she will make a statement on the British Government's response to the Iranian regime's brutal crackdown on protests.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): The United Kingdom condemns in the strongest of terms the horrendous killing of Iranian protesters and the most brutal and bloody repression against public protest in Iran for at least 13 years. The Iranian authorities must immediately end the abhorrent killings and uphold the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Iran's citizens, including the right to freedom of expression, to seek, receive and impart information, and the freedom of association and peaceful assembly, without fear of reprisal. The Iranian security forces must be held accountable for the deliberate use of violence that has claimed thousands of lives.

On 13 January, the Foreign Secretary was clear in her statement to the House and delivered that message directly to the Iranian Foreign Minister. The Prime Minister has issued a joint statement alongside the Chancellor of Germany and the President of France. On 15 January, alongside our G7 partners, we strongly condemned Iran and announced our readiness to impose additional restrictive measures if Iran continues to crack down on protests and dissent in violation of its international human rights obligations. We publicly called out Iran's crackdown at the UN Security Council meeting on 15 January, and we have now secured a special session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, which will take place on 23 January. On 13 January, I summoned the Iranian ambassador to underline the gravity of this moment and to call on Iran to answer for the horrific reports that we have heard.

On 1 October, alongside our E3 partners, France and Germany, the UK implemented snapback in full by reinstating the six previously terminated United Nations sanctions resolutions on Iran. We are going further by bringing forward legislation to implement more sectoral measures. We have already designated key players in Iran's oil, energy, nuclear and financial systems, and further measures will target finance, energy, transport and other significant industries. We will continue to work with the European Union and our other partners to explore what additional measures might be needed in response to these most recent developments.

Priti Patel: Since last week's statement, we have seen more information about the horrific brutality that the despotic regime in Tehran has inflicted and the bloodshed it is responsible for against its own citizens. Reports from medics in country say that the figure could be as high as 18,000 men, women and children dead, slaughtered in cold blood. Reports also suggest that up to 360,000 people could be injured, with those wounded left dying due to shortages of blood in hospitals. This is an affront to humanity, and there must be accountability, including for the use of execution show trials.

The regime is one of the most consistently vile and brutal in the world. The UK Government cannot stand by, and we need to understand what more they are doing in

response to the latest barbaric revelations and actions. What is the Government's assessment of the numbers killed and injured and the brutal tactics used by the regime? What do they make of reports that the regime may have used chemical weapons in the recent attacks on its own civilians? What assessment has been undertaken of those imprisoned and being tortured? The principle victims of this vile regime are the Iranian people themselves. What did their ambassador say when he was summoned last week to the Foreign Office, and what did the Iranian Foreign Minister say when he was called by the Foreign Secretary?

Once again, protesters in Iran seek freedom from tyranny, and the response from the west has been shameful as Iranians have been slaughtered. Iran continues to pose a threat to us all and to our interests with its sponsoring of terrorism and its nuclear programme. The US State Department remarked on Saturday that it had

"heard reports that the Islamic Republic is preparing options to target American bases".

Given that Britain has many joint military bases with the US in the region, what is being done to secure those assets? What is the latest assessment of Iran's nuclear enrichment programme and ballistic missile capability, and what is being done to strip Iran of those weapons?

With phase two of the Gaza peace plan being implemented, what is being done to stop Iranian sponsorship of Hamas and other terrorist groups undermining efforts to secure peace in the region? This is not a time to be timid as the response to these continued atrocities continues to be shamefully muted.

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Lady asks important questions. Let me turn first to the question of numbers. I do not want to give the House an artificial sense of precision when the internet has remained restricted since 8 January. There clearly have been many deaths; we believe in the thousands. We will not put a more precise figure on it at this time because to do so would be at risk of misleading the House that we have a more precise picture than we do. That does not in any way take away from the strength of our condemnation.

The Iranian regime has provided a variety of rationales, both in private and in public. It has claimed that it was responding to armed protesters, and it has complained that others are seeking to interfere in its internal affairs. Let me be absolutely clear: there is no excuse for the scale of bloodshed that we have seen in relation to those protests. It is not to seek to interfere in Iran's internal affairs to say that the protesters have rights—rights of assembly, rights to protest and rights to have their internet turned back on.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I know that the Minister shares with me—and probably with most of the House—a deep affection for the Iranian people, for their beautiful country and for their extraordinary culture, which makes the killing and terrible violence we have seen even worse than we could possibly have imagined. Can he give the House confidence that Britain and the international community will not now abandon the Iranian people for geopolitical expediency?

Mr Falconer: We will not. As I said in response to the shadow Foreign Secretary, the Iranian people have rights—rights that we hold dear in this place and this country—and we will continue to press those points with the Iranian regime.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Since the Foreign Secretary's statement last week, Ayatollah Khamenei has confirmed the death of thousands of protesters, but he has again deflected responsibility for the brutal crackdown by his regime. The Foreign Secretary told the House last week that sanctions against the leaders of the regime, and the proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, relied upon new legislation or instruments. We have waited too long for that. Will the Minister give the House a date by which those measures will be introduced?

Will the Minister update the House on internet connectivity? What is the UK doing, with our partners, to restore internet access so that people in Iran can communicate and evidence can be gathered to hold the regime to account? What dialogue have Ministers and officials had since last week about the Liberal Democrat proposal to pursue, through the United Nations, an International Criminal Court investigation into crimes against humanity perpetrated by the regime?

Mr Falconer: I am sure that my Liberal Democrat colleague knows that the processes of the ICC are independent of the decisions of Ministers here—rightly so.

To turn to the hon. Gentleman's other questions, I will not presume to dictate dates on which the House might pass legislation, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I can confirm that we are progressing that legislation at pace.

Let me say a little about the impact of the sanctions that we have introduced. The House is aware that we now have over 550 sanctions on Iran. Most recently, in October, we sanctioned IRGC financier Ali Ansari. As an indication of the scale and efficacy of our sanctions regime, I am pleased to confirm to the House that that has led to the freezing of over £100 million-worth in UK property. There is exposure from Iran to the UK, and we will take every step required.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): We must not be indifferent to the pleas of the Iranian people—what we are seeing is absolutely horrific. I welcome sanctions, but we must be honest: the people of Iran are fighting for their freedom. It is still possible that the US will intervene. Will the Minister reassure me that the UK Government are thinking about how they can offer meaningful support to the people in Iran who are fighting for their freedom?

Mr Falconer: I have set out our position in relation to these issues. I would not wish to give the House the impression that the protesters are not at risk; clearly, they are, and we have seen the devastating consequences of the regime's behaviour in the most recent days. We will do everything we can to ensure that the protesters' rights are protected. We are discussing closely with our allies what steps we can take.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): This despicable regime goes in for state terrorism at home and abroad, and its principal instrument for terrorism abroad is the IRGC. This is now the sixth time that I have called on Prime Ministers and Ministers to proscribe the IRGC. The excuse given historically is that we want to keep our embassy open, but the embassy is now shut, demonstrating how futile that argument is. When will we proscribe that terrorist organisation?

Mr Falconer: I just want to be clear about the status of our embassy in Tehran. While it is true that we have withdrawn our staff, we have not closed our embassy. I expect that the embassy will be fully functional again soon—I hope with some of this behind us.

On the IRGC, which the right hon. Gentleman has asked about on several occasions, as have others in the House, we conducted the Jonathan Hall review and he found that it is important that we have a tool that is focused on the particularities of the threats from Iran and the IRGC. That is a different threat from that which emanates from a simple terrorist group, if I may use that language, and we are committed to taking forward those recommendations through the creation of a state threats proscription-like tool, and we will be coming back for the parliamentary time to do that.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Chillingly, the head of the Iranian judiciary has publicly called for the acceleration of executions of protesters. The killing in Iran is not stopping. Last week, when the Foreign Secretary talked of further sanctions and sectoral measures, she linked those to the nuclear industry. Will the Minister now confirm that the UK will be seeking to go further than sanctions applied in relation to nuclear issues, to also seek to impose them on human rights grounds for those who have been linked with this brutal Iranian regime?

Mr Falconer: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend who has considerable experience in these matters. She is right to differentiate: there are the snapback-related sanctions, which are in progress and which the shadow Foreign Secretary and I have corresponded on recently; and I can confirm that we are also separately considering human rights sanctions in relation to the abuses that we see.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Many of us will have read the reports in *The Sunday Times* yesterday detailing how IRGC forces burnt alive and machine-gunned down so many, and that this is not happening in just one town or one city, but right across Iran. We have very few levers in this country to make a difference, but one of them is to proscribe the IRGC. Please, Minister, just do it and make some small difference to send a clear message and make the Iranian people understand that we stand with them.

Mr Falconer: I do not have a great deal to add to the answer I have already given to the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), but I would say that we are under no illusions about the threat posed by the IRGC. The right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) talks about what they are doing in Iran; nobody on this

side of the House has lost track of the fact that there have also been more than 20 plots in this country linked to Iran and to the IRGC. That is why it is so important to us that we have a tool focused on the particularities of a state-based threat, rather than treating them just as terrorists.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): The world has been appalled by the scenes of bloodshed. Will the Minister outline what discussions the Government are having with our G7 colleagues and European colleagues to make sure we send out a united message of condemnation and a common demand for the rights of the Iranian people to be respected?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm to the House that both the Foreign Secretary and I have been in extensive discussions over the last few days, and I expect those to continue this week, including at Davos.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Iranian Government are massacring civilians, and brave young protesters are risking their lives for freedom and dignity against a violent and corrupt regime. The Minister has spoken about the thousands of people who we fear have lost their lives, and *The Times* is reporting that up to 16,000 people may have died—and in an age when we can see news as it happens in the palm of our hands, we see nothing because of the darkness of the internet crackdown. What are the Government doing to support internet access across Iran so that we can collect evidence to hold the perpetrators to account for this brutality?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Lady asks important questions. We are working with our allies and continue to press the Iranians, both in public and in private. They must restore internet access.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The brutal regime in Iran has destroyed so many lives, and as a woman and a feminist I want to pay particular tribute to the brave women of Iran fighting for their freedom against such odds. They were promised support by President Trump. Can the Minister say what form that support may take, and what involvement the UK may or may not have, and whether it is dependent on executions taking place? On the technical front, will he write to me in my role as Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee explaining exactly how the Iranian regime was able to turn off access to the internet? Do they have some switch somewhere? With our unique technical expertise, what is the UK doing to address that?

Mr Falconer: I join my hon. Friend in her comments about the bravery of protesters. I am sure we have all seen pictures of incredibly courageous protesters, often young women, showing defiance against a regime that is, clearly, deeply intent on not only stopping the protests but silencing the voices of protesters and ensuring that nobody can see them. Those protesters are admirable people asserting their rights. It is clearly an inalienable right of the Iranian people to be able to protest, and that is what we want to see. I am happy to write to my hon. Friend but, for reasons she will understand, I will not be able to delve too deeply into technical questions when they are sensitive.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Does the Minister's Department assess that the Iranian regime can come back from this and move into a position of strength? If so, does he assess that the sanctions packages being put forward are enough to limit that happening?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful for the opportunity to set out our position on the future of Iran, which is clearly a matter for the Iranian people. What we are pressing for and focused on is the Iranian authorities ensuring that their people can exercise their right to peaceful protest. What happens next is clearly a question not for London or Washington, but for the Iranian people themselves. That is a message we have delivered consistently to the Iranian regime, which is saying otherwise—publicly, particularly—so I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to set that out from the Dispatch Box so clearly.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): The Trump Administration initially indicated that they would protect protesters when they came out, which they have done in droves, but, as many Members have indicated, thousands upon thousands of them have now been killed. We worry about outside interference, but if we listen to a lot of the protesters, they are actually demanding help from outside. I do not, and I am sure other Members do not, want to be standing here in a few years' time, looking back and thinking, "What if?" Given that half a million people died in the recent Syrian civil war when a straightforward no-fly zone could have protected them, I urge Ministers to keep everything on the table and to talk to partners about how we might be able to degrade the IRGC's ability to kill thousands of protesters, because I do not think it is going to stop.

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his continued commitment to these issues, and to those in Syria, which he has been engaged in for some time. As I said, we are deeply concerned about the use of violence against protesters and we strongly condemn the killings of protesters. People must be able to exercise their right to peaceful protest without fear of reprisal.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): There are reports that the US is planning airstrikes or action in Iran. Following the previous US airstrikes there, Iran fired rockets at the Al Udeid airbase in Qatar in response. That base, which has recently been partly evacuated, is co-located with the prison where Matthew Pascoe is being detained. Will the Government advise the House on what they are doing to make sure that he, and any British nationals in the nearby area, will be safe? What is being done to ensure the safety of the Foremans, who continue to be held in Evin prison? We know that, in the past, Iranians have often rightly sought to overthrow the prisons, because of all those who are being held unjustly there.

Mr Falconer: The hon. Lady asks a series of important questions. On our general posture in the region, I do not want to comment in great detail about force protection questions in relation to our bases, although I am sure she will be aware of reports. We are working closely with our American counterparts on those questions.

On those detained—the Foremans and others—I can confirm that I have been in touch with the families, who are at the forefront of our minds. I must draw the

House's and the public's attention to our travel advice, however: with the embassy withdrawn, there is a limit to what can be done. We cannot offer a full consular package of assistance in Iran. This is a fast-moving situation and we try to keep our travel advice as up-to-date as possible to reflect the very latest developments.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): For almost 50 years, Iranians have found refuge in the UK, and many have made their homes in west London. One of them wrote to me saying that even after 20 years, Iran still runs through his veins. Will the Minister outline how the Government are working with the Iranian diaspora in the UK to provide support and reassurance to them and to their families still in Iran?

Mr Falconer: I know how many families in the UK will feel very personally affected by developments in Iran. Where there are consular-related questions, they are very much on our minds for both dual nationals and mono-nationals. I am afraid that wider community concerns are a question for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My British-Iranian residents are deeply worried about their families. The Minister has said that he hopes the embassy will reopen soon, but time is not on the side of the Iranian people. When is "soon" likely to be? How quickly should we expect the proscription of the IRGC?

Mr Falconer: I do not want to sound evasive, either about the delicate decisions we need to make about posture across the region or about parliamentary time, but I am afraid I am not able to be drawn any further on either.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): In the last few weeks I have been inundated with communication from constituents who are part of the Iranian diaspora. It is very difficult to convey the extent of their agony about the lack of contact with their families and the fear they feel for their loved ones. They have said to me that they want to see the strongest possible action on sanctions and the fastest possible progress on proscribing the IRGC. I have listened carefully to what the Minister has had to say about the particularities of state-backed terror; will he set out in more detail why he believes it will take further time for us to tackle the vile state-backed terror that is affecting us all so much?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the care that she puts into these issues in her constituency. The Jonathan Hall review sets out some of the reasons why, in his view, a state-focused proscription-like tool is necessary. We accept his recommendations and we intend to legislate.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): There is a shared horror across the Chamber at the killing of protesters in Iran, just as there is a shared condemnation of the brutal regime and, it appears, a shared view that the IRGC should be proscribed. I have listened carefully to the Minister's answers, but I gently suggest that he has a consensus, which he should use to proscribe the IRGC as soon as possible to send a clear message to the Iranian people that we stand with them.

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman's points are well noted. For the clarity of the House, let me say that the legislation will be Home Office legislation, rather than Foreign Office legislation, but I will certainly pass on the strength of his feeling to the Security Minister.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is undertaking and leading the brutal repression and murder of so many Iranians fighting for their freedom. We know that the IRGC has used two registered cryptocurrency exchanges to move approximately \$1 billion since 2023, evading international sanctions. Zedcex and Zedxion routed funds through IRGC-controlled wallets, offshore intermediaries and Iranian crypto companies. What are the Government doing to ensure that the IRGC cannot fund this brutal crackdown through British-based companies?

Mr Falconer: If my hon. Friend writes to me, I am happy to provide a more detailed answer in writing. Clearly, our sanctions regime is wide-ranging, and any British companies need to give very careful attention to it. On the face of it, it sounds like what my hon. Friend has outlined would not be consistent with our arrangements, but if he writes to me, I will respond.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister and I share the dubious distinction of having summoned Iranian ambassadors. Does he agree that whether it is Ambassador Mousavi, Baeidinejad or Abbas Araghchi, it does not really matter, because they are not the problem? The problem is the IRGC and its constituent parts. Does the Minister accept that Jonathan Hall KC's review is not particularly controversial? He has made recommendations that would effectively get around the Minister's problem with the proscription of state actors. There is cross-party agreement right across the House that would get such a measure through in a day. It is not as if we do not have enough time, as today's cancellation of business has shown.

Mr Falconer: I am wounded that the comparison is a dubious one. On the question of time, I gently say to my predecessor—and I am glad to see the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), in his place—that there was rather a lot of time over the past 14 years to pass these things. We have done the Hall review and we are committed to implementing it.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The brutal regime in Iran is well known to be attacking its own people at home, but it also poses one of the largest credible threats to Jewish people here in the UK. As the regime is currently blaming Israelis, Jews and Zionists for being responsible for the protests, will the Minister set out what discussions are happening across Government to ensure that the proxies and agents that we know are in the UK are being monitored, to make sure that the Jewish population of the UK do not feel a backlash as a result of the protests in Iran?

Mr Falconer: I have said repeatedly and in no uncertain terms to our Iranian counterparts, as has the Foreign Secretary, that any threats in the UK to British people of any faith or denomination in any building and, indeed, any other diplomatic premises in the UK will be treated

with the utmost seriousness. I have reiterated that strength of feeling to a range of representatives from the Jewish community in the UK, and I am happy to reiterate it again from the Dispatch Box.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Last Tuesday afternoon, President Trump took a short break from attacking America's NATO allies to write on Truth Social the following:

"Iranian Patriots, KEEP PROTESTING—TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS!!!"

He added:

"HELP IS ON ITS WAY."

Have the Government the faintest idea of what he was talking about?

Mr Falconer: US posture and policy towards Iran is, I am afraid, a matter for the US Government.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Many in this House are concerned about the malign influence of the ayatollahs in our own country. There has been dreadful slaughter on the streets of Iran, but curiously little protest on the streets of Britain. What a contrast that is to the regular protests—sometimes intimidatory to local Jewish people—about the terrible war in Israel and Palestine. Could the aforementioned malign influence explain this?

Mr Falconer: As the Home Secretary has said, we are aware of the very considerable concern that the ongoing protests have caused, particularly in places of real sensitivity such as outside synagogues, and we are taking measures to address it.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): At the weekend, I visited several Iranian-owned businesses in my community to show my support and solidarity. The business owners told me that they have relatives inside Iran who, due to the internet shutdowns, are going to increasingly extreme lengths to pick up information from the outside world, including travelling close to the border with Iraq to pick up a mobile phone signal or across towns to connect to the community-owned Starlink network. They expressed their frustration at the lack of activity from the British Government, as they see it, but they also expressed their fears that the US Government have marched protesters up to the top of the hill and left them abandoned there. What co-ordination has the Minister had with our American allies—if I can still call them that—on their approach? Are we aligned with them on what we are doing in Iran?

Mr Falconer: I understand the degree of anxiety within Iran. The restriction of the internet since 8 January is obviously a source of real concern, both to Iranians in Iran and to those with family links there, and to those few, but none the less profoundly affected, British families who have loved ones detained there, who are also suffering from the restrictions. As I said, US policy and posture towards Iran is clearly a matter for the US Government, but we are in close consultations and discussions with our American counterparts and, indeed, others.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I share the Minister's horror at the brutal repression we have seen in Iran. Hendon is home to a large and vibrant Iranian community, and we are all horrified beyond words to

see the savage, murderous violence being meted out by the Iranian regime to protesters. Is it not the reality that even when there are not protests in the street, the regime is engaged in industrial levels of violence against its own people? Executions in Iran more than doubled in the last year alone. Does the Minister agree that we must keep up the pressure on the Iranian regime to end this barbarity once and for all, and to let the Iranian people exercise their fundamental rights?

Mr Falconer: I do. We have spoken in some detail about current events in relation to the protesters, but I can confirm to the House that we oppose any and all executions in Iran, and across the world.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): As thousands of brave Iranian protesters are slaughtered on the streets of Iran, I was humbled yesterday to speak in front of thousands of wonderful Iranians here in Whitehall. They asked me to ask the Government a simple question: how much more will it take for this Government to do the right thing and proscribe that terror group, the IRGC—and, while they are at it, the Muslim Brotherhood?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to my Lincolnshire colleague for the question. I do not have a great deal more to add to the discussions that we have already had this afternoon on the IRGC. “Muslim Brotherhood” is a term that covers a whole range of groups, including, depending on how we consider it, Hamas. Where there is a violent threat to the UK, we will of course take proscription action as necessary.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I condemn the violent oppression of the Iranian people. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the work of the BBC World Service and BBC Persian, not only in getting free journalism and the truth into that country, but in getting stories of bravery, courage and suffering out to the wider world?

Mr Falconer: I will. The BBC World Service and BBC Persian are a lifeline, as are so many of the other World Service channels. I pay tribute to the vital work that they do in reporting, even in the most difficult circumstances.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): If I may, I will return to the topic of Craig and Lindsay Foreman. The Minister will be aware that they have been imprisoned for more than a year and are in Evin prison, regarded as the harshest in Iran. Can the Minister update the House on their medical condition since the outbreak of violence in Iran in recent weeks? Can he say when he was last informed of their medical condition, and whether they are still safe?

Mr Falconer: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I do not want to provide too much personal information to the House, but I can confirm that we have had consular access relatively recently. I have spoken to the families twice, I think, since the protests began. Those people are very much at the forefront of my mind.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The scenes from Iran are barbaric, and those executions that we are aware of are an affront to human dignity. Wherever we

look around the world, we can see the malign influence of Iran, including here. Our national security strategy, published in June last year, highlighted that. Can the Minister assure me that our law enforcement is taking every step possible to manage the risk? Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger), will the Minister make a contribution to the BBC charter review consultation in respect of the positive work that the BBC is doing in that troubled part of the world?

Mr Falconer: The Foreign Office has a special relationship with the BBC, given our role in the World Service, which we have talked about already this session. I can confirm to the House that law enforcement is making full use of the powers afforded to it, including under the National Security Act 2023. It is under that Act that those associated with potential violence were arrested in May last year.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): My constituents have contacted me sick with worry. They have not heard from their loved ones for over a week. There are reports of tens of thousands of citizens being killed, but the number could be higher because of the deliberate communication blackout. This is now an international human rights emergency. Will the Government act faster on the proscription of the IRGC, and will the Minister support stronger diplomatic consequences for this brutal regime?

Mr Falconer: We have discussed the IRGC proscription process, and I do not have much further to add on the more detailed timing questions on which the hon. Lady has sought to press me. As for diplomatic consequences, I have described some of the actions that we have taken in recent days, and I imagine that we will have more to tell the House shortly—for instance, during Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions tomorrow.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The scenes in Iran that we are seeing are obviously absolutely terrible, but I am also concerned about the impact that the ongoing situation will have on safety in this country. May I ask the Minister to pass on my thanks to the Foreign Secretary for her decision, in her previous role, to list Iran under the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme, and may I also ask him to be specific about what difference that will make?

Mr Falconer: Putting Iran on the FIRS regime means that there is a new offence of seeking to act on behalf of the Iranian regime in the UK without properly so declaring, so it is harder for people to do that in this country without being exposed to the force of law enforcement. As I said just now to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies), UK law enforcement has proved itself capable of finding these people and ensuring that they are prosecuted.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): There have been many calls across the Chamber for sanctions and the proscription of the IRGC, which I fully support. I think we need to be honest and admit that those measures are unlikely to save the lives of protesters who are under a regime fearing for its survival, but I point out that the drone strike in 2020 against Soleiman, the head of the IRGC, did influence Iranian behaviour.

[Chris Coghlan]

These protests follow on from western military intervention. As was pointed out by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the United States President has explicitly called on the protesters to overthrow the regime. That reminds me of the 1991 Shi'a uprisings in Iraq; President Bush did exactly the same in the aftermath of the Gulf war, and left those people to be massacred by Saddam Hussein's helicopter gunships. Is the Minister considering that legacy in his deliberations?

Mr Falconer: When it comes to events across the middle east, I am reluctant to focus on a particular incident in the long and, I am afraid, fraught history of interventions and the violence that follows them, but we are of course considering the broader history of the wider region as we consider our response.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I share the horror expressed by colleagues on both sides of the House at the brutal, repressive crackdown on protesters in Iran, and pay particular tribute to the bravery of women protesters who are fighting for their rights. Among the many concerning stories that are now emerging is testimony on the use of sexual assault as a weapon of repression. Did the Minister and the Foreign Secretary raise that specifically during their recent interactions with representatives of the Iranian regime, and can the Minister set out in more detail the timetable for next steps, including implementation of the additional sanctions to which the Foreign Secretary referred last week?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm to the House that the Iranian representatives were left in no doubt about the strength of our views, but because these were not terribly long conversations, we were not able to get into the full detail of our concerns, and there is not much more that I can add on the timing of further sanctions.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): For me, this is personal. It reminds me of what I saw when I was in Tehran nearly 50 years ago, at the beginning of the revolution. My father was appointed naval attaché to the British embassy in Tehran before and during that revolution, and we saw some awful things. What kept us going when the nights were cold, the power was off, the phones were cut, the guns were going off outside and people were demonstrating on rooftops nearby was the British World Service broadcasting; we could rely on that information. What extra support is the Minister giving the BBC to ensure that the World Service and BBC Persian are boosted in that area, so that we can get information through, and give people the lifeline that I had as I took the last flight out before Khomeini arrived back?

Mr Falconer: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for his question, and I pay tribute to him. I hope he will not mind my saying that he was a diplomat brat. I know from my own service—many Members will be familiar with this—that when diplomats are in difficult positions, their family face the same worries and the same hardships. That was obviously very much in our minds as we considered the position of the embassy in Tehran last week, and it continues to be in our minds as our brave diplomats face perilous situations across the world. I echo the hon.

Gentleman's generous words about the World Service. I can confirm that we are thinking about how its future can be ensured, so that it can continue to perform its vital functions.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Given the horrific scenes of pro-democracy protesters being attacked by the police in London over the weekend, what steps will the Minister take to ensure that peaceful protest can take place in this country?

Mr Falconer: We completely support peaceful protest, but it is true that diplomatic premises are subject to particular protections under the law. That applies in London, as it does in Tehran. There is a balance to be struck, and I was in discussions with the Security Minister throughout the weekend to ensure that we get it right.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): "There were so many people killed, they were hosing the blood down the street using fire engines." That was the message coming out of my constituent's home town. She has no idea if her mum and dad are safe in Iran during the communications blackout. When she asks me, as she no doubt will, "Why won't the Government do everything they can to proscribe the IRGC?", what would the Minister have me tell her?

Mr Falconer: I am sure that the hon. Lady's constituent is suffering great anguish, as are so many constituents who will be in correspondence with MPs from across the House. I cannot imagine how I would feel if my loved ones were in a situation in which communications were not certain. I feel it in relation to our consular cases, and I know that it is felt by people right across the country. We will do everything we can to ensure that the protesters are able to enjoy their rights and, indeed, that the communications restrictions are lifted. Iran was plunged into darkness on 8 January, just as Afghanistan plunged into darkness last year. This is a malign trend, which we oppose completely. We will do everything we can to see that the situation is temporary in Iran, as it proved to be in Afghanistan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. He will be under no illusions about the barbaric tactics that are being employed in Iran; indeed, last week's statement made it very clear that the Government are fully aware of them. The strongly worded condemnation has not brought about any change, and we have British citizens incarcerated and in danger. The IRGC's forces have killed thousands. They have shot them in the head, neck and face, and the IRGC has had a "shoot to kill" policy. What discussions has the Minister had with the United States of America, which promised physical action, about ensuring the safety of our citizens and nation, protecting Iranian citizens from sustained terrorism, and showing Iran that its recent abhorrent actions will no longer be tolerated? Physical action against the IRGC, on the ground, is what is needed.

Mr Falconer: We have already discussed our attitude towards the protests. We are not threatening physical action against the IRGC in Tehran. We want the whole Iranian regime to respect the rights of their people, in accordance with international norms; to ensure that the protesters can exercise their rights; and to lift internet restrictions.

Local Elections: Cancellation

5.28 pm

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if he will make a statement on the cancellation of scheduled local government elections in May 2026.

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We are undertaking a once-in-a-generation reorganisation of local government. We have now received proposals from all areas, and from councils across the political spectrum. For decades, the two-tier council system, where it still exists, has made local government more complicated and more bureaucratic than it needs to be. This Government are bold enough to change that.

We will put in place single-tier councils everywhere by the end of this Parliament. That will mean faster local decisions to build homes and grow our towns and cities. It will bring services such as housing and social care under one roof, making them more effective and responsive to what communities need, and it will end the duplication that sees two sets of chief executives and two sets of councillors, which creates confusion and waste for local taxpayers. This is a proven model, and when we change to unitaries, we never hear calls for a return to two-tier local government.

On 18 December I updated the House on our plans to seek councils' views on their elections in May. There is clear precedent for postponing elections due to local government reorganisation—the previous Government postponed many elections between 2019 and 2022 in order to smooth the transition to new councils. I therefore wrote to 63 councils undergoing reorganisations with elections in May to ask them if postponing their elections could release essential capacity to deliver reorganisation and to allow it to progress effectively. It is only right that we listen to councils when they express concerns about their capacity. Local leaders know their areas best and are best placed to judge their own capacity. As we have said, should a council say that it has no reason to delay, we will listen; if a council voices genuine concerns, we will take those seriously.

We are running a legally robust and fair process, and all representations are now being considered before decisions are made. The Secretary of State has written to four councils to ask for more clarity on their position by 10 am tomorrow. These councils are Essex county council, Norfolk county council, Oxford city council and Southampton city council. As I have said, no decisions have been made, but we want to make them as quickly as possible in order to give councils certainty, and we will update Parliament on those decisions in the usual way.

Sir James Cleverly: This Government have moved seamlessly from arrogance to incompetence, and now to cowardice. Some 3.7 million people are being denied the right to vote. It was the Government who rushed through a huge programme of local government reorganisation, imposing new structures and timetables, and it is the Government who are failing to deliver them. Rather than take responsibility for their own failure, the Secretary of State has chosen to dump the consequences of their incompetence on to the laps of local councils.

The Government's own local election strategy said:

"The right to participate in our democracy...should not be taken for granted."

Cancelling elections was not part of that strategy. The Electoral Commission has been clear that the scheduled elections should go ahead as planned and that capacity constraints are not a legitimate reason for delay. Why was the Electoral Commission not consulted on these cancellations? Why is this being done at the last possible moment? Do the Government accept the Gould principle that at least six months' notice should be given for any changes to election administration?

Ministers say that they are following the wishes of local councils, and the Minister said at the Dispatch Box that the Secretary of State has written to, among others, Essex county council. The leader of Essex county council has been clear that these elections should go ahead, yet the Secretary of State still cites Essex, among others, to justify the cancellations. It is all well and good for the Secretary of State to write to councils basically to ask them the same question, but they have already given an answer. When does the Secretary of State intend to lay the statutory instruments for these areas, and does he think it is appropriate to use secondary legislation under the Local Government Act 2000? Did Parliament really allow Ministers to run scared and cancel elections at will?

I have always said that these elections should go ahead, but the Secretary of State was the one who called these elections "pointless", so why does he not have the courage of his own convictions, take responsibility for his own ineptitude and stop laying the blame on local councils?

Alison McGovern: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making those points, which I will certainly relay to the Secretary of State so that he can take them under advisement. We wrote to notify the Electoral Commission, and we are grateful for its ongoing engagement. We will certainly have regard to all views and representations made, including those of the Electoral Commission, but this is fundamentally about local councils and their capacity, and that is why we have asked for representations from them.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the Gould principle. That principle is underpinned by the need for certainty, so if there are technical changes, those responsible for the delivery of elections have time to adapt, but this is not about technical changes. We are listening to councils' views about their capacity in the context of local government reorganisation.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked when the Secretary of State will make decisions. We have moved quickly to get these representations from councils, and the Secretary of State will make a decision as soon as he possibly can.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), for raising this important issue. I accept that the Minister highlighted that there are concerns from councils, but again, we find ourselves in quite a disappointing area.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

Just before Christmas, the Minister highlighted that councils were asked to delay elections, after the Secretary of State had repeatedly told our Committee that they would be going ahead. As a former election organiser, I know how key dates will be etched in a lot of our minds. It is 108 days until polling day. The deadline for people who have to re-apply for postal votes is 31 January, while the deadline to register to vote is in April. We want people to vote, so I am concerned that we are seeing a postponement yet again. Can the Minister outline when the Government will make the final decisions? Do they plan to reject any of the requests for delays?

The Minister outlined that the Government want councils to be up to date and not have to stress with reorganisation. Reorganisation will take a lot of time and resources, but we are effectively asking councils to choose between running day-to-day services and running an election. It should not be either/or. Councils should be in a state to deliver those services. Can the Minister outline that she is confident that the reorganisation will not distract hard-working frontline staff, impacting residents across the country who rely on the council's day-to-day services?

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend mentions how important it is for elections to take place. As she knows, large numbers of people will be voting in May. We are talking about a relatively discrete number of local authorities undergoing reorganisation. She asked when the Secretary of State will make the decision. He will do that as soon as he possibly can, and we have set out the further information that we have asked for.

My hon. Friend also asked about resources. This is really important, because the whole point of reorganisation is to ensure that we use our resources in the best way possible. It bears repeating, as I have done on many occasions in this House, that local authorities bore the brunt of austerity. We have reconnected council funding with deprivation, and I am anxious to make sure that all local authorities move towards financial sustainability. I look forward to discussing that with my hon. Friend's Committee further.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I find it really interesting that this urgent question comes from the Conservative party, which sought to cancel local elections this year and last year in Surrey. [*Interruption.*] Given the professed concern for democracy of the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), I hope that he will commit to supporting Lord Pack's amendment in the House of Lords, removing the Secretary of State's power to change the timing of local elections—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I want to hear what the Liberal Democrat spokesperson has to say, as do all our constituents.

Zöe Franklin: That said, the Labour party is the main offender in cancelling elections, and it appears to be running scared from the ballot box rather than trusting voters. Does the Minister accept that cancelling elections risks setting a dangerous precedent that elections become

optional when they are inconvenient to those in power? What message does it send to residents about the value of local government if their right to vote can be so easily set aside? Democracy is a right, not a matter of convenience.

Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Lady for powering through, despite commentary from the Opposition Front Bench. She asks about the importance of democracy. It is, of course, very important. The vast majority of elections are going ahead next year. A huge number of people will be voting. It is important that that principle is stuck to. We will take the decisions based on the evidence and the precedent I set out in response to other Members.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): As a former leader of a major council and a Labour MP, I find this completely embarrassing. A Labour Government should not be taking the vote away from 3.7 million people. It is completely unprecedented for a Labour Government to do that. There is clearly a vested interest for some councillors who may feel, looking at the opinion polls, that they will lose their seat. Some of those councillors will vote for delay. How will the Minister distinguish between that motivation and whether or not there really is a lack of capacity to carry out the elections? I do not believe that any of those councils are unable to hold those elections.

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the views he expresses, which I will be certain to pass on to the Secretary of State as he takes his decision. In the statement before Christmas, I set out the kind of evidence we are looking for. That is the kind of thing we will take into consideration.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): A year ago, Ministers told council leaders in Essex that it was necessary to postpone elections in order to facilitate reorganisation to "the most ambitious timetable". A year later, there has been absolutely no progress and we do not even know how many authorities are proposed. Was it not wrong to cancel elections last year and wrong to cancel them again this year?

Alison McGovern: We have made progress on the reorganisation and I anticipate us making strong progress this year. I hear the points that the right hon. Gentleman makes about his own views. Those will be taken account of, alongside other views expressed.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): Local elections will be going forward in full in Milton Keynes this year, and I look forward to continuing to work with my brilliant hard-working Labour councillors. The ongoing process of reorganisation is delaying elections, but it is also delaying the creation of new combined authorities across many parts of the country. Given that, will the Department look again at the fast-track process, and whether places that have already gone through reorganisation and are fully unitarised, such as Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes, should be added to that programme, and that the creation of new combined authorities should be sped up in those places, given that it has taken some time in others?

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Coming from an area with a unitary council and a combined authority that is taking steps to improve public transport and other things, I appreciate fully the points he makes and I will pass them on to the Minister for Devolution, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh).

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Only dictators cancel elections, as well as Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat councils, which are terrified of facing the wrath of the voters. We will be carrying out a judicial review of this appalling decision to cancel elections. Will the Minister confirm that if the noble judges rule in our favour that this is the wrong thing to do, the Government will abide by their ruling?

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman mentions a legal process that I am not at liberty to comment on in detail. We want elections to go ahead, unless there is a strong justification. That is what we have said and that is what we will stick to.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents do not understand why we have an inefficient, duplicative, confusing system of two-tier councils at the moment. They are looking forward to this process going ahead and to having one council. As we await the process, it is really important that the councils we have remain responsive to our constituents' needs. To give one example, I am organising a meeting next month about local bus services. I have invited East Sussex county council, run by the Conservatives, as the responsible transport authority, but it is currently refusing to send anyone to the meeting. Does the Minister agree that is unacceptable, particularly because it has been given a record amount of money by this Labour Government—over £10 million—to improve our bus services and my constituents want to tell it their experiences of buses?

Alison McGovern: Given the number of times buses have been raised with me when I have been door-knocking during elections, I am surprised that they do not lead the news more often. I congratulate my hon. Friend on her efforts to get decent bus services for her constituents, and would say to any local authority that if it wants to engage with residents on the things they care about, buses should be top of the list.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Is it just a coincidence that the only three councils in Essex that want to cancel the elections—Basildon, Harlow and Thurrock—are all run by the Labour party, while all the others—Braintree, Chelmsford, Colchester, Brentwood, Epping Forest, Rochford, Southend and Essex county council—want the elections to go ahead? Is the Minister going to listen to the majority?

Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the points he raises. I have set out the way in which we are consulting with local authorities, and the Secretary of State will take the decision accordingly.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): As the Minister has already mentioned, the previous Government postponed elections in 2021, including in my constituency. Does she agree with the words of the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who was the Communities

Secretary at the time—and whom I note is not in either of his recent places in the Chamber this afternoon—that holding elections “in such circumstances”, namely local government reorganisation, risks

“confusing voters and would be hard to justify where members could be elected to serve shortened terms”?—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 24WS.]

Alison McGovern: I do not know about agreeing with the right hon. Member for Newark, but I certainly agree with my hon. Friend, who gets to the point we are trying to make. We are acting in accordance with precedent. She makes that point very well.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): In Eastbourne, Conservative-run East Sussex county council is one of the worst in the country for potholes, with the second highest number of compensation payouts in total. It has resurfaced zero roads in the past year, making it the worst. Yet the people of East Sussex do not currently have a say. When can they expect to hear from the Minister or the Secretary of State about when they can kick out the Conservative council that is squatting in County Hall?

Alison McGovern: Potholes are probably second only to buses in the list of important issues. We will not have any undue delays. The Secretary of State will have more to say quite soon.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The truth of the matter is that there is actually a lot of false information flying around—does the Minister agree? In Bolton, we are very much looking forward to having local elections in May. Can the Minister confirm that that has always been the case, as it has been in the other nine boroughs in Greater Manchester, and that words to the opposite effect are simply false information?

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend is right, of course: elections are taking place up and down the country. I am sure there are lots of people who are looking forward to participating.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): The good people of Exeter want their elections to go ahead as planned in May, yet the Labour super-majorities both on Exeter city council and here in Westminster leave no realistic prospect of fighting the decision. Does the Minister agree that Exeter city council is quickly losing its democratic mandate and is moving to some form of local tinpot autocracy?

Alison McGovern: Let me thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I do not agree with him on the substantive point he makes, but I have heard his views and will pass them on to the Secretary of State.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): “No taxation without representation.” Councillor Kevin Bentley, the dynamic Conservative leader of Essex county council, has been adamant that elections should go ahead. On 14 January, he wrote to the Minister:

“You may be aware that at our Full Council on 9th December I stated that Essex County Council would not be calling for the postponement of elections in May 2026. This continues to be our position.”

What was ambiguous about that? Is Labour simply running scared?

Alison McGovern: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for relaying the words of Councillor Kevin Bentley, whom it has been a pleasure to meet on a number of occasions. Getting a clear position is obviously important. We will do that quickly, and the Secretary of State will —*[Interruption.]* I don't know; there may have been more context than that one quote, but the Secretary of State—

Mr Francois: Shall I read it again?

Alison McGovern: No, you're fine. The Secretary of State will take into account those representations and others, and make a decision without any undue delay.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): For the second year running, Conservative-run West Sussex county council has applied to cancel local elections, in which the Conservatives face wipeout. Their excuse is that it would be too hard to organise, but it is the seven district and borough councils that run the elections, not the county council, so will the Minister speak to the councils that have an actual democratic mandate, rather than the county administration, which is trying to cling to power long past its sell-by date?

Alison McGovern: We are in regular contact with local authorities. The Department and the Secretary of State will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said, and we will make sure that those views are fed in.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): As the House may be aware, I was a local councillor at three different levels: parish, district and county. Several right hon. and hon. Members have referred to the proposals as being either single tier or two tier. I gently remind them that parishes and towns will remain, so two tiers is the minimum. I repeat the question that was asked earlier: when will all these councils know for definite if and when their elections are going to be held later this year?

Alison McGovern: Again, we have moved quickly. We are getting the information that we need, and the Secretary of State will move as quickly as he can to take the decision. It is good to know that we have Members with extensive experience in the House. I thank the hon. Gentleman for all that he has done down the years.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): Conservative-run Broxbourne borough council wants its elections to go ahead, and the people of Broxbourne should be allowed their choice on 7 May. However, devolution plans could see us merge with Labour-run Stevenage borough council and the Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition-run Welwyn Hatfield borough council, which both want their elections to be cancelled. Conservative-run Broxbourne council wants its elections to go ahead. I, as the Conservative Member of Parliament for Broxbourne, want the elections to go ahead. The people of Broxbourne want their elections to go ahead. Can the Minister categorically confirm to my constituents that local elections in Broxbourne will go ahead on 7 May?

Alison McGovern: I have said on a number of occasions that we want the elections to go ahead unless there is a justified reason. The hon. Gentleman makes his point

on behalf of his constituents, in the context of reorganisation. I will take that under advisement as we move forward.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If a future political researcher decides to write a thesis about the influence of adverse opinion polls on the cancellation of local elections in Britain, will the Minister, amiable as she always is, make herself available?

Alison McGovern: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind question. I hope that at that point I might be doing something other than politics, and perhaps I might not quite have time.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): People in Northern Ireland on a day-to-day basis know well how casually the democratic process can be set aside, not just by this Government but by the previous Government, who gave the EU permission to impose its laws on the people of Northern Ireland without any say at all. Now the people of England are beginning to experience that—3.7 million people, who would want to vote against the £280 million of additional taxes imposed on them by Labour councils, will now be denied the ability to have their say. Are the Government running scared of Reform, or do they simply not want to be held to account? Do they not realise that behaving like this turns the United Kingdom into some kind of third-world dictatorship?

Alison McGovern: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, which I take in the serious terms in which it was meant. The vast majority of elections are going ahead. It is very important that people have their say. I hope that he will appreciate, as I have set out previously, the reason we have taken these steps and the manner in which we will take the decision, but he makes a very important point about the centrality of democracy, which I take seriously.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a serving Isle of Wight councillor. Local government reorganisation in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight is a mess. Meanwhile, the Government propose to cut £13 million of funding from Isle of Wight council. We are due to have elections in just three and a half months' time. Our council wants those elections to go ahead and wants to prepare for them. Will the Minister confirm that we can do that, and that those elections will go ahead on the Isle of Wight in May?

Alison McGovern: As I have said to other Members, where councils want to go ahead, and they have the capacity and there are no issues, that is fine. Elections go ahead unless there is a strong justification for them not to, which is what I—*[Interruption.]* Where councils want the elections to go ahead, that is fine. We will listen to what they have to say. The issue that the hon. Member raises about funding and capacity is an important one, not least in a place as unique as the Isle of Wight. We are currently in a process of considering the local government finance settlement, and he will know that we are working very hard to get that right.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Last year, a junior Housing Minister, the hon. Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), stood at the Dispatch Box and said that

“local council elections are happening in 2026. We are cracking on with it”.—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2025; Vol. 776, c. 1164.]

For some communities, this is the second year in a row that elections have been cancelled. How does the Minister expect the British people to believe anything this Government say, or have any faith in their commitment to democracy?

Alison McGovern: Elections will be happening up and down this country in May. We are committed to democracy and it is very important that people have their say.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is indeed a very honourable lady, in her response and in the way that she does things in the House, but the fact is that, whether it be down to reorganisation or a new strategy—whatever reasons the Government put forward—3.7 million people will be denied the right to cast their vote. They will see it as a denial of their franchise, which will reduce their confidence in the Government, the Minister and local government. What will she and the Government do to restore that confidence, in the light of the denial of people’s franchise and their right to express themselves democratically?

Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the attention and care that he gives to these issues. He gives me the opportunity to come back to the underlying reason for this whole process, which is reorganisation to get councils in a good position. In those areas that are

undergoing reorganisation, once we have got the new institutions set up, which we are doing without delay, people will be able to elect representatives to those new institutions. That is what happened when we had reorganisation previously—as has been mentioned, this process has been gone through recently—and it will mean that people can elect their councillors, and have their say about the kind of public services they want in their area.

Sir James Cleverly: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister referred earlier, and did so again in her final comments, to the cancellation or delay of the 2020 local government elections as being justified by the reorganisation of local government. That is a factual error; they were, quite unambiguously, delayed because we were in the middle of a global pandemic. How is it best to correct the record with regard to the reason those elections were delayed?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. That is a continuation of the debate, and I am not responsible for the Minister’s comments; however, he has put his point of view on the record.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Forgive me, but I must correct the record: Harlow council is a Conservative council, but it is the exception that proves the rule that they are otherwise all Labour councils.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He has now corrected the record.

Proposed Chinese Embassy

6 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on representations made to Five Eyes partners on the potential risks posed by the proximity of sensitive cabling infrastructure to the site of the proposed new Chinese embassy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to it. She will know that discussions with Five Eyes partners relating to domestic security matters are primarily a responsibility for the Home Office. The decision on planning permission for the proposed Chinese embassy at Royal Mint Court rests solely with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in his quasi-judicial capacity. He has set 20 January as the target date for his decision, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham will agree that it would not be appropriate for me to cut across that process.

I appreciate that there has been significant interest in our engagement with allies and partners on this matter. As my hon. Friend knows, we never comment on conversations with allies regarding intelligence matters. I can nevertheless reassure her and the House that we continue to work closely with our Five Eyes partners and other like-minded countries on a wide range of issues, including those pertaining to domestic security. These partnerships are essential for our shared security.

We have been consistently clear that national security is the first duty of Government, and it has been our core priority throughout the embassy process, with the close involvement of the security and intelligence agencies. Our intelligence services have been involved throughout, and a range of measures have been developed and are being implemented to protect national security. The Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary also publicly identified two issues: the consolidation of China's diplomatic estate in London and public access. Those require resolution before a decision could be made. In November, they wrote to confirm that appropriate resolutions to those issues had been reached. As the director general of MI5 commented last month, our security services have over a century of experience of managing the risks that arise from foreign embassies on UK soil, and I have full confidence in their ability to do so effectively.

Sarah Champion: I hear what the Minister has said, but I am not reassured and neither are our partners. We have now had interventions from the Dutch Government, the Swiss Parliament, and the Swedish Parliament, and we have had two interventions from the White House on the risks posed to UK infrastructure by the cabling that runs along Royal Mint Court. Last year, a Minister said that reports regarding the cables were inaccurate. Does the Minister still believe that to be the case? I understand that we are now briefing Five Eye partners that

"no sensitive government data is transmitted through cables".

Would the Minister confirm that? Surely, that line is a tacit admission that financial services based in London could be affected by Chinese proximity.

Minister, what were the mitigations that MI5 and MI6 suggested to avoid espionage risks, and will their implementation be conditional for planning approval? I remind the House that the US has confirmed three major infrastructure hacks in the past 18 months, while we have faced hacks on the Electoral Commission, the Foreign Office and parliamentarians, to name just a few. A Chinese mega-embassy in the heart of London is an issue of national significance, not purely a planning issue as the Government try to present it. Combined with the heightened risk to dissidents, campaigners and the wider public, is this really a risk we should be taking? Can the Minister offer reassurance to my British Hong Kong constituents that transnational repression will not increase if this mega-embassy is approved? Once planning permission is given, we cannot take it back; we will have lost control. I know I speak for colleagues across the House and the wider country, because they have contacted me, when I say that this is not a risk we can afford to take and the Government should refuse this disastrous plan tomorrow.

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for her remarks. I reiterate that our intelligence services have been involved throughout. A range of measures have been developed and are being implemented to protect national security. She will also know that the Government are still to make a decision. That planning decision will be made independently by Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on planning grounds.

It is also important to recognise that we have set clear red lines through this process. That has included, for example, the consolidation of the diplomatic presence of China from seven buildings to one, which will have security benefits. It is also important to say that we do routinely engage with our allies, including the US, which is our closest ally, on a range of issues, including security and intelligence in relation to China. It is important to recognise that we do that routinely and that it is important to discuss national security factors that we may consider.

My hon. Friend referred to transnational repression. She will know that the UK Government will not tolerate any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm their critics overseas, especially in the UK. We continually assess potential threats in the UK, and we take the protection of individuals' rights, freedoms and safety very seriously.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on her question. One could be excused for feeling that this is groundhog day, because once again the House has gathered to share our collective concern about plans to approve the Chinese Communist party's mega-embassy and once again the Home Office has declined to answer. I did consider rereading my speech from last week, but as I hope we will get some answers, I have gone back to the drawing board.

The Chinese Communist party's plans are not normal diplomatic renovations, and it would be laughable to suggest that they are, given the location. Did the Minister see the unredacted plans before their publication, and can she genuinely say that she would have no concerns about her Government approving this shadowy network of 208 secret rooms? Given the claims that the Government and Ministers had not seen these plans until last week, surely the Government need time to review them. Would the Minister confirm that there will be a delay to the decision, which is due tomorrow? No one would seriously suggest that, in the week that has passed, the Government have identified all the mitigations needed to protect our cables and militate against these secret rooms.

The Government have so far shielded themselves behind the mundane language of planning policy, but this is not a normal application. Can the Minister confirm whether our allies have been consulted on the unredacted plans, and if so, who? Can she confirm whether UK Government officials previously denied the existence of these cables to the United States in discussions?

Last week, I asked whether the Chinese Communist party's ambassador had been *démarché* and forced to explain his party's duplicity in the application. The Minister declined to answer. It has now been a week. Has the Minister—not officials—finally found time to prioritise national security and haul in the Chinese ambassador? If not, why not, and what message does that send to China? Not once have this Labour Government *démarché* the Chinese ambassador since they came to power, despite cyber-attacks, spies in this place and bounties on the heads of Hongkongers. What does the Chinese Communist party have to do for this Government to defend us and act to deter future hostile acts? The Government tell us that security concerns have been addressed, including ones that they only knew about a week ago. Tell us how.

Finally, the Prime Minister has not yet publicly confirmed his vanity visit to Beijing. Has the Chinese Communist party made approval of the new embassy contingent on the visit going ahead? The Government have a duty to protect our country. Without national security, there is no economic security. This House clearly speaks with one voice on this issue and that voice says no, so will the Government join us or will they choose a dereliction of their duties?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the shadow Minister for her remarks. First, in relation to the Prime Minister's visit, any prime ministerial or ministerial travel will be confirmed in the usual way. Secondly, it is right, and we are clear, that the planning decision is one for the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to take independently and that that decision is made in a quasi-judicial capacity. It is also important to say that the decision on the embassy will be taken in the proper way, regardless of any attempts at pressure from anyone, and we have been clear throughout that this is a planning decision for MHCLG Ministers.

It is important to recognise that national security is the first duty of Government—the shadow Minister will understand that more than anyone, given her own background—and we will always act to protect it. It is taken extremely seriously by the Home Office and the Foreign Office. It will be important that we continue to

ensure that we have conversations, as we do routinely, with our allies and with the US, and that we take into account any security and intelligence, which we also share on a routine basis, in relation to China. As I have already mentioned, where there are concerns about national security, it is important that our intelligence services are involved throughout, and a range of measures have been developed and are being implemented.

I am sure that these matters will continue to be part of the debate, and that the Minister for Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), will address them further. It is also important that we continue to ensure that there is a focus on security and, in relation to concerns about those who may experience attempts under transnational repression, that we continue to stand up for the safety and security of all our people in the United Kingdom.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that the site of the proposed embassy is in my constituency. I have relayed the concerns of my constituents to the Government on a number of occasions. They are concerned about the security issues, about the human rights record of the Chinese Government and about local disruption as a consequence of the development. As she will be well aware, these concerns have been highlighted on several occasions, including in statements in the House. What assurances can the Government provide to my constituents and others with serious concerns about the proximity of the proposed embassy to critical and sensitive communication cables serving the City of London and the local area? I would be grateful if she could take that into account.

Seema Malhotra: I know that my hon. Friend has raised her concerns a number of times. I reiterate that national security considerations are always the first duty of any Government, and the security and intelligence agencies have been involved throughout this process. As I noted in my opening remarks, the two national security issues that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office made public as part of the planning process have now been addressed. If the planning application for a new embassy in Tower Hamlets is approved, China has committed to replace seven sites that make up its diplomatic footprint in London with the new embassy, which will also bring clear security advantages. I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to have conversations with her local council and with the Government in due course.

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

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have made it clear from the beginning of this saga that the approval of China's super-embassy would be a terrible betrayal of Hongkongers who moved to the UK to escape the very repression that the Government are now inviting to their doorstep. The Government must halt the application and summon the Chinese ambassador to make it clear that we will not accept Beijing's efforts to spy on our Parliament or to intimidate and harass Hongkongers in our community.

[Luke Taylor]

On the specifics of the application, in a 2018 letter the then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson granted diplomatic status to Royal Mint Court. That letter made no mention of a condition relating to planning permission and, under section 1 of the Diplomatic and Consular Premises Act 1987, represents a fulfilment of the condition to provide express consent. Eight years later, we are now being told that consent was somehow conditional on planning permission, based on a secret note verbale from May 2018 that has not been published. Will the Government release that note verbale, which is the only evidence that diplomatic status was provided conditional on planning permission and, therefore, that the application was not prejudged by the Government?

Seema Malhotra: It is important to agree that the decision to provide China with consent to use the Royal Mint as diplomatic premises was made in 2018 by the previous Government under the former Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, and was subject to planning permission. China purchased the site on that basis. That is what my colleague Baroness Chapman has also shared. It is important to recognise that the decision will be an independent one made by MHCLG through a quasi-judicial process.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I think I heard my hon. Friend say clearly that the Government would not stand for coercion by the Chinese diplomatic service. Has the Foreign Office not been looking at what has been going on over the last 10 years? At the consulate in Manchester, people who were demonstrating against the Chinese Government were dragged into the grounds and beaten up, and the diplomatic staff were left alone, with nothing happening to them. There are pop-up police stations all over the country that intimidate members of the Chinese community, whether they are British citizens or from Hong Kong or other parts of China. There should be a simple answer to this application. There is no need for an embassy of this size for the Chinese diplomatic community in this country. It is there to intimidate Chinese people and undermine the elected representatives in this Chamber.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is right that we must not tolerate any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate or harass. He has highlighted some examples that have caused great concern and that we take extremely seriously. We continue to assess potential threats in the United Kingdom, and the protection of individual rights and freedoms is a matter of great concern for the Government. Indeed, freedom of speech and other fundamental rights of all people in the UK are protected under domestic law. The police and security services monitor these issues closely.

The UK has a broad suite of powers available to counter foreign interference, including acts that amount to transnational repression. We continue to implement measures in the National Security Act 2023, which strengthens our legal powers and makes the UK a harder target for states that seek to conduct hostile acts. The Security Minister announced last year that counter-terrorism policing is offering training and guidance on state-threats activity to all 45 territorial police forces across the UK. This will enhance the ability of frontline

police officers and staff in the identification of state-directed crimes and the actions that can, and must, be taken to escalate matters and mitigate such activity.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Intelligence and Security Committee was set up specifically to fill a gap in oversight whereby this House could not directly look at highly classified and sensitive information. Having chaired that Committee throughout the previous Parliament, when we undertook our very detailed and sensitive inquiry into China—the published version of which was quite well received, to put it mildly—I can assure the Minister that absolutely no aspect of this matter could not be shared with the ISC. Can she tell the House whether the National Security Adviser has discussed with the ISC and briefed it on the security aspects of this proposal, the proceeding of which enjoys such hostility on both sides of the House?

Seema Malhotra: I recognise and acknowledge the right hon. Member's deep experience in the House and from chairing the ISC. Matters of security and intelligence continue to be the first priority of this Government. In relation to national security and in respect of the National Security Adviser, our partners abroad and Five Eyes—which was included in the urgent question—it is important to recognise that we continue to have conversations about security and intelligence in respect of all areas of concern to the United Kingdom and, indeed, in relation to China.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The Speaker of the US Congress, Mike Johnson, was here today in Parliament. Last night, when asked about the Chinese embassy application, he said:

"I'm concerned about it...But if it were me, I would be very cautious about that."

The Minister has heard the caution in this House and from the US Speaker, the White House and many others about the proposed Chinese embassy, which would give China a much greater ability to undertake transnational repression and espionage and to attack our critical national infrastructure. I ask the Minister again: are she and the Government listening to all the voices before making this decision? Once Pandora's box is open, it cannot be put back.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend will know from his own discussions that we continue to routinely engage with and discuss a wide range of national security issues with the US. Indeed, the US has also had its own relatively recent experience of China building a new embassy in its capital. I recognise the importance of ensuring that views across the House are heard, and we have had a number of debates on this issue, but it is also important to recognise that we have made it clear throughout the process that this is a planning decision that is for MHCLG Ministers to make in an independent, quasi-judicial capacity.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Circumstances have changed dramatically since 2018, and the Minister cannot simply dismiss this as a planning application, just like it were a conservatory—it is a matter of national security. Will the Government at least concede that if the building goes ahead all the cabling along Mansell Street at the Wapping exchange should, as a condition of any planning permission, be relocated at the applicant's expense?

Seema Malhotra: Our intelligence services have been involved throughout the process and are advising on a range of measures that are being implemented to protect national security. It may be useful to mention, including for the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), that we have engaged with the Intelligence and Security Committee on this matter, most recently as part of a cross-HMG appearance before the Committee on 26 November.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Does the Minister personally share any of my concerns that the proposed so-called mega-embassy risks becoming not only an excessively large diplomatic site, but a focal point for the intimidation and surveillance of Hongkongers and members of the Chinese, Uyghur and Tibetan diaspora—over 700,000 people in total—given that we know China's track record of transnational repression, such as the million-dollar bounties on UK Hongkongers? If not, why not? If so, how is that being prioritised in the decision-making process?

Seema Malhotra: I will make two comments in response to my hon. Friend's questions. First, the UK has a broad suite of powers—important powers—available to counter any foreign interference. It is extremely important that our security services and law enforcement agencies are armed with the tools they need to deter, detect and disrupt modern-day security threats. As the Security Minister announced in March last year, counter-terrorism policing is now offering training and guidance on state-threats activity to all 45 frontline territorial police forces. Secondly, on the planning application, there is clearly a security advantage if we see China replace the seven different sites and have one diplomatic footprint in London with the new embassy.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Following on from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), I too would be very surprised, as a co-author of the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on China, if the Committee had not seen the National Security Adviser on such an important issue.

The director general of the Security Service gave a speech some time ago in which he spoke about China using a “whole-of-system” approach. I encourage the Government to do the same when it comes to our own national security and deliberately juxtapose planning with national security, to ensure that our nation is kept safe. One easy way for the Government to act to ensure that we are safe from the malign influence of Chinese spies operating in this country is to ensure that the number of diplomats at the new embassy, which will be the largest Chinese mission in Europe, is commensurate with the number of UK diplomats in China.

Seema Malhotra: It is right to say that national security is the first duty of Government. We will always act to protect it, and it is a matter of great concern for the FCDO and for the Home Office. The UK does have control over the number of diplomats in the United Kingdom, as per the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations. We follow our legal obligations and have in place robust systems to ensure that any diplomatic positions at the Chinese embassy are approved on a case-by-case basis.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I think this House has grown tired of the Government's insistence on framing this as a mere planning application—as a quasi-judicial process about which national Government can do nothing. That is simply not the case. This is a test of this Government's resolve to stand up to the threat that China poses to the UK. The Prime Minister clearly thinks that handing this gift over to the Chinese in Beijing will strengthen his hand in trade negotiations, but I believe that China will just smell weakness. I challenge the Government to reject the mega-embassy, cancel the visit, and not go back there until Jimmy Lai is back on these shores.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I would challenge him on it. He will know that it is possible for the Government to uphold both national and economic security as a priority, and that national security must always be the first duty of any Government.

We have talked extensively about our serious, clear-eyed approach to a relationship with China that is in our long-term interests—one in which we co-operate, challenge where we must, and compete. This is not just about balancing that; it is about being strong on security and on the economy, through engagement. The hon. Gentleman will also know that China is the world's second largest economy and the UK's third largest trading partner, so not engaging is no choice at all.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The urgent question secured by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), which Mr Speaker granted, explicitly refers to our Five Eyes partners. The first thing that the Minister said when she got to her feet was that she could not answer any questions about the Five Eyes partners, because that was a Home Office responsibility. Why did she come? Did she argue with those who sent her? Did she say, “BAGSY not me; I can't answer that question”? The fact that she came, willingly or unwillingly, is an insult to this House.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. It is important to acknowledge that we work with our Five Eyes partners on a range of security matters. It is important that we have that trust, and share security concerns and intelligence. It is also important to recognise that some of those matters are primarily a responsibility of the Home Office. While we routinely engage with our partners—including the US—on matters relating to security and intelligence, those matters cannot always be shared in the Chamber, but they are important to the functioning of Government.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The UK Government do not seem aware of the message that disregarding safety and approving the Chinese mega-embassy would send to Tibetan, Uyghur and other exile communities in the UK who face intimidation, surveillance and abduction attempts almost daily. On transnational repression, we have heard warm words about upholding various measures, so let me be more specific: what assessment have the Government made of the risk that the proposed embassy will be used to facilitate transnational repression, bearing in mind that there will be hundreds more diplomats there, and what specific safeguards have been put in place to prevent that?

Seema Malhotra: We continue to raise all human rights concerns at the highest levels of the Chinese Government. It is important to say that any new diplomatic positions at the Chinese embassy must be approved, on a case-by-case basis, by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's protocol department. The UK has control over the number of diplomats in the UK, as per the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations. We will always take the security of all those in our country extremely seriously.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Minister said that the intelligence services are engaged, but she has not given any information about whether they are happy or able mitigate any risks. Why can she not give us that information? On the timeline, the first application was rejected in 2022; the revised application was submitted in 2024, and was called in; and we are now in 2026. A decision has been made within a week, based on the unredacted plans we saw a week ago. Why such a quick turnaround?

Seema Malhotra: Let me reiterate: the decision on the embassy must be taken in the proper way. It is a matter for Ministers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and it is an independent process. We have been clear on that throughout the process.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): The Minister stated several times that national security is a priority for this Government, so why are they letting a hostile state that wants to sabotage and spy on us into the very heart of Government?

Seema Malhotra: Is the hon. Lady referring to Russia, or to another country? In relation to the China, I will say again what I said earlier: China is the world's second largest economy and the UK's third largest trading partner, and not engaging with China is no choice at all. Through engagement, we can be strong on security and on the economy.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Can the Minister not hear herself, and not see how absurd it is for the Government to insist that they should treat the decision on the embassy as a quasi-judicial, independent planning question? It is not a planning question; it is a question of national security, and if the Prime Minister had any backbone, he would own it, decide it one way or the other, and then talk to the House about it.

I do not know how up to speed the Minister is on her Greek mythology, but before the Trojan horse was pulled into Troy after a 10-year siege, one priest, Laocoön, said that the horse should not be pulled in because it would spell the end of the city. That is the role that this House is playing today. Does the Minister think that the decision about whether to pull the Trojan horse into Troy should have been treated as a veterinary issue?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Member for his lesson in Greek mythology, most of which I am familiar with. It is important to have a serious debate about our relationship with China, and to continue to have a consistent and pragmatic approach to our engagement. I have already said that China is our third largest trading partner, but also all G7 nations engage with China economically and diplomatically, and it is important that we continue to do so.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Foreign interference in British politics is of enormous concern to most Members, following the conviction of Reform politician Nathan Gill, who betrayed our country for a genocidal Russian dictator. In response, the Government announced the Rycroft review to investigate foreign interference, including by China. Will they delay the decision on the super-embassy until the Rycroft review has reported?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Member will not be surprised to hear me say that the decision on the embassy is an independent process, but I will just emphasise to him that the UK has a broad range of powers to counter foreign interference, including acts that amount to transnational repression, and it is important that we take that extremely seriously in government and across the House. On the Minister for Security's announcement last year about the training and guidance on state threats that Counter Terrorism Policing had offered to all 45 territorial police forces across the UK, it is important that that training is taken up, and that frontline police officers and staff have an enhanced ability to identify state-directed crime and the actions that must be taken to mitigate it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. In last week's urgent question on the Chinese embassy, I highlighted that while the consulate is entitled to facilities that enable its citizens to get consular help, the Chinese are not entitled to facilities that pose any type of threat to national security. The information provided this morning again demonstrates the potential for risk to our national security. Will the Minister take steps that are well within the Government's power, act in the national interest, and make it clear that the consulate as proposed is not necessary for the carrying out of consulate functions, and is therefore not acceptable?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Member for his question. It is important to emphasise again that national security is the first duty of Government, and we will always act to protect it.

Alicia Kearns: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When I asked an urgent question about this important issue last week, it was shunted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Today when the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) asked the question, it was shunted to the Foreign Office. The Minister opened her answer by saying that she could not answer the fundamental question being asked in the Chamber. When I asked her directly whether she had demarched the Chinese ambassador, because that is within her brief, no answer was given, so Ministers will not answer on other people's briefs, despite collective responsibility; if they will not answer on their own briefs, how are we to get answers in this place?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Lady for advance notice of that point of order. As she will know, the Chair is not responsible for the content of Ministers' answers—if only we were—but she has most definitely put her point on the record, and the Minister might wish to respond now.

Seema Malhotra indicated dissent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Minister has declined to respond now. No doubt those on the Treasury Bench will feed that point back to the Ministers responsible.

Arctic Security

6.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): I begin by expressing my condolences to all affected by the terrible train crash near Cordoba last night and thanking the Spanish emergency services who responded overnight and throughout today. I am sure the House will join me in thinking of the people of Spain at this distressing time.

With permission, I will make a statement on Greenland and wider Arctic security.

On the evening of Saturday 17 January, President Trump announced the intention to impose 10% tariffs on goods from Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK over the future of Greenland. This is a serious moment for our transatlantic discussions and partnerships, so let me outline to the House the UK's response, which rests on three key principles. First, Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Its future is a matter for Greenlanders and the Danes, and them alone. This reflects the fundamental principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity to which the whole House is committed. Secondly, the use or threat of tariffs against allies in this way is completely wrong, unwarranted and counterproductive. Thirdly, Arctic security is a shared concern and a shared responsibility for both sides of the Atlantic. It can be effectively addressed and maintained only through co-operation between transatlantic allies and, crucially, through NATO. So instead of divisions that only aid our adversaries, we now need a serious and constructive dialogue about our Arctic security that is built on respect for sovereignty and collective security and the rules that underpin our alliance.

As the Prime Minister set out this morning, the north star for the Government's foreign policy is to stand up for the UK's national interest and to defend and advance Britain's security, Britain's prosperity and Britain's values, and we do so through the alliances and partnerships we build abroad that make us stronger here at home, including alliances where that transatlantic co-operation between Europe and North America has long been vital. As the Prime Minister has made clear, our close and deep-rooted partnership with the United States is a hugely important part of our security and our prosperity. The depth of our co-operation on intelligence sharing and defence helps keep us safe, and our trading relationship and the new agreements we have reached in the last 12 months are driving billions of pounds of investment in the UK, supporting jobs across the country. But the Prime Minister has also made it clear that we will be very direct about our differences, as he was in speaking to President Trump yesterday, because standing up for the UK national interest means defending the principles that underpin stable and enduring international co-operation. That means respect for sovereignty and respect for long-standing allies.

Denmark is a close ally of the United Kingdom and the United States. Indeed, Denmark has long been one of the US's closest allies, a proud NATO member that has stood shoulder to shoulder with the UK and the US, including at real human cost in recent decades. Rooted in that partnership, the US already has in place a 1951 treaty with Denmark that provides for an extensive

[Yvette Cooper]

US security presence in Greenland. Alliances endure because they are built on respect and partnership, not pressure, and tariff threats like this are no way to treat allies.

The tariff threat has come following the co-ordinated preparations for the annual Danish programme of activities under the Arctic Endurance framework, which is focused on addressing Russian security threats in the Arctic. Last week, at the request of the Danish Government, one UK military officer currently based in Denmark joined a planning group visit in an observational capacity. These sorts of visits are a regular part of military planning ahead of exercises and operations—work among allies to strengthen Greenland's security that should be recognised for its importance, not used as a reason to impose economic pressure.

A trade war would hurt workers and businesses on both sides of the Atlantic. It would be in no one's interests. Both sides of the Atlantic should be working together on Arctic security, not moving apart. That is why the Prime Minister and this Government are working intensively in the UK national interest to prevent this from happening and to reach a resolution.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister spoke directly with President Trump, the Danish Prime Minister and other close allies and international leaders. Today, I welcomed Danish Foreign Minister Lars Rasmussen here to London for valuable discussions, and the Europe Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), has been in touch with the Greenland Foreign Minister. I have also been in direct contact with the US, Canada, France, Germany and other European colleagues, and on Wednesday my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will visit Denmark. We will continue with this urgent diplomacy in pursuit of the principles I have set out.

We will also argue for the strengthening of our multilateral co-operation around Arctic security, because the Arctic is the gateway for Russia's northern fleet to threaten Britain, western Europe and North America—threats to undersea cables and to critical national infrastructure. We have seen a greater presence of Russian ships and submarines making their way to the north Atlantic. We have seen Russian aircraft testing our air defence as shadow fleet vessels pass through our waters, trying to evade our sanctions and continuing to fund the war in Ukraine. Northern Norway, Finland and sea routes through the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap have long been strategically significant when considering Russian threats. We know that the strategic significance of the Arctic is likely to grow as the melting of Arctic ice stands to open new routes through the Arctic ocean, and with new-found geo-economic competition for critical minerals and rare earths.

Arctic security is crucial not just to the UK but to the entire NATO alliance—of the eight countries north of the Arctic circle, seven are NATO allies—so across our alliance, working together, we can and should do more. That is why last week I travelled to Finland and Norway to discuss the threats they currently face, and my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary was also in Sweden.

In Helsinki, I met the Finnish Foreign Minister and was briefed on Finnish border force activities to tackle a Russian ship that had damaged undersea cables between

Finland and Estonia. In northern Norway, I met the Norwegian Foreign Minister. We signed a new agreement to strengthen our co-operation to tackle Russia's shadow fleet, and we travelled together to Camp Viking to see the work of the Royal Marines and their Norwegian partners.

In the bitter cold of that unforgiving landscape, our commando forces are training and exercising, and preparing for contingencies. For more than 50 years, the Royal Marines have trained in the Norwegian Arctic, but we are increasing that commitment by doubling the number of marines there from 1,000 to 2,000 in the space of three years—I pay tribute to their phenomenal work. Alongside that, the landmark Lunna House defence agreement will see the UK and Norway jointly operate a new fleet of Type 26 anti-submarine warfare frigates to hunt Russian submarines and protect our critical undersea infrastructure.

In the autumn, the UK-led joint expeditionary force saw thousands of troops, including over 1,700 British personnel, dozens of ships, vehicles and aircraft, deployed from the Baltics to Iceland. The UK plans to contribute to a range of exercises in the north Atlantic and High North throughout 2026, because that is how we believe we will best strengthen our Arctic security for the sake of western Europe and North America—together, through alliances and partnerships, not through threats on tariffs or on sovereignty that simply undermine our collective security.

I welcome the messages of cross-party unity and the shared conviction that the future of Greenland must be determined by the Greenlanders and the Danes. Whether on Greenland, on tariffs or on wider Arctic security, we are clear in our views, firm in our principles and steadfast in our commitment to safeguarding UK interests. The UK will continue to pursue constructive ways forward, collaborating intensively with our partners and allies and pursuing our security, our prosperity and our values every step of the way. I commend this statement to the House.

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

6.52 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I begin by expressing our condolences to the people of Spain following the devastating train crash yesterday.

The Conservative party is clear that the US Administration's decision to announce tariffs on the UK over Greenland is completely wrong. People in the United Kingdom and the United States will face higher costs because of the proposed tariffs. The tariffs will be yet another burden for businesses across our country, and they go against the United States' recent national security strategy, which says:

"It is natural and just that all nations put their interests first and guard their sovereignty... We stand for the sovereign rights of nations".

We respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Greenland and Denmark. The future of Greenland must be for its people and Denmark—and for them alone—to decide. Denmark is a valued NATO ally and a leading contributor to Ukraine; indeed, it is one of the highest per capita donors. We have also worked with Denmark

on Arctic security, and it is imperative that we and our European NATO allies now show a determination to go much further and back up our words with actions.

The security challenges in the Arctic must be tackled head-on, particularly the threat of Russia. Greenland is of geopolitical significance to every NATO member state, including the United Kingdom. The best way to tackle threats is to work together in unison, as NATO allies, because America's national security is indivisible from NATO's—they are one and the same. That collective security is the basis of our national defence architecture.

Collective action in the immediate term is how we should work together to address those challenges, so will the Foreign Secretary say what resources the Government will put in place to prioritise or repurpose their inventory to contribute to NATO's High North missions? What are the Government doing to look at how, working with the US, we can build on existing joint defence agreements to broker a greater consensual military presence on Greenland from both sides of the Atlantic? What is the Government's plan to help lead international efforts to secure the safety of Arctic shipping routes as they become more open, stave off exploitation of Greenland's critical minerals by malign actors, protect the region's fisheries, and boost digital connectivity and security, particularly at sea?

Has the Foreign Secretary discussed this issue with Secretary Rubio and, if not, what will she propose when she speaks to him, including on the security issue in the High North? UK leadership matters at this challenging moment for NATO, and we should advance a push from all NATO allies to thwart Putin's ambitions in the High North. It is incumbent on the United Kingdom to help to lead that charge, and our ability to convene outside the EU is a strength that we should put into play.

The Conservatives have also called on the Prime Minister to push for an urgent NATO meeting that includes the United States especially. Will the Government pursue that, so that a position can be reconciled behind closed doors and we can present a united front to our adversaries?

It is important for our economy and for businesses that the Government secure a reversal of the position on tariffs. This is not a moment for megaphone diplomacy, but can the Foreign Secretary share the Government's strategy for bringing the US round to revoking those tariffs before their kick-in date? Can she also confirm the UK's position on countermeasures?

Under the tariff deal agreed in the spring, the UK secured a reduced 10% tariff for 100,000 vehicles. Does the Foreign Secretary expect the 10% Greenland tariff to be added to that existing 10% tariff, effectively doubling the tax on British car exports to 20% from 1 February?

Pharmaceuticals were also a cornerstone of the agreement on tariff-free exemptions. Does the Foreign Secretary expect life sciences to be protected from the new baseline tariff, or will the 100% tariff threatened in late 2025 now be accelerated? What specific support will her colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade provide for small and medium-sized business exporters, which could face an overnight increase of 10% in the costs for their largest export market? What assessment have the Government made of the potential economic impact of tariffs, and what can be done to mitigate that?

This is a time for cool but determined heads, because the stakes are significant and enormous for our country. This is not just a big geopolitical moment; it is a moment of real concern for businesses and exporters in our country. We are counting on British diplomacy to reverse the tariff situation and bring a swift end to the debacle over Greenland. The US is our closest ally: the way that our security agencies operate together is unparalleled in modern history and our bilateral trading relationship dwarfs every other. In this moment, we need to summon and leverage the strength and depth of that special relationship.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her response and welcome her support for the sovereignty of Greenland and Denmark and for the strengthening of support for Arctic security against the Russian threat, which she is right to highlight. She asked what work can be done to establish constructive discussions, and indeed, I talked to the Danish Foreign Minister about that today. Denmark has set out a process to have detailed talks with the US on how to strengthen security around Greenland, being very clear that the issue of sovereignty is non-negotiable, but that there are many issues to be discussed around strengthening security.

I spoke to Secretary Rubio today and we agreed to take forward further discussions on the issue. I assure the shadow Foreign Secretary that we will be pursuing every avenue for discussions directly with the US and with all our close allies, the purpose being to prevent the tariffs and the trade war that would be in no one's interest, and to replace the threats about sovereignty and tariffs with a constructive, shared approach to our security, including security in the Arctic.

There is a critical issue here. The Arctic is the gateway for the Russian northern fleet to be able to threaten the UK, western Europe, the US and Canada. That is why this is a shared threat and requires a shared response. That is why, as part of the discussions in Norway and Finland last week, I proposed that NATO should establish an Arctic sentry, similar to the approach that NATO has taken to the Baltic Sentry and the Eastern Sentry, with co-ordination that brings together and looks in a strategic way at all the issues around security across the Arctic. We believe that it is through those partnerships and alliances that we can best strengthen our shared security against the threats that should concern us most.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The main purpose of the Prime Minister's statement today was to send out an international message, and I thank the Foreign Secretary for the skilful way in which she has amplified that message this evening. However, there is another audience who deeply appreciate what the Prime Minister has had to say. Many ordinary British people are becoming increasingly anxious about the threats being made by one of our most important friends to one of our allies. They are frightened by the dark turn that international relations seem to have taken and the potential chaos that we may be heading for. In fact, a friend of mine texted me today to tell me

[Emily Thornberry]

that as she was watching the Prime Minister live, she was weeping—she has found this very frightening. Will the Foreign Secretary convey the thanks of so many of us to the Prime Minister for his clarity, calm and leadership?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my right hon. Friend for those remarks, and I will convey that message to the Prime Minister. We have clearly seen that our Prime Minister is standing up for the UK national interest, our security and prosperity and British values. We know that our security and prosperity are strengthened by alliances and partnerships, not by pulling apart.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): May I associate myself and my party with the comments made by the Foreign Secretary about the terrible rail crash in Spain? I thank her for her statement.

President Trump is acting like an international gangster, threatening to trample over the sovereignty of an ally, threatening the end of NATO altogether and now threatening to hit our country and seven European allies with outrageous, damaging tariffs unless he gets his hands on Greenland. This is an incredibly grave moment for the United Kingdom, Europe and our world. Without provocation or justification, the President of the United States is attacking our economy, our livelihoods and our national security. Trump has put British businesses and jobs on the frontline in his unprovoked aggression. The only people cheering him on are Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Only a few months ago, Trump hailed the special relationship at Windsor castle. Now, thanks to his actions, it is nearly in tatters.

How do we stop Trump's damaging trade war? For a year now, the Prime Minister has tried a policy of appeasing Trump, flattering him, fawning over him and refusing to stand up to him, because—he argued—Trump would otherwise hit us with damaging tariffs. Well, the Prime Minister has tested his approach to destruction, and it has failed. It is time for the Government to change course.

We have to finally be clear-eyed about the sort of man Trump is and treat him accordingly. He is a bully. He thinks that he can grab whatever he wants, using force if necessary, and he is corrupt—the most corrupt president that the United States has ever seen. There are only two ways of getting him to back down: bribing him—with a new jet, perhaps, or a few billion in his crypto account—or standing up to him, like we would with any other bully, and standing together with our European allies to make him back down. That is the choice. Which one, Foreign Secretary?

Yvette Cooper: This is clearly a serious moment. I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman actually saw the Prime Minister's response this morning. He should know that it is because this is a serious moment that we respond in a serious way and that this Prime Minister responds in a serious, calm, robust and hard-headed way about what is in the UK's national interest

and how we work together in the alliances that are crucial for our security and prosperity and are underpinned by our values. That is why the Prime Minister has been so firm in the United Kingdom's response and why I welcomed the Danish Foreign Minister to London today.

The right hon. Member's description of the response of our Prime Minister and our UK Government is inappropriate. This is a really important time for parties to come together on how we ensure that we can respond to the situation that we are in, work closely with our allies and create a constructive approach to our Arctic security. That ultimately will depend on transatlantic co-operation and ensuring that those alliances and that transatlantic alliance respect the principles of sovereignty and collective security. We will do that in a sober and serious way.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): European nations, including our own, are witnessing a very rude awakening: if we do not invest in sovereign capabilities for defence and security and rely instead on others, sooner or later we will be bullied or blackmailed by larger nations. The question for us is: will we just kick the can down the road and trundle along with small, gradual increases in defence investment, or will we chart a path to spending 3% of GDP on defence in this Parliament?

On Arctic security, the Foreign Secretary intimated that only one British officer was involved in the Danish-led Operation Arctic Endurance in Greenland. Will she update the House on our current and future planned participation? Are there any political or practical constraints on that future participation?

Yvette Cooper: On the specific issue that my hon. Friend raised, that was not an operation; it was a planning process, as takes place very routinely, and that continues to be the case. We are arguing for a broader approach to Arctic security. In fact, the UK's strongest contribution is around the north of Norway. Our partnership with Norway is really unrivalled. We have the commandos and the excellent work that I saw at Camp Viking and elsewhere, as well as the joint frigates. For a non-Arctic nation, our contribution to Arctic security is unrivalled. We see that as being part of the Arctic sentry and a wider approach to collective Arctic security.

My hon. Friend also raises the issue of investment. That is exactly why we have put forward the biggest increase in defence spending for very many years.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am afraid that the Foreign Secretary is being rather mealy-mouthed about a situation that the President of the United States obviously sees as very simple. He believes that through extortion or military force—he is not denying that he may use military force—he can acquire Greenland, whichever way we look at it. As the Foreign Secretary will know, significant military assets owned by the United States are based here in the United Kingdom. Could they be used as part of an invasion of Greenland against our will? Does she recognise that when tariffs were first wielded as a weapon against the Canadians, we should have stood with them, rather than cut a snivelling deal?

Yvette Cooper: First, that is clearly not the situation we are talking about. We have been very clear about the importance of both sovereignty and collective security—that they are not just part of the NATO alliance, but fundamental principles that we stand for.

Turning to tariffs, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the work that the Prime Minister has led has been effective in addressing tariffs in the past. We will show the same determination and robust approach again, as we have done on other issues. It is important that we focus on the results that we can get by taking a hard-headed approach, and that is what we are continuing to do.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Knocking on doors in Denton, Westerhope, Arthur's Hill and Wingrove, I found that, for the first time in my 15 years as an MP, the No. 1 issue was global insecurity. President Trump has succeeded in uniting the British people against his unwarranted attack on a close ally. My right hon. Friend is right to be calm and diplomatic, but will she reassure us that given the current President's volatility, she and her Government will ensure that our sovereignty is not dependent on US capability, and specifically that our technology procurement—both civil and defence—will reflect this?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the very strong feelings on this matter right across the UK—of the need to protect sovereignty for the people of Greenland and the people of Denmark more widely, and the sense that to propose tariffs in this way is just deeply wrong. It is counterproductive to our collective security, but it is also deeply wrong.

My hon. Friend has also raised issues of UK resilience. She will know that on things like the Five Eyes partnership, there is very deep, long-standing co-operation and shared technology, but there are also areas in which we agree that Europe needs to do more for its own defence and its own investment, and that is what we are doing.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Greenland. President Trump's threat to annex Greenland either “the easy way” or “the hard way” is pushing Europe to the verge of one of the biggest political and security crises we have faced in decades. Now, his threat to impose punitive tariffs on those opposing his illegal annexation means that the President of our closest ally is using economic and military threats against the UK and other European nations simply for defending sovereignty, self-determination and international law. On what basis do this Government view this particular President as being a trustworthy and reliable ally?

Yvette Cooper: We have made it very clear that threats to Greenland's sovereignty are wrong, and that threats of tariffs and economic pressure are also wrong, because allies should stand together and not face the kinds of threats we have seen. That is a particular issue for the UK, but also for Denmark, which has been such a close ally to both the UK and the US. We are taking a very robust, hard-headed approach to this matter, to work through what is in the UK national interest and get a resolution that can protect, defend and strengthen Arctic security, as well as UK security more widely. That is the right thing to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Colleagues need to shorten their questions. Many Members want to get in, and that will depend on the length of your questions.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for setting out the UK's position that the future of Greenland is for the people of Greenland and the Danes to decide. It is not right that one of our closest and oldest allies is threatening us with economic sanctions, so I have two questions for the Foreign Secretary. First, how will she explain to the US Administration our interests and our actions at this time, and stop the sanctions and resolve the situation? Secondly, building on the excellent question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), might the Foreign Secretary take an interest in the Franco-British fast jet replacement programme and a company called Aeralis, so that we do not have to rely on an American solution?

Yvette Cooper: We have been very clear, both to the US and more widely, about the importance of countries working together to strengthen security. That is exactly what Denmark has been seeking to do—to strengthen the security of Greenland as part of strengthening Arctic security against the Russian threat. Where countries come together to do so, that should be recognised as important and valuable, because Arctic security is a multilateral issue, not a unilateral one. It will only be strengthened by countries working together, so this is about our interests in that shared, collective security, but also our values of defending sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister, NATO, the Danes and others have been commended for responding to this situation through the usual channels and the usual means. That would be fine if we had an occupant of the White House who understood and respected all that, but he laughs now not just behind his hand but blatantly, in our faces, as a result. While all that continues, we need to try to work out what makes this man tick. He is thin-skinned, he has an ego, and he does not like to be embarrassed. Should the state visit go ahead this year? Should football teams play in American stadia for the world cup? These are things that would embarrass the President at home. We now need to fight fire with fire.

Yvette Cooper: We heard from the Prime Minister this morning the approach he is taking. The approach that our Prime Minister and this Government have taken has already led to very big changes in the United States' initial proposals on tariffs, which were substantially reduced and changed as a result of that engagement. As a result of our engagement we have also seen big changes in the US approach to Ukraine: considerable work has now been done to secure agreements around security guarantees that have been immensely important. That is the result of continued engagement, not just by the Prime Minister but by others more widely. We are clear about the importance of working in the UK's national interests and pursuing different issues to make sure that we protect UK businesses and UK prosperity, as well as our shared values, including sovereignty.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): As a proud member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I thank the Foreign Secretary for her visit to our Marines at Camp Viking in Norway, and for her unequivocal stance in support of collective security with NATO at its heart. I welcome the Rycroft review of foreign interference in our politics. In the context of NATO and Arctic security, does the Foreign Secretary agree it is vital that we get to the bottom of the role that Russian money plays in trying to subvert our public discourse on these hugely important issues?

Yvette Cooper: I know that my hon. Friend and others have been raising this issue, particularly about the hybrid threats from Russia. There are the direct threats we see in the Arctic, but also broader hybrid threats, which range from sabotage—of undersea cables, for example—to foreign interference, including information interference. The Foreign Affairs Committee is doing an important inquiry into this issue, and I look forward to its conclusions, but we have substantially increased UK sanctions to address some of the interference threats.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The post-war world order was based on the premise that like-minded western liberal democracies would stand up for each other, expand democracy wherever we saw it and lower the barriers to free trade, and that through NATO we would engage in collective responsibility—an attack against one was an attack against all. It is clear that the President of the United States does not share those values. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the UK should be closing our military and economic bonds with the European allies that do share those values?

Yvette Cooper: The transatlantic security relationship of North America—the US and Canada—and western Europe, and the whole of Europe working together around security, has been immensely important for a long time. We continue to have shared interests and shared threats—for example, Arctic security is clearly a shared security interest—but we are also strengthening our direct security and defence co-operation with Europe. Central to the EU reset was strengthening defence co-operation with our European allies, with whom we are bound by our close geography, as well as our shared values and interests. We will continue to strengthen those relationships.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Donald Trump's appalling threats to seize Greenland, along with his disgusting bombing of Venezuela, are a new form of gangster politics that are set out in his new national security strategy, which also speaks of boosting support for the far right across Europe. We have to deal with that reality, and Trump's threats of tariffs this weekend show how little we can rely on the so-called special relationship. Instead of blindly following US policy, as we have done all too often in the past, with disastrous consequences, is it not now time to stand up to Trump and forge a new independent foreign policy based on international law, peace and co-operation? Those important values are the antithesis of what Donald Trump stands for.

Yvette Cooper: I caution my hon. Friend against somehow suggesting equivalence in a whole series of different areas. I am disappointed that he has not, as

part of his question, recognised the scale of the threat from Russia, which is the most serious threat the UK faces.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): We have to ride the Trump tiger as best we can until November 2028, but the future of Greenland is for Greenlanders. However, when the Foreign Secretary talks to her Danish interlocutors, can she ever so gently point out that small countries such as Denmark have historically spent little on their defence and on collective defence? Will she also, perhaps equally as gently, admonish Denmark? Along with most member states of the European Union, it has administered something of a punishment beating to this country since 2016.

Yvette Cooper: I was delighted to see the Danish Foreign Minister in London today. He is a friend, and Denmark is a close friend of the UK. Denmark has stood firm alongside the UK and the US, including by putting its armed forces' lives at risk in Afghanistan and in other conflicts to support close allies. The Danes have shown immense dedication to the principles of collective security, they continue to show substantial support for Ukraine against Russia, and I want to strongly show Denmark the UK's support.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): This week's tensions highlight the strategic importance of the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap and the urgent need for Europeans to fill the gaps in their ability to defend that space. Currently, that can be done only by the United States of America. Will the Foreign Secretary update us on the Government's discussions with our European counterparts on strengthening our defence industries? What discussions have there been on full access to Security Action for Europe?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend has immense expertise in this area and is right to highlight the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap as being crucial to maintaining the security of the Atlantic and as the basis for a lot of Arctic security issues. That is exactly why the UK and Norway are now jointly building new frigates as part of a major investment programme. It is one of the biggest defence contracts we have ever had. Norway is investing not just in jobs in the UK but, crucially, in an unrivalled partnership to strengthen our maritime security.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker:

"I will happily accept tariffs to oppose Trump and his corrupt regime."

Those are not my words, but those of a Bath constituent who emailed me today. Does the Foreign Secretary not recognise the strong feelings of so many of our constituents? They are ready to stand up to the bully that Donald Trump is, and they want the Government to do the same.

Yvette Cooper: Across the country there are strong feelings about the tariff threats we have seen. That is why we have been clear that they are completely wrong. The impact of tariffs is felt by businesses, by consumers and by ordinary families in the US, in the UK and in other European countries. That is why tariffs are completely counterproductive, as well as being completely wrong.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's calm diplomacy this morning. It is right that only adversaries stand to gain from the fracturing of NATO. The Government do not believe that the US President is serious about using military force to seize Greenland, but even in just the past hour he has refused to rule that out. My right hon. Friend will also know that the President spoke about wanting Greenland in his previous term in office; he has long been serious about it. As the UK is the lead nation in the joint expeditionary force, can she assure me that, alongside NATO-level discussions, we are engaging fully with our JEF partners?

Yvette Cooper: We regularly engage with joint expeditionary force partners. Indeed, there were meetings around the joint expeditionary force last week, and I believe there are further such meetings later this week, which the Ministry of Defence is heavily involved in supporting. That is exactly because we take these shared security issues so seriously. We know that for a country like the UK our security depends on the alliances we build, including with close European allies through the JEF.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Greenland is being offered two options: to be sold or to be annexed. This is naked imperialism. The Government of Greenland have made clear that they will work with the US in any way necessary to protect our security and that of Europe, but I am afraid that beyond the vague diplomatic assurances of diplomatic activity and claims of being hard-headed, I am no clearer, from the statement, about what the Government are doing to keep us safe from tariffs and, more importantly, to protect our security and the sovereignty of Greenland.

Yvette Cooper: To be honest, I am surprised by that question from the hon. Lady, because she has experience in foreign affairs. She knows how diplomatic discussions take place and the urgency with which those discussions are taking place right now. She will understand the importance of those discussions. She will understand the importance of the collaboration with our allies and partners and how those discussions take place. She will also have seen the results of taking a similar hard-headed and robust approach to previous issues and the previous discussions we have taken forward. We will continue to do that. In terms of the people of Greenland, we have seen the protests on the streets in Greenland, and we have seen the strong views expressed by the people of the Kingdom of Denmark more widely. We will continue to support them and their sovereignty.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Section 21 in chapter 8 of the Greenland Self-Government Act 2009 states that decisions

"regarding Greenland's independence shall be taken by the people of Greenland."

Therefore, no external coercion should be applied to Greenland's people. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking with our European allies to ensure that that Act is respected and that no major power can pressure the Greenlanders over their constitutional status?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's point. That is exactly why the Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth

(Stephen Doughty), has been in touch with Greenland's Foreign Minister, and why I had many discussions today with the Danish Foreign Minister about our support for the sovereignty of the people of Greenland. It is for them and the Danes, side by side, to decide their future, and not for anyone else.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I agree with the Foreign Secretary that we should be working with our allies—I welcome that approach—but I fear that Donald Trump does not agree with her. What are the Government doing to harden our infrastructure? We are heavily dependent on several American IT systems, including Palantir, controlled by Peter Thiel, who is well inside the coterie of Donald Trump's Administration. On sanctions, we have seen that they could switch off Microsoft's provision of services to the International Criminal Court. Will the Government look into ensuring that Palantir is not a single point of failure in our critical systems—in the health service, defence, the Cabinet Office and now the police?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we take all issues involving critical national infrastructure immensely seriously. There are areas—for example, our security and intelligence Five Eyes partnership—where our technology partnerships go back many generations. I remember my first Five Eyes meetings in the United States to discuss these matters, more than 25 years ago, and those technology partnerships have strengthened since then. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that we should also consider key areas in which critical national infrastructure needs to be strengthened.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the Foreign Secretary's statement that the future of Greenland is a matter for the Greenlanders and the Danes alone. We all know that the geo-security issues in the High North are due to Russia's threat to NATO. I am very pleased that the Foreign Secretary went to Norway last week, because we have two Russian bases on NATO territory in Svalbard. What discussions did she have with her Norwegian counterparts about the possibility of ending the Russian presence on that NATO territory?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the issues in the High North are about the Russian threats. That has long been the case, but we have seen those threats grow. There was a time at the ending of the cold war when, I think, everyone was optimistic that this might fundamentally change. Sadly, many years on, that has proved not to be the case, which is why the partnership between the UK and Norway is crucial for our security, the security of the whole of NATO, and the security of many of our allies as well. I can assure my hon. Friend that we keep a range of issues under discussion.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): The Foreign Secretary is, of course, absolutely right to insist that the future of Greenland is a question only for the people of Greenland, but does she acknowledge that this crisis is the consequence of our weakness—of decades of failure on the part of Europe and the UK to invest in defence, and, indeed, of a historic failure of statecraft on the part of the United Kingdom? One naval officer went to Greenland, and as a consequence, 10% tariffs are to be

[*Danny Kruger*]

imposed on us. The Foreign Secretary mentioned a conversation that she had in Scandinavia last week. Did she offer to do more than simply co-operate with our partners and neighbours, and to actually lead in the defence of Greenland by committing a proper joint expeditionary force, led by the UK, with a proper commitment to ensuring the safety of Greenland?

Yvette Cooper: The biggest threat to Arctic security comes from Russia, and the hon. Member would have a lot more credibility in talking about any of these Arctic security issues if he and his new party looked inward at themselves and carried out the long-needed investigation of Russian influence in that party.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's strong response, and the assurances that we have heard from the Foreign Secretary today. She has rightly made it clear that Donald Trump's claims to need to possess Greenland for security reasons are complete and utter nonsense. The United States already has access. The Foreign Secretary spoke of a multilateral approach to Arctic security; there is also the critical minerals element, which I suspect has a great deal to do with Donald Trump's interest in the country. What are we doing to adopt a similar multilateral approach to critical minerals, as we seek to divest ourselves of reliance on China?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise the broader issue of critical minerals. Many of the issues relating to Greenland are long-term issues, as opposed to immediate critical mineral issues, but there is a wider need to ensure that we have security around our critical mineral supply chains, and to work with other countries to prevent any country from having a chokehold on the supply of those critical minerals. That is crucial in connection with new green technologies, but it is also crucial more widely when it comes to our economic prosperity and economic security for the future.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): All relationships, particularly special relationships, must have a foundation of respect and mutual consent. What is the view in NATO on economic measures being used to force the annexation of a sovereign NATO territory?

Yvette Cooper: NATO allies need to respect each other. That is a core part of the NATO alliance, and it is what makes the alliance effective. Not to do so simply aids our adversaries.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome both the Foreign Secretary's statement and the Prime Minister's remarks this morning. It may be surprising that neither Greenland nor the Arctic featured as a strategic priority in the United States' national security strategy, published in November, although transatlantic trade did. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear to the United States Administration that its goals of prosperity and the long-term security of the Arctic can be achieved only through close co-operation with allies—not through dangerous rhetoric, and actions that risk weakening the collective strength on which we all rely?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend. The economic prosperity of the UK, Europe, the United States, Canada and our other NATO allies is strengthened by trade, rather than by tariffs, and our security is strengthened by co-operation through NATO, and by respect for each other's sovereignty and collective security.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Foreign Secretary is right to say that NATO allies should not threaten one another, and she is also right to highlight the threat and potential harm caused by trade wars and the imposition of tariffs, but does she understand the bemusement of Northern Ireland Members? She talks strongly about sovereignty, but it was this House that diminished the sovereignty of Northern Ireland and placed us in the European Union customs code, and I hope she recognises that there is a double-edged sword when it comes to tariffs for Northern Ireland.

The Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, who will address Parliament tomorrow, said very clearly at the weekend that while he has heard what President Trump has said, he does not know what his aspirations are in relation to Greenland. Does the Foreign Secretary?

Yvette Cooper: I hope that everyone, not just in the United States Administration but throughout the United States, would agree that we should have shared aspirations for our shared security in the Arctic. We should recognise that that includes respect for sovereignty and for collective partnership. Addressing the Arctic security threat, much of which is maritime, depends on countries working together. It depends on an ability to address issues relating to the eastern end of the Arctic, northern Norway, the western end of the Arctic, and the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. Only through co-operation is it possible to keep the Atlantic safe, and to keep all our countries safe.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): As possibly the only MP with American grandchildren, may I ask whether the Foreign Secretary agrees that whatever disagreements may arise between this Government and the Government of the United States about Greenland, the bonds of friendship and kinship between the peoples of this island and the peoples of the United States are historic, vital and enduring?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the strength of our people-to-people bonds, but also the deep historical bonds and the continuing bonds of co-operation. Even today, the US and the UK have been discussing terrorism threats in northern Syria and the need to tackle Daesh. We have so many shared interests and a shared history, which is why it is so important that we pursue this disagreement in a robust and constructive way.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): In pushing back against the tariffs, will the Foreign Secretary and others make it clear to the US that it is not just the potential imposition of these tariffs, but the bandying about of the threat of tariffs, that is so disruptive and difficult for major British businesses that export to the US, such as those

in the Scotch whisky industry? The tariffs might be just game-playing or tactics, but they are causing real damage right now.

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the right hon. Member about the impact that threats can have, and the instability that they can cause. Stability and respect in relationships is a crucial underpinning of the economy.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): If this was truly a debate about the security of the Arctic, we would be talking about more than the sovereignty of Greenland, which is clearly a matter for the Danes and the people of Greenland. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that our collective interests and security are best served by working collectively through NATO, rather than creating division in that alliance, which will only help those who want to do us harm?

Yvette Cooper: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. I saw for myself the immense co-operation between the Royal Marines Commandos and our Norwegian colleagues in the north of Norway. They briefed me on where the threats and concerns are, the way in which we need to respond to them, and the way in which the response in the north of Norway also helps with security right at the other side of the Atlantic, in the US and Canada.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Trump is certainly an unreliable and unpredictable ally, and his comments yesterday about the Norwegian leadership make us all wonder whether he is of sound mind, but what can we do? We have to deal with him.

I am sure it has not escaped the Foreign Secretary's notice that the messaging from Congress is quite different from the messaging from the White House. Divisions were exposed in the passing of the Defence Appropriations Act before Christmas. Can she reassure me that conversations are being had, not just with the Administration but right across Congress, in which we have quite a lot of allies who are willing to support our position?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to say that there are many different perspectives across the US system, both in the Administration and in Congress. As he will know, we have always had very close engagement with all aspects of the US system, including Congress. Indeed, the House Speaker is in Parliament today.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): I want to put on the record my gratitude for the leadership that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have shown on this issue as it evolves. Does she share my confusion about why Members of this House who claim to be patriots would join a party that blames NATO for starting the Ukraine war, that has a leader who admires Vladimir Putin, and that has a former leader in Wales who is serving 10 years in prison for taking Russian bribes?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend. We need to be very clear about where the threat to UK security comes from, the threat from Russia to our security—be it through the Arctic or through Ukraine—and the impact that has on Europe. Frankly, the fact that Members of this House who call themselves patriots have joined a party that is so soft on Russia is just astonishing.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Donald Trump rides roughshod over international law and international alliances. The PM has said that a trade war is in no one's interests, but we all know that if you give ground to a bully, you get bullied even more. Does the Foreign Secretary recognise that after a full year of attempting to appease Donald Trump, the strategy has comprehensively failed; that it is time to replace submission to the US with strength and solidarity with our European partners; and that the UK needs to make it clear to Donald Trump that there are red lines, and that if he engages in hostile activity towards the UK, it will have practical consequences, not least in trade?

Yvette Cooper: The UK's security is strengthened by the NATO alliance—the transatlantic alliance. I know that some want to reject Europe, and some want to reject the US and North America. We know that the transatlantic partnership keeps us safe and is crucial, which is why we believe in continuing with NATO. I know that some parties want to ditch it.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the calm and robust approach to our American allies from the Foreign Secretary, and from the Prime Minister this morning. State sovereignty, respect for territorial integrity and the right of self-determination have been the bedrock of global affairs since the end of world war two; indeed, it is why a Ukrainian victory against Russian aggression is so important for global stability. Can the Foreign Secretary set out how, in order to deter further Russian aggression, we are working with our Arctic partners—in Norway and Finland, for example—to further protect our own continent?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. We are doubling the number of UK marines based in the north of Norway in the space of three years, we are jointly building frigates in order to strengthen our Arctic security, and we are working through NATO, through the coalition of the willing and with the US on security guarantees for Ukraine, because that is crucial to delivering a just and lasting peace.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): The western world must remain united to keep us all safe from both Russia and China. Regrettably, we are far from united right now, and many of our constituents will be concerned about the risk to our country and critical infrastructure. At the same time as trying to reinvigorate our relationships with our NATO partners, should our worst-case planning assumption be that the USA may not be by our side if and when we need it in the future? If it was not clear before this week, surely it is clear now that spending on defence must rise immediately to at least 3% of GDP. Does the Foreign Secretary agree?

Yvette Cooper: This Government are responsible for the biggest increase in defence spending for many years. The hon. Gentleman will know that, under the previous Conservative Government, the level of investment in defence did not reach 2.5% of GDP throughout their period in office and the defence infrastructure was hollowed out for too long. It is right that we invest in it for the future, but it is also right that we build our partnerships.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): As the Foreign Secretary has alluded to, the 1951 agreement allows the US to construct and operate military bases across Greenland, house personnel, and control the movement of ships and aircraft. Will she do all she can to urge US counterparts to use that agreement to provide enhanced protection for NATO's northern borders and to drop the outrageous threat of tariffs, which is causing very damaging uncertainty for our industry? If implemented, they would not only hit our industry but further fuel inflation for the US consumer.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. The 1951 agreement has huge flexibility and provides for considerable joint working between the US, Denmark and Greenland on strengthening security in that part of the Arctic. I know that many countries will be keen to work with them on exactly that, which is why we think the talks that began last week between the Danish Foreign Minister and the US Secretary of State and Vice-President were an important opportunity to explore the 1951 treaty.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Diplomacy relies on rational actors, yet even in the last fortnight we have seen Donald Trump declare that he is not bound by international law, only by his "own morality". He has deployed paramilitary forces against his own people, and he speaks of cancelling elections. How apt! We have also seen the unilateral kidnapping of the President of an independent country. We are not dealing with a rational man; he responds only to shiny baubles, as we have seen with the incredible saga of the Nobel peace prize. I agree with the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and ask the following question: will the Government consider removing the King's visit to the United States and boycotting the world cup? The only thing to which Donald Trump responds is his own pride.

Yvette Cooper: We have long had deep interests and partnerships with the US that go back many years. The engagement the Prime Minister has led with the US Administration and the President has led to important results, including billions of pounds of tech investment in the UK and crucial security co-operation—for example, on Ukraine, with the development of security guarantees in support of the work of the coalition of the willing. However, this is an issue on which we strongly disagree, and the Prime Minister has made that absolutely clear. We will be very direct about the areas on which we disagree, and we will set those out. We will also work intensively with our allies to address them, because the sovereignty of Greenland is a vital principle that we will defend.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): President Trump's threats to Greenland must be taken very seriously. Given Trump's banditry in Venezuela, I fear the Prime Minister's hopes of "calm discussion" may fall on deaf ears. Will the Government stand firm with our European allies and the people of Greenland in opposing rampant American territorial expansionism?

Yvette Cooper: We work closely with our European allies, which is exactly why I have had discussions with the Danish Foreign Minister today. I have also had discussions with the US Secretary of State today, and we will have further discussions. It is also why the Prime Minister has had discussions with European leaders

and President Trump. However, I say to my hon. Friend that the role of the Government is to pursue the UK's interests in a calm, robust and hard-headed way, which is about getting results and ensuring that we build the partnerships, including with the US and with Europe, that make all of us stronger together.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Trump and Putin both respect strength; neither of them respects international law. In the light of that, I welcome the work undertaken by the Prime Minister and leaders from Canada and Europe on the coalition of the willing. The Secretary of State has outlined what we are doing to strengthen our capabilities and those of our neighbours, but can she explain how the coalition of the willing will become the coalition of the capable to make us stronger?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for his support for the coalition of the willing. He will know that the UK and France set out a declaration of intent, and further work is under way on the security guarantees. I caution him against drawing an equivalence between the US and Russia, which I hope he did not mean to do, because it is obviously Russia that poses a significant threat to Ukraine and the whole of Europe, while the US is a long-standing and close ally in defending security in Europe.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the strong statement she has made. I have been disappointed to hear so much politicisation of a national security issue in this House, but can she confirm that, just as the future of Ukraine should be determined by the Ukrainians, the future of Greenland should be determined by Denmark and the Greenlanders?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right that there are principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, underpinned by the UN charter, but also by the rules underpinning so many of our alliances, including the NATO alliance. At the heart of this is the very simple principle that the future of Greenland is for the Greenlanders and the Danes alone.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, but in all sincerity can I ask her how, as per her statement, she intends to have "serious and constructive dialogue...built on respect" and rules with a man who wants to drop peace and go to war simply because he did not win a prize?

Yvette Cooper: In NATO, we have a long-standing alliance—a long-standing partnership—not just with the US, but with western Europe, and we continue to discuss with the US the issues affecting peace around the world. I would give the hon. Member the example of Sudan, which I do not think has had the level of international attention it needs. However, the US is putting in considerable efforts to seek a ceasefire in Sudan, and the UK is working not just with the US, but with other members of the Quad to support a desperately needed ceasefire.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Last week, I was delighted to lead a debate on the very topic of the High North and Arctic security, highlighting that, because of our geography, the UK should be

considered a frontline nation in the ongoing war with Vladimir Putin and that we cannot afford to sleepwalk unprepared into a geopolitical High North and Arctic. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, as a frontline nation, we must urgently increase public awareness of the threat we face and the effect that will have on our constituents? Will she discuss with the Defence Secretary and our allies the possibility of urgently increasing the capability of the joint expeditionary force to defend both the UK and our High North allies? I know that would be welcomed by countries such as Estonia, which I visited at the start of the year.

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Increasing our presence in the north of Norway—increasing the number of marines from 1,000 to 2,000 over three years—helps support the joint expeditionary force. It is also a crucial part of our co-operation across not just the Arctic, but the Baltic, and that work was welcomed in both Finland and Norway, where I was last week.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): President Trump has stated that he no longer feels an obligation to think “purely of Peace”. He has threatened a trade war with the UK and Europe, and he has refused to rule out military force against Greenland. This shows that President Trump and his Administration cannot be trusted. Will the Government therefore consider a review of the UK’s intelligence sharing with the US at this very dangerous and volatile time, and until Trump is no longer in power?

Yvette Cooper: Let me be really clear with the hon. Member: our Five Eyes intelligence and security partnership is vital and keeps us safe. It keeps us safe every single day of the week and every single day of the year, and that is vital. It is particularly close with the United States, but it is also with Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and our security depends on sustaining and continuing that Five Eyes partnership.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister for their clarity today on the future of Greenland. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that, while recent comments from the United States have generated understandable concern, the correct response is not panic or escalation, but calm diplomacy grounded in the clear, simple principle that Greenland’s future is a matter for the Greenlandic people? Does she also agree that the real strategic challenge in the High North remains Russia, with its militarisation and aggression, which NATO must continue to confront together as partners, not opponents, of the United States?

Yvette Cooper: I do agree with my hon. Friend. We need to be purposeful in our response. It is for all of us to recognise that the greatest threat to UK security, as well as to European security and North American security, does come from Russia. We have shared alliances, and the US is a close partner in strengthening our security against Russia.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I absolutely agree with the sanctity of territorial integrity and how fundamental it is to sovereignty. Indeed, those principles provide a powerful basis to challenge the US’s posturing.

I do not at all dissent from the Foreign Secretary’s statement. However, I am intrigued as to how this Government are properly so exercised about America’s disrespect for the territorial integrity of Greenland, but so disinterested about the disrespect of the territorial integrity of our own country, whereby the European Union imposes its laws, as on a colony, in 300 areas of law on a part of the United Kingdom and insists on an international customs border to partition this United Kingdom. Now that the Government have got hold of the importance of territorial integrity, can we look forward to their reasserting it in respect of our own country?

Yvette Cooper: I know the hon. and learned Gentleman’s views, but the Windsor framework was about sustaining the Good Friday agreement, which was a shared agreement underpinned by principles and peace.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for her statement, as well as to the Government for their commitment to Arctic security and recognition of the threats that we face. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the partnership with Norway—that includes the £10 billion contract for Type 26 frigates secured by this Government and set to be delivered on the Clyde, including by some of my constituents—makes clear that, beyond the rhetoric we are hearing at present, the Government are absolutely committed to playing their part within NATO to uphold our collective global responsibilities?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to welcome the £10 billion contract. That will support thousands of jobs in his constituency and across the UK. It is driven not just by the strength of our defence industry, but crucially, by the strength of our joint co-operation with Norway and the shared operations we will be able to take forward in future.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement and her commitment to Greenland, which is not for sale. President Trump’s threat of tariffs is an alarming escalation and strange behaviour from someone who the Foreign Secretary describes as a close ally. France and Germany have suggested imposing retaliatory tariffs, but our Prime Minister has dismissed this. He says that he does not want to start a trade war with the US. Could the Foreign Secretary tell the House which side the UK will be on, if our European friends and neighbours decide to pursue this retaliatory course of action?

Yvette Cooper: We have always been clear that a trade war between any nation—certainly between the US and European countries—is deeply damaging and not in anyone’s interest. That is why our first priority right now should be to stop this happening and stop the tariffs, and to build a shared sense of security.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should send a message of reassurance to our children and young people, who will undoubtedly be feeling concerned and scared about the developments in the Arctic and Greenland, and more broadly regarding our international system? Does she agree that they know instinctively that international co-operation, standing up for our allies, international friendship and defending a rules-based system is the right way for our world?

[John Slinger]

Does she agree that they should take some reassurance from the fact that our Government, this House and our allies agree with them?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's framing of this around the interests of our young people and the values of shared co-operation. It is co-operation with allies that makes us stronger.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I commend the Government for standing firm with our European allies in supporting the principle that the future of Greenland is a matter for her people and her people alone. I know that the Government will make every diplomatic effort to avoid the imposition of these punitive tariffs, but if they were to be imposed upon us, will it be the policy of the Government to pursue a co-ordinated approach with our European allies in any countermeasures that may prove necessary?

Yvette Cooper: At all stages, we have discussions and co-ordination with our allies, but the Prime Minister made it clear this morning that our focus has to be on preventing a trade war and additional tariffs being introduced, and on building a constructive approach to our shared security.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): How many times do my Lib Dem colleagues and I need to come to the House and tell the Government that Trump cannot be trusted? His behaviour is that of a spoilt child, bullying his allies while looking to swell the coffers of those closest to him. By working with our European partners in NATO, we must persuade Trump that his aggressive approach to Greenland and the threats of tariffs is not acceptable behaviour from our closest ally. I ask the Foreign Secretary to try to persuade the Prime Minister that we need to stand up to this bully in the White House before he causes untold damage to the UK and to Europe.

Yvette Cooper: The job of Government is to pursue the UK national interest and build alliances to work with our allies both in the US and in Europe to promote the UK's prosperity, our security and our values. We do that in a serious, hard-headed way, and not in the way that, unfortunately, the Liberal Democrats have taken.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): To say the very least, Donald Trump's actions in Greenland and the related sanctions on the UK are not befitting of a trustworthy ally. Does the Foreign Secretary now accept that President Trump does not respond to weakness, and that, as Canada has shown, we must stand firm against this bullying behaviour and, as the Liberal Democrats have argued for months, work more closely with our EU allies?

Yvette Cooper: Again, I would say that our strength, security and prosperity depend on things such as the NATO alliance, in which we work closely with our North American allies—the US and Canada—and our European allies. That strong relationship, and the fact that the UK works so strongly at the heart of that relationship, as opposed to rejecting one side or another, is what makes us stronger.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): President Trump questioned the Danish right of ownership of Greenland, saying:

"There are no written documents, it's only a boat that landed there hundreds of years ago".

Although Trump may today be challenging Greenland, on that basis, what assurance can the Foreign Secretary give that our overseas territories and those of our other allies would not come under a similar challenge from President Trump?

Yvette Cooper: We have been very clear that the principle of sovereignty—of territorial integrity—is fundamental. That is why the Prime Minister has made clear our strong disagreement with President Trump on this issue, the importance of issues such as Arctic security being collective, and that threats are no way to treat allies.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The Prime Minister insists that a trade war is in no one's interest, yet we know that the US has declared sanctions on our economy, in spite of the so-called special relationship. If these sanctions come to pass, can the Secretary of State say what concrete measures will be put in place to protect UK businesses from their detrimental effects?

Yvette Cooper: The Prime Minister has already discussed this issue with President Trump and made clear our position, and we are working through diplomacy and continued different avenues to stress the importance of respecting sovereignty, collective security, and the fact that tariffs benefit no one and are completely wrong in this situation.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The Secretary of State has rightly outlined the importance of co-operation with our allies over this serious issue, but as we have seen, there is not a consistent approach on retaliatory tariffs. Can she describe to the House the discussions that the UK Government had with our European allies before ruling out retaliatory tariffs?

Yvette Cooper: The UK is continuing to hold discussions with European allies, exactly as I have been doing today with the Danish Foreign Minister, and as the Prime Minister has been doing throughout the weekend. He also made clear our strong view to President Trump and the US that we need to prevent these tariffs in the first place, and that we need to take action together to make sure that that happens.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Exactly two weeks ago, the Foreign Secretary told me that I was quite wrong to describe Donald Trump as a threat to liberal democracy. Since then, we have seen the horrifying shooting of Renee Good, trumped-up charges against the chair of the Federal Reserve, and direct threats to Denmark and this country. I understand that the Foreign Secretary cannot publicly agree with me, but if the Government are serious, why are we not seriously re-arming, especially when that will help our economy anyway? Is the Foreign Secretary worried that the hour is getting too late to act?

Yvette Cooper: I think the question the hon. Member raises is about the increase in defence spending, which is exactly what we are doing. We are investing—we are

introducing the most substantial increase in defence spending for many years. Defence infrastructure was hollowed out under previous Governments, and that is exactly why we are increasing investment now.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): A week or so ago I asked the Foreign Secretary at the Dispatch Box: where was the red line? What was the Rubicon that would have to be crossed to lead the UK to hang together with our values-based allies in opposition to the imperialist ambitions of Donald Trump? I have to confess that I felt a brief moment of pride yesterday when I thought that Rubicon had been reached, but I have been filled with increasing fear today. I fear that we might again allow ourselves to be picked off, that we might allow ourselves again to prostrate ourselves in front of the President as we beg not to be treaded upon. So, I ask the Foreign Secretary again: what is the Rubicon that would have to be crossed? This is not just an academic question. We are, through our overseas territories in the Caribbean and in the south Atlantic, a western hemispheric nation. Is the red line the Falkland Islands?

Yvette Cooper: I just say to the hon. Member that what we have seen from our Prime Minister is a serious level of international leadership that is immensely important: a robust and hard-headed approach to the UK's national interests that is the way we achieve results and have achieved results in a series of different areas. He set out this morning the principles that guide us, including the strong defence of the principle of sovereignty, and that the future of Greenland is for the Greenlanders and for the Danes to decide.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): The Foreign Secretary has talked a lot about military co-operation today, less so about economic security co-operation. She will remember that the Prime Minister abolished the National Security Council sub-committee on economic security. I was pleased that the Minister

with responsibility for economic security was here for a time, but he is not part of the National Security Council. How are these economic security questions and co-ordination with partners being handled and managed in Government?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, as the Foreign Secretary, I take economic security issues immensely seriously. It is why we are strengthening the work around critical minerals and the economic security that comes from international supply chains. He will know that there are issues around critical national infrastructure that also underpin our economic security. This is taken immensely seriously right across the Government, including on the National Security Council.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your patience in getting us all in; it is much appreciated. I also thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. I agree that the sovereignty of Greenland is a matter for her own people, but I understand the dangers present, with the Russian threat and aggression. Rather than simply making statements of support for Greenland's sovereignty, will the Foreign Secretary outline how we in this country, as close allies of the USA and as a nation that relies on the security of that area, will liaise with the USA and Greenland on enhancements of security and greater strategic facilitation, recognising that diplomacy is more than words but action, and actively seek solutions we can achieve?

Yvette Cooper: This is an important question to finish on, because the UK is proposing an new Arctic sentry as part of NATO. We already have a Baltic Sentry and an Eastern Sentry that pull together operations and co-ordination in a strategic way to look at the defence of those regions and how all NATO allies can pull together to support that. We believe the same is now needed for the Arctic. The Arctic is the gateway for the Russian northern fleet to threaten the whole of the transatlantic alliance. That is why we believe an Arctic sentry would be in everyone's interests.

Public Office (Accountability) Bill

8.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the next steps for the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, also known as the Hillsborough law.

As Members will be aware, the Bill was due to return to the Chamber today for its remaining Commons stages. From the very beginning we have been clear: it is a Bill for families, and it must have their voices and views at its heart. We remain absolutely committed to making meaningful changes for the families of Hillsborough, the Manchester terror attack, the Grenfell Tower fire, the sub-postmasters and, sadly, so many more.

The Bill is about something very simple: what people should be able to expect from the state when the worst, sadly, happens: candour, transparency, frankness and a system that stands with families, not against them—not a battle against the full might of the state. That is why the Bill is so important and is so long overdue, and it is why we will always be open to listening.

On Second Reading, the Prime Minister made a commitment that the Bill would not be watered down, and that any changes made to it will only strengthen it. We have always been clear that the Hillsborough law will apply to all public authorities, including the intelligence services. The Prime Minister was clear on Second Reading that the duty of candour would need to apply differently to the intelligence services, to get the right balance between transparency and national security. Last week, the Government brought forward several amendments to strengthen the Bill, including to extend the duty of candour directly to individuals working for the intelligence agencies, as well as to the authorities themselves. This was a direct response to concerns raised by MPs and campaigners.

There have been reports in the press that the Government wanted to water down aspects of the Bill. I want to take those claims head on, because, with respect, that was never, ever our intention. It is not what the amendments we proposed would have done. The amendments aimed to strengthen the Bill by extending the duty to individual employees of the intelligence services, as well as to the services as organisations. However, it is clear from our conversations with the families directly and with the stakeholders that there are concerns about how the accompanying safeguards we proposed will work in practice.

There will be questions about why we could not find a solution and why we need to delay when families have been clear on their views. I want to be clear that this is an incredibly complex area of policy. Across Government, we must think about all the possible scenarios and unintended consequences for national security, and then work together with Parliament, the Intelligence and Security Committee, the campaigners and, most of all, the families to find a way through.

It is right to acknowledge that this is not a simple issue to resolve. We are absolutely committed to the principles of the Bill: ensuring clear standards for all public servants and accountability for anyone who seeks to lie or cover up the truth. At the same time, our primary

duty as the Government is to keep this country safe and secure. We must be able to assure our citizens and our allies that national security information will always be protected.

The Government remain resolutely committed to finding a way forward on this issue, which is why we have taken the decision to delay the remaining Commons stages of the Bill so that we can find a solution and bring it forward in this House. This pause is not a step back from our principles; it is a commitment to getting this right. I know that families have waited too long already. This decision is not one we took lightly, but we believe it is better to take the time needed to resolve the complex issues, rather than rush the Bill through.

I want to place on the record my deepest thanks to the families and stakeholders for all their continued work with us. It has been the biggest privilege for me, personally, to have had the opportunity to get to know them and to work alongside them over the last year—in particular Margaret Aspinall, Charlotte Hennessy, Sue Roberts, Steve Kelly, Jenni Hicks and Hilda Hammond, who I now personally count as my friends, and I hope they feel the same.

The Bill is about restoring trust between the public and the state. That trust cannot be demanded: it must be earned. It must be earned by showing the families that this legislation is not about appearances, not about headlines, not about being seen to act; it is about making real and lasting change. By listening to the families, and by taking time to get this right, that is exactly what we are doing. Because when things go wrong, the truth must come out. Accountability must follow and families must never, ever again be left to fight or walk alone. That is what the Bill will achieve, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

8.19 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): What an absolute shambles. The Government have had long enough to work this out: the campaign for a Hillsborough law started 10 years ago, in 2016; Labour MPs started campaigning for it a year later, in 2017; in 2022, the Prime Minister adopted it as a formal Labour policy; in 2024, he put it in his manifesto, promising it would be one of his first acts as Prime Minister. Yet here we are today, after another set of rushed amendments, with yet another delay and another promise to get it right, but absolutely no idea what the Government are going to do or even when they are going to do it.

This problem was not some bolt out of the blue or unforeseeable surprise. How the Bill applies to the intelligence agencies is an obvious question that has been known for years, but it is a question that the Prime Minister—the man they used to call Mr Forensic—never thought to answer. Instead, he did what he always does: he made the campaigners one promise and made the intelligence agencies another. That is why, when the Bill's Report stage was due last week, the Government pulled it. It is why, when it was due again today, they pulled it again, late last night. It is why, just now, the Minister was unable to say when the Government will bring forward their next attempt to get this right.

Right now, in the bowels of Whitehall, the Government are trying to draft their way through the problem—trying to find a form of words that will satisfy both the campaigners and the spooks. But I have news for the Minister: they cannot draft their way out of this problem. There is a choice to be made. If the Prime Minister believes it is dangerous to apply this law to the intelligence agencies in full, just as it is applied to other public bodies, then he simply should not do that. He needs to make a decision.

I have five questions for the Minister. I am not asking for classified information, so she need not use that defence. These are reasonable questions that she can answer. First, by what specific date will the Government return to Parliament with a new amendment to address this question? Secondly, do the Government still believe it is appropriate for the heads of the intelligence agencies to determine what information is provided to an investigation?

Thirdly, if the Government believe that somebody else should decide, who do they think that should be? Fourthly, if the Government believe that the decision rightly lies with the intelligence agencies, and that this is necessary for national security, are Ministers prepared to assert that difficult truth to the campaigners? Fifthly, what representations have the Government received from the Governments of other Five Eyes countries that do not have laws like this?

There are five questions; five clear answers are needed. After all this time, we deserve answers for the families who have suffered terrible tragedies, for the brave men and women who work every day to keep us safe, and for the country as a whole.

This completely avoidable situation is the fault of a pointless Prime Minister who has no idea what he wants to do and, even if he did, no idea how to do it. He made a promise but had no idea how to keep it. He made that promise not once, but five times in this House alone. As with tax and spend, jury trials, ID cards and more, the contradictions are piling up. The Government talk about a duty of candour, but if the Minister was to show some candour now, she would admit that this has been, from start to finish, an absolute mess.

Alex Davies-Jones: I do not know how the Opposition dare. It is utterly shameful. I know that the shadow Secretary of State knows how complex this all is and how much it means to everyone involved. His party did nothing to solve this issue—the Conservatives did nothing for the families or to bring forward a duty of candour. He asks me to be candid, so I will be candid. This is about righting an injustice and preventing people wronged by injustice from going through absolute hell. To try to make political hay from this matter is disgraceful, and he should be called out for it.

The hon. Gentleman has been in the job for only a few days, and I was going to sincerely welcome him to his position and hope that we could work collegiately on this legislation for the families and the victims of these horrendous state cover-ups. However, I advise him that following in the footsteps of his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), by attention seeking at all costs does not end well.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's questions, we will continue to work with the families, to listen and to work with the intelligence services and other partners to ensure that the Bill is brought back to the House when it is fit and proper.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): I must say to the new shadow Justice Secretary that we have been trying to do this since I was elected in 2019, and we could not even get a seat at the table with the Government then, so to cast aspersions—[*Interruption.*]

Hon. Members: He's not even listening!

Ian Byrne: I'll move on.

I thank the Minister for the statement and for the pause. A lot of people were extremely concerned about what was happening over the weekend, myself included, so I think the pause is the right thing to do. This is not just a law or a piece of legislation; this is a legacy. This is about the 97 men, women and children who died at Hillsborough, but also those who have been wronged at the hands of the state. This is hugely important, and it is not party political. It is for the whole House to make sure it is done right.

I would like to ask the Minister why amendment 23, which I tabled and which has the full support of everybody connected to Hillsborough, has not been adopted by the Government. Why is it deemed not to be right and proper to be adopted by the Government? It would solve all our issues. Any clarification on that would be great.

Could the Minister also give us a timeline? As she rightly stated, we have waited a long, long time for this, and there is a real concern now that the Bill could be kicked into the long grass. I know the Minister does not want that; she knows I do not want that. All the families and campaigners do not want that either. I just ask for a little clarity on those two questions.

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his diligent campaigning on this matter throughout his entire life as a parliamentarian, and for his commitment to ensuring that the voices of the families are always heard inside and outside this place. I make the commitment to him that the Government are listening to the campaigners and committed to doing all we can to work on a way forward. We will work with him, with other parliamentarians and with the Intelligence and Security Committee to find that way forward on this complex and difficult issue. I am committed to having a meeting with him to discuss that further.

On a timeline, we know that families have waited too long. The Bill is not just overdue; it is far too overdue, and it is needed more than ever. However, it has to be right, and we have to get the balance right. We are not kicking the Bill into the long grass; we are committed to doing this as soon as possible, but we have to get it right. I am not setting an arbitrary deadline here—the families have asked me not to, because they want us to get it right. We are committed to doing that and to getting this policy correct. As soon as we have more information, I will bring that forward to the House.

My hon. Friend mentioned his specific amendment. Again, I am happy to speak with him on that and discuss it going forward. Again, I make the commitment that we will work together to get this right.

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

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. Liberal Democrat Members recognise that the Minister has worked to move the Bill forwards, and has given a lot of care and attention to trying to get it into this place, but the situation is frustrating for those on both sides of the House. This landmark legislation will transform the relationship between public bodies and victims of horrendous tragedies. It was this Government and this Prime Minister who committed to its implementation in full in the Labour manifesto, yet we find ourselves again in limbo.

The carve-out for security services is completely unacceptable and has ground this process to a halt. It is vital that the legislation includes clear, binding provisions to ensure that the security services are subject to the duty of candour. Despite much of the rhetoric around this, there are clear ways to include the security services in this duty while still protecting sensitive national security information. We already do it, as the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) alluded to in speaking to his amendment 23, which I am pleased to have supported.

Provisions already exist to allow evidence that is too sensitive for public disclosure to be heard in closed proceedings before a judge in inquiries, so there is no issue there. Heads of service must be held to account if they refuse to provide relevant information to inquiries and investigations, but it is not for them to decide what is relevant to an inquiry or investigation; that is up to the independent chair of that inquiry. Campaigners raised this issue as early as last September, and Ministers were made fully aware that this was a red line for victims and their families.

I trust that the Minister has had the families at the forefront of her mind in everything that she has done, so I ask her: when the Government present their Bill to the House of Commons, will the duty of candour apply to all in the intelligence services? Will she commit to ensuring that Report and Third Reading of the Bill will take place as soon as possible, so that there is a chance that the legislation will pass prior to the end of this parliamentary Session and the next King's Speech, as promised, and will she give a cast-iron guarantee that it will be in this place that we put the full Hillsborough law forward, not the other place, so that elected representatives can fully scrutinise the finished legislation?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, for their tone, and for her candour; it is appreciated by the Government. I recognise and share her frustration, and that of the House, about how this process has been conducted. This is no ordinary Bill; it is something more than that, and it deserves proper scrutiny in this place, which we will ensure it receives. The Bill will come back to the House of Commons for adequate scrutiny before it goes to the Lords—we have made that commitment today.

There has never been a carve-out for the intelligence services. The duty of candour and assistance has always applied to them. The amendments that the Government tabled apply directly to individual employees of the intelligence services. The difference has always been on the procedures in place for how we handle secure information, but we are committed to finding a way forward for the benefit of everyone, and to doing so as

soon as possible. I cannot give a definitive timeline, but we will do it at pace, with the families and the intelligence services. We have to get this right. The Bill will come to this House first, and I am committed to ensuring that it applies to all public servants.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I pay tribute to the families, some of whom are in the Public Gallery; to Elkan Abrahamson and Pete Weatherby KC, who have done phenomenal work for the past 37 years; and of course, to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), and to the Minister for the work that she has done on this.

While I am pleased that the Government have paused proceedings on the Hillsborough law, I am increasingly concerned about the direction of travel. In March last year, the families of the 97 and Merseyside MPs made it clear that we would not accept anything less than the Hillsborough law. We all understand the importance of national security, but this Bill is not incompatible with national security. As has been said, provisions already exist, and quite frankly, nobody is above the law. A carve-out for the security and intelligence services would only allow the behaviour exposed by the Manchester Arena inquiry to happen again, whereby MI5 were able to withhold information and avoid accountability.

The Minister has been very patient in her responses, but I urge her to continue to work with the families, and with Elkan Abrahamson and Pete Weatherby. Please, Minister, bring the Hillsborough law back to this House, so that we can all pass it, because as a Liverpool MP, it would devastate me to vote against the Hillsborough law.

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her questions, and I make that commitment to her. The Prime Minister was clear on Second Reading that the Bill as introduced was agreed with Hillsborough Law Now and the families, and would not be watered down. We will do all that we can to strengthen the Bill. We will continue to work with the families. I, too, pay tribute to Elkan Abrahamson and Pete Weatherby, whom the Government met this morning to discuss next steps. We met the families again today to discuss ongoing collaboration, which will continue. The families will be at the forefront of this, because this is their Bill. This is a legacy, and we want to ensure that we do right by them and bring forward the Hillsborough law.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement, and ask her for two points of clarification. Does she believe that it is appropriate for the heads of the intelligence services to determine what information is provided to an investigation, or should that be determined by someone else, and does she accept that in the early stages of the Bill, the Government were clear that it would not be possible to make the Bill applicable to individual agents? How can the House have confidence that we can now do that without creating unacceptable risks to national security?

Alex Davies-Jones: The primary objective of this Government, and I hope of every Government, is to protect national security and to keep our citizens safe. That is, and will continue to be, of utmost importance to this Government and to this Prime Minister. We will continue to work with the intelligence services. We have had a very collaborative working relationship with them

during the development of this Bill. That relationship will continue. We would never do anything that would jeopardise or undermine national security; we have been very clear about that. The families have also been very clear that that is not their intention, and they totally understand this. We think there is a way forward. The Government introduced amendments to ensure that the Bill applied to individual agents, and we did that by working with the heads of the intelligence services directly and with the security services. We will continue to work collaboratively with them and with the families on finding a way forward.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): The response of the shadow Justice Secretary, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), while families are sitting with us in the Public Gallery, was one that he should be ashamed of. As the Minister knows, for me, this has always been about families first. It is crystal clear that the Government cannot progress the Bill without the full confidence and support of the families who have fought for decades for justice, and it is right that the Government listen to the families and pause today. The Prime Minister made a direct promise to those families that the Hillsborough law would be delivered in full. Any amendment that fails to satisfy the families on the duty of candour of individuals in the security services is a red line for me and for so many other colleagues in this place. Will the Minister promise me that she will work like the clappers with the families to introduce an amendment that has their full support, and that she will deliver justice for all victims of state cover-ups, so that we can finally say, “Never again”?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, and commend her on her tenacious campaigning on this issue. She has been a true champion for the Hillsborough families, and for all the families impacted by state failure and state cover-ups. She is a true friend to everyone who needs their voice to be heard in this place. I can make a commitment to her that we will continue to work with the families, the intelligence services and the Intelligence and Security Committee to find a way forward. I am committed to working with her and other parliamentarians on this issue. This has always been a collaborative process. I am always keen to work cross-party, despite what the official Opposition have to say, because this is above party politics. It always has been. It is about ensuring that we find a way forward that can benefit the families and be a true legacy, while ensuring that we protect national security.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): In my past life, I spent a good deal of time working on matters affecting victims of child sex abuse and trafficking, so I have a lot of sympathy with the Government's desire to ensure that the Bill, in its final form, is workable, but it seems there is already a serious risk of ambiguity around the accountability at the heart of the Bill. How does the Minister propose to ensure that there is effective oversight of the decision-making process about disclosure? If it is her view that it is not the heads of the intelligence services who should make that decision, can she share with the House her view on who should make that decision, so that we can be confident that there will be appropriate oversight of the disclosure process?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He knows that this is a very complex issue, and that it is not an easy problem to solve, but we are committed to solving it, and we will continue to work with the heads of the intelligence services, the Intelligence and Security Committee, parliamentarians, the families, the Foreign Office, the Home Office and all Government Departments to ensure that we get this right and that there is protection, oversight, accountability and an amendment that the families can support. They do not want to see national security compromised. No one does. We are not prepared to go there, but we are prepared to do the right thing, and to ensure that there is candour across all public authorities.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): The Minister was right when she said that trust has to be earned. I believe that she is really putting her heart and soul into earning the trust of the families. I thank her for her work in doing so, and I hope that it leads us to a satisfactory conclusion. Not everyone affected by Hillsborough is as close as the Minister is to the very important considerations that she has to balance, or indeed to the vagaries of parliamentary procedure and the way that Bills pass into law. Our constituents might only read the lurid headlines, or about the party political point scoring, and they see stories about the Bill being watered down or delayed. It is not great for people to read that, so I urge the Minister to make sure that the next time she, or anyone in the Government, makes a statement publicly on this Bill, it is to say that agreement has been reached, and it can go ahead.

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome that question from my hon. Friend, who, as the MP for Merseyside and Ellesmere Port, has been a vocal champion for the families at every stage of this process. It has been a privilege to work with him and other colleagues on this directly. He is right. This Bill might colloquially be called the Hillsborough law, and many people outside this place who are not aware of the issues might think it is about a tragic football match that happened 36 years ago, but it is about so much more than that. This Bill will provide the biggest expansion of legal aid for a generation to anyone who has been affected by a death in which the state had a role, and it will be non-means-tested legal aid for the first time ever.

The Bill will also ensure that all public servants and authorities are bound by a legal and criminalised duty of candour. It will bring in new criminal offences of misleading the public and of misconduct in public office. This will be a truly landmark Bill that will change the culture of British life for the better, forever. That is what is at stake here. That is why this Bill is so important, and we are committed to bringing it forward as soon as possible, but we need to get it right for everyone. That is what the Government are committed to doing.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I thank the Minister for her statement. I know that she is a woman on a mission, and let us hope that we get to the end of this before terribly long. We know that the Government are struggling with accepting the families' wish that we should pick up amendment 23 and its consequential amendments. I am mystified about the business of a balance being struck between intelligence services personnel being transparent and the protection

[Tessa Munt]

of national security, because my understanding was that we already had that balance; national security is safeguarded by the fact that in any inquiry, the release of sensitive information happens in closed session, via a High Court judge.

Schedule 1 includes a carve-out for the intelligence and security services, who are proven not to have told the truth. That is a dreadful shame. I am told that we have to trust what is said, but that seems entirely inappropriate, as the heads of the security services have unfortunately shown themselves not to be trustworthy. People talk about our allies being able to trust us, but if the heads of the security services are lying, I do not know how our allies are meant to trust us. Will the Minister please tell us what the problem is with amendment 23? It has been put together by Pete Wetherby, Elkan and others, and the families support it. Why can we not just agree to it?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her service on the Public Bill Committee. Her thoughtful contributions there have made the Bill better. I will cite the great Pete Wetherby KC now at this Dispatch Box, and I hope I do him justice: there is no balance to be struck on national security, because national security should always come first. That is Pete Wetherby's position, that is the families' position, and that is the Government's position. The Government always have to protect national security, and we will always do that, but the families have a right to the truth. I want to restate that there is no carve-out in this Bill for the intelligence services. They will be bound by a legal duty of candour, and it will apply to individual agents. All we need to do is find the mechanism by which that information is passed on to an investigation or inquiry. We are working at pace with the intelligence services and the families to find a way forward. This is very complex. It sounds simple, but I assure the hon. Lady that it is not. I am a woman on a mission, and I am determined to do this as soon as possible, but we need to get it right, and that is what this Government will do.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for the leadership that he has shown on this. It is right that we have a pause, but the Minister will know how distressing this is for the families, and about the emotional and physical toll that going back and forth to and from Parliament for decades has had on them. They came so close to this Bill being passed, only to encounter further disappointments and setbacks. This is the only experience that my constituents whose children were killed in the Manchester arena attack have had of meetings in Parliament to date, so can she assure us that when the Bill comes back, every single part of it will have the full involvement and support of the campaigners and families, and that there will be no more short-notice, unexpected amendments from the Government?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I want to place on the record my sincere thanks to her for all her tenacious campaigning on behalf of her constituents who have been through the unimaginable pain, trauma and grief of losing their children in the most horrific circumstances and then being denied the truth. It was a privilege to meet her

constituents with the Prime Minister last week and to hear their truth, and I thank them again from the Dispatch Box for sharing their pain with us and sharing directly why this Bill is so important and why we need to get it right. Hearing their truth and hearing from the families is exactly why the Government have taken the decision to pause this legislation so that we can get it right. We are determined to do that by working with the families and hearing from them, and by working with the intelligence services.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Looking at the wider implications of the Bill, the Minister talks about the intelligence services. Can she confirm whether there is a carve-out for military intelligence services in any way? Looking at that more broadly still, will it also apply to special forces operations and personnel, and will it be applied retrospectively?

Alex Davies-Jones: It is important to put on the record that there is absolutely no carve-out here. The Bill will apply to all public authorities, including the armed forces and all intelligence services. We have worked collaboratively with our armed forces and with the Ministry of Defence in the design and creation of the legislation, and we will continue to do so. As I have said, the primary objective of this Government is to protect national security, and we will do that at all costs, but we also need to ensure that the families' experiences are reflected in the Bill and that we get the legislation right, and that is exactly what we will do.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome the delay to the Bill. Too often Governments soldier on even when they are not getting things right, and that leads to bad legislation. This is something that we should get right before we send it to the other place.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) said, this is not just about the Hillsborough families, and I pay tribute to them for what they have done on behalf of others who have been wronged by the state. I say as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood that it is also about the people who were wronged in that scandal. It is about the nuclear test veterans, those wronged in the Horizon scandal in the Post Office and many others. What they have all shown us is that the state will lie to defend itself, and we do need this duty of candour for all, including the security services, who can give evidence in camera, so that they tell the truth to the public when they get things wrong, and so we can learn from it and move forwards.

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is right. This is a Bill for everyone who has been wronged and lied to and who has been subject to failures of the state when it was meant to protect them. This Bill is for much more than just the Hillsborough families; it is for the victims of the contaminated blood scandal, the LABRATS, the sub-postmasters, the victims of the Grenfell tragedy and, sadly, many more. It is for every citizen in this country who potentially could be caught up in this. It is about looking forward and getting this right for decades to come to ensure that when something goes wrong, the state, which is meant to protect people, tell them the truth and be open with transparency, frankness and candour, does just that. We will ensure that the Bill does that before it leaves the Commons.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I pay tribute to the Minister for the constructive, collaborative and collegiate way in which she has worked, and I endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne). That is in stark contrast with the disgraceful words from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), and his behaviour in this statement. This whole process has been marked by parties of all shades and hues working together. In that spirit, I want to reassure the Hillsborough families that that is the way in which we have proceeded on our work in association with the Bill, and we will continue to do so.

I endorsed amendment 23—I think it is sound—and Pete Weatherby has also endorsed my amendment 20, which provides a simple role for the Intelligence and Security Committee. My question to the Minister is simple: when we see the next draft of the Bill, will there be a role for the ISC?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and comments. I pay tribute to him for his collaborative work, collegiate tone and all his constructive work in the Bill Committee—the Bill is better for it. The Bill is and always has been above party politics. For anyone to seek to use it for political gain is truly shameful and disgraceful. It is all about the victims and their families, and it always will be. I will ensure that we continue to work with him and the rest of the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and any party that chooses to work collaboratively as the Bill progresses. I can assure him that there will be a role for the ISC; we will work with all partners and agencies to ensure that we get the Bill right.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her update and her acknowledgment of how important it is that the families who have suffered so much and campaigned so hard are satisfied by the final wording of the Bill. What assurances can she give us that the Government will provide the leadership, training and resources to change the culture of cover-up and minimalist responses, and ensure that people get the full truth the first time around?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend's important question, which goes to the heart of exactly what the Bill is about. It is all very well for us to write fancy words on goatskin and ermine, but if we do not change the culture—the aim at the heart of the Bill—this process will have been pointless. We must change the culture, and the legislation is partly about that, but it is also about ensuring that we get the implementation right. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and I are heading to Liverpool next week to see how we can learn from the world-leading work of the University of Liverpool on changing the culture through a duty of candour for public authorities. We are continuing that work at pace; none of it is stopping. We are continuing to work jointly on the Bill's implementation, and on getting it right once it becomes law, while simultaneously developing the policy. I look forward to updating the House on that work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, thank the Minister very much for the statement. I also thank the Liverpool MPs, who have worked very hard to achieve balance in the Bill between citizens and the priority

status of security agencies. As the Minister said, it is time for the Government to get this right, and that is what we should be doing.

My colleague Paul Frew, a Member of the Legislative Assembly back home, is taking a candour Bill through the Assembly. The obligation must apply across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. May I ask the Minister a favour, if she does not mind? Will she work with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and with my colleague, to ensure that everyone will benefit, no matter whether they are in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland?

Alex Davies-Jones: It gives me great pleasure to confirm that, to take this forward, we have had fantastic collaboration with the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Government. Everyone has collectively been pursuing the aims of the Bill, which has been a true joy for me as a Member of Parliament from a nation with a devolved Government. All nations have given legislative consent for the criminal offences to apply UK-wide—that is positive. We will bring that amendment forward when the Bill comes back to the Commons. We continue to work collaboratively across the United Kingdom to ensure that a duty of candour applies to all public authorities in the United Kingdom.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The campaign for the Hillsborough law—not “a” Hillsborough law—has been this country's greatest and most defining campaign for justice led by ordinary people in the modern era. I am very pleased that the Government pulled back at the weekend from what would have been—regardless of any good intentions—a betrayal of that campaign. The choice that the Prime Minister now makes will come to define his domestic legacy when all is done and dusted.

Will the Minister put on the record the understanding that those of us with closer proximity to power than the people who have campaigned courageously for this law have a tendency to be too trusting of others in powerful institutions? The security services sometimes let people down, and they sometimes do not effectively protect the lives of people in our country, so a duty of candour should apply to them, too. Will the Minister confirm that the amendment from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) is not off the table and will now be fully and properly considered before the Bill comes back to this House?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions and comments, and I can reassure him and everyone again that the duty of candour will apply to all public servants, including the intelligence services and individual agents. That is the intent and it will be in this legislation. We will work with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) to ensure that we get this right. We will work with the families who have that lived experience. The Prime Minister has heard from them directly about why it is so important that the intelligence services are captured, and they will be by the duty of candour in this legislation. We will work together to ensure that we get the legislation right.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Will the Minister update the House on the progress made in her positive discussions with the Scottish Government relating to the provisions of non-means

[Douglas McAllister]

tested legal aid? Will Scottish families enjoy the same access to justice as those in the rest of our United Kingdom, and at the same time?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and again thank him for his service on the Public Bill Committee. It was fantastic to have another Member of Parliament from a devolved nation represented on the Bill Committee to discuss why it is so important that everyone in the United Kingdom should benefit from this legislation. I am pleased to confirm that the Scottish Government have indicated that they would like to be part of the mechanism for legal aid, and they have asked us to include them in this legislation. Those discussions are ongoing. It will, of course, be for the Scottish Government to determine the methodology for how they determine who gets legal aid for their fatal accident inquiries and inquests. Those discussions are ongoing, but we have had very positive discussions with the Scottish Government.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I travelled through Manchester Victoria station on the day of the arena bombing and I saw the young people on their way into that concert. They were young, vibrant, excited, happy—all the things that they deserved to be, doing the most normal thing in the world: going to see a concert. It was one of the most shocking moments of my life a few hours later to hear that they had been the victims of a terrorist attack. It is painful to me that they were let down by the state and by false narratives. Almost a decade later, I am glad that the families are being listened to. I thank the Minister for her assurance that we are going to take the time to get this right. Can she please confirm that the voices of all the victims and all the families of state cover-ups and of these tragedies will be at the centre of any legislation that comes forward from this point on?

Alex Davies-Jones: I can indeed confirm that.

PUBLIC OFFICE (ACCOUNTABILITY) BILL

Bill to be considered tomorrow.

Business without Debate

FINANCE COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That James MacCleary be discharged from the Finance Committee and Martin Wrigley be added.—(*Gen Kitchen, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Disclosure and Barring Service

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

8.58 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I am pleased to have secured this debate on the Disclosure and Barring Service. It is my hope that I can shine a light on some of the shortcomings of the current system and that the Minister will consider my proposed improvements so we can help families protect their loved ones, reduce the burden on voluntary groups, and speed up employment processes. Tonight, I want to make the case that the DBS system as it currently operates is not fit for purpose. Its loopholes cost lives, undermine trust and leave families exposed. In its current form, the DBS introduced enhanced checks that include not only a search of an individual's criminal record, but checks against barred lists, providing a more comprehensive assessment of an individual's suitability for specific roles, especially those involving vulnerable groups. The system is an integral part of employment in appropriate sectors, and should offer assurance to families as well as employers and voluntary organisations.

When a parent drives away from a dance class, a scout group or a swimming lesson, they assume that the organisation has established that the employee or volunteer has no criminal record, and does not present a risk to their child. At the heart of the problem, however, is the fact that thousands of roles involving unsupervised contact with children or vulnerable adults are eligible for DBS checks, but are not required to have them. Eligibility in itself is not protection, and families assume that protections exist where they simply do not.

I want to start by sharing the tragic story of Lauren, a promising performer who lost her life in 2020 after an accidental drugs overdose. In November 2019, two separate safeguarding allegations were made about someone relating to the supply of class A drugs to Lauren and her friend. That person was eligible for—and in my view should have been required to undergo—enhanced DBS clearance, but it seems the relevant information never made it to the Disclosure and Barring Service. The teacher continued to work with the children and allegations of other inappropriate activities were later made. Sadly, Lauren had by then been exposed to drugs and became involved with someone who continued to supply her with them. By August 2020, she had died.

When I made inquiries, the DBS could find no record of the organisation, so I could not establish whether the teacher was registered, or even whether the organisation had obtained checks on any of its other staff. The Disclosure and Barring Service told me that it has no jurisdiction over whether an employer or safeguarding lead should take action; its role is only to record whether the legal duty to refer an incident has been met. It told me that any failure to investigate lay with the employer and whoever regulates the employer, but as there is no regulator for dance schools, I met another dead end.

That raises two issues. First, is it appropriate for someone to provide hands-on, unsupervised sport or dance activities without the expectation of an enhanced DBS check? Secondly, do parents not have the right to know whether someone undertaking such work has clearance to work with children and vulnerable people?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate; I spoke to her beforehand about the incredibly important issues that she is raising. Does she agree that child safety must be paramount? The Government need to clarify paid and voluntary sector rules—for example, how often should screening be done and how often should mandatory child protection training be carried out? Too much is left to best practice, which differs across all the regions, and not enough is clear and unequivocal. The time has come to make obligations crystal clear.

Vikki Slade: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right: assumptions are being made around the country. As the mother of four children, I assumed, as I dropped off my children, that everybody had to be DBS checked. The idea that that is not strictly the case fills me with dread. When I talked to the people from the Campaign for Gigi this afternoon about nursery safety, I shared this issue with them, and they were horrified. Clearly, people working in an early years setting are required to have an enhanced DBS check, but they were concerned about other sectors, too.

As I am sure the Minister can understand, Lauren's grandfather Paul, who brought this case to my attention, and Lauren's parents remain concerned that if the coach had been reported to the DBS at the time of the original allegations and potentially withdrawn from working with children, Lauren, who was described as

"a talented singer and dancer with the world at her feet"

may not have been introduced to illegal drugs and could well have been continuing to enjoy a very bright future. Additionally, there does not seem to be a route for the public to report concerns. If the employer has not registered a member of staff, or an organisation has not been deemed to be undertaking a "regulated activity", as the council told me the dance school was not, there is no one to document the concerns and no register to check.

I welcome the DBS's new video, which was launched before Christmas, to support faith organisations with the legal duty to refer. The legal duty to refer requires organisations to notify the DBS when they remove a person from a regulated activity because they have harmed or may pose a risk of harm, but it does not protect those in the care of an individual who has not been registered by their employer in the first place. I welcome the changes made in the Crime and Policing Bill, which will close the loophole for supervised staff, ensuring that they will be eligible for checks against the children's barred list. I also welcome the Minister's work to ensure that that happened earlier last year.

Those are positive steps, but I have two questions. First, will the Government consider requiring employers and organisations to register their staff, rather than just making them eligible, and will they require the police, local authority or regulator to record allegations made against the organisation where an individual is not registered? Secondly, have the Government considered a simpler system? For example, there could be a system in which an individual applies for a card that could be searched by an employer, a parent or a service user to confirm that an individual has been cleared to work with children or vulnerable people. The card could include a "date of most recent update" section—that

way, details of past convictions do not necessarily need to be shared, but a timeline of when people have been deemed safe to be around vulnerable people could be.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): My hon. Friend raises very good points on this matter. There are two issues that I have always seen with the DBS check. First, like an MOT, it is only as good as the date when it is issued, and people do not have to subscribe to the update service. Does she agree that updates should be mandatory? Secondly, a DBS check cannot be passed from one organisation to another—people need a fresh one every time—which seems to be an unnecessary waste of time. Does my hon. Friend agree that her card idea would probably solve that?

Vikki Slade: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People have to pay extra to be part of the update system. Why would anyone pay extra to put themselves under additional scrutiny? Why is that not automatic?

The other option, which has been suggested by some, is that the Government could consider a right to ask/right to know process for family members. That would ensure that the public could not have free and easy access to information that could be risky, but if they had a concern, there would be a route for them to find out. We were simply stonewalled every time that we tried to find out whether this teacher had been registered and whether those allegations had been made.

Let me turn to another situation, which has come up on a number of occasions, relating to people who are caring for family members. DBS checks currently have to be undertaken by an employer, a registered organisation or an umbrella organisation. That increases costs, adds delays and makes it more complex for families using direct payments for the care of disabled children and for those starting the journey of caring for an elderly relative.

Laura contacted me about the direct payments that she receives to fund the care of her son, noting that she cannot directly access DBS checks. She said that

"my very vulnerable son, quadriplegic with cerebral palsy and profound multiple learning disabilities has a team of 15 carers none of whom have DBS checks."

She asks why the law does not allow parents to carry out DBS checks on carers, who are

"working often alone in our home".

Another constituent, Sandra, is in a similar position. She said:

"We had a carer a few years ago, who had been lone working with our daughter at night for over a year, with a current DBS check. We had a call from Child Protective Services—the carer had tried to smother her own child".

They later discovered that the reason why the carer's other child lived with grandparents was because she had tried to smother the older child, and they had been removed from her care. The man from the child protection services said, "It probably should have been on her DBS," but it was not. As a result, Sandra said, "What is the point? There is no reason for me to get a DBS check—it would not have protected my child."

I have also been contacted by Louise, from another part of Dorset, who approached me due to my dementia champion work. After her husband Richard was diagnosed with dementia, she decided to try to care for him at home. Her job meant that she went away for a few days

[Vikki Slade]

at a time, and she felt that the best option was to find a carer to stay in her home with Richard. My colleagues in Somerset may remember this story, as it was in the local paper.

Louise's experience led to her starting a campaign for Richard's law, which I said that I would take up. The law has three simple pillars—so simple that I was shocked they were not already in place. Those three pillars are mandatory registration of all care workers; mandatory enhanced DBS checks, with all carers required to join the update service; and mandatory, nationally recognised training for care staff in first aid, medication compliance, manual handling, dementia awareness and safeguarding. I find it hard to believe that a person can be a carer without all of those things being in place.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What my hon. Friend has said puts me in mind of another case in a village not far from where I live, where a cleaner was systematically stealing from elderly and vulnerable residents. This went on for years, and every time the person nearly got caught or was interviewed by the police, they just left their job and moved on. This is exactly why we need to do something to make the system far better, because elderly and vulnerable people have no way to be absolutely certain that when they give somebody their card to get some money so that they can pay the carer, something will not go desperately wrong and the rest of their money will not disappear.

Vikki Slade: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Today, the headline in the *Bournemouth Echo* is about another case involving a carer, who stole £125,000 from an elderly person. The case I am describing is not a one-off.

Louise told me about a carer who was coming into her home and who she had trusted. The basic DBS check was all she had, but after the carer stole jewellery and cash from her home, it came to light that this woman had three previous convictions for theft and obtaining property by deception, including a suspended sentence for an almost identical offence. In her victim statement, Louise said:

"I welcomed her into our home, believing she was there to help us through one of the hardest chapters of our lives. Instead, she exploited our vulnerability in the most callous way imaginable. The worst thing she stole was my trust. Her betrayal destroyed my ability to believe in the carers who were supposed to support us. I reached a breaking point where I could no longer allow outside help, and as a direct result, I had to make the heartbreaking decision to place my husband in residential care. This was never what I wanted for him, and it has changed both of our lives immeasurably, for the worse. The weight of that decision, forced upon me by her selfishness, is something I carry every day."

Sadly, Richard Woollam died on Boxing day—Louise contacted me a few days later to tell me that I had not managed to have this debate while he was still with us. However, it seems shocking that family carers who are already sacrificing so much are unable to access DBS checks for those who are coming into their homes, and that someone who is providing such personal care is not automatically required to have such checks and training. Provision of personal registration would allow those who are working directly for their employers—be they carers, cleaners, tutors, babysitters, drivers or personal

trainers—to provide security for families, particularly families who are home educating their children, and to work across multiple employers with ease.

Finally, over the past few months, we in this place have spoken on numerous occasions about improving the service provided by Government agencies. From two-year waits for shotgun licences to nine-month delays in responses to MPs' letters to the Department for Work and Pensions—if the Minister is listening, I have been waiting since February for an answer to a simple request—and a Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency that does not bother to chase doctors' letters at all, I have been shocked by the poor service experienced by my residents in times of need.

Where an enhanced DBS check is needed for an employee to take up their position, it is so important that it is processed swiftly. In theory, such checks should be completed within a fortnight, but in Dorset, the police are advising that delays can be up to 100 days. Daniel from Wareham has explained that this problem is impacting his ability to move forward with professional opportunities. He said that when he worked abroad, background checks often came back within a few hours, and that the

"current manual processes just feel so outdated and inefficient, especially when so many people—students and employees alike—need these certificates to do their jobs or continue their studies."

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the speed of DBS checks. My constituent Marcia had a DBS check, but needed an enhanced DBS check to move into a child's residential home for work, and was at risk of losing that job opportunity if the DBS check did not come back. Given that it had taken seven months to get the original DBS check, Marcia had very little faith that the enhanced one was going to arrive on time. Does my hon. Friend agree that when people are looking for job opportunities, they need to be able to respond quickly?

Vikki Slade: My hon. Friend makes a great point, and it is exactly the situation that Tabitha from Wimborne told me about. She said:

"I am desperate to work...this is a big problem for not only my life and finances but also for others who are surely out there...who are like me, waiting for more than three months... I have been a TA (teaching assistant) previously and all my prior DBSs came back within a month."

She said it is absolutely ridiculous. Dorset is not alone in this. Across the country, families, volunteers and employers face similar failures, with delays, loopholes and an opaque system that simply does not keep pace with modern care and employment.

The Disclosure and Barring Service exists to make recruitment safer and to protect vulnerable people from those who may present a risk. Those are both worthy aims, but the system is not working. We need: mandatory registration of anyone working with children or vulnerable adults; mandatory enhanced DBS checks and use of the update service; a central, individual-held clearance card; a public mechanism to report concerns; the ability for families directly employing people to access DBS checks themselves; faster processing times via a digital system; and a review of the definition of regulated activity. These failures are not administrative inconveniences; they are risks to life and safety, and they reduce productivity too.

The people I have spoken about tonight have paid the price for a system that is too complex, too slow and too optional. We owe it to them, and to every family in this country, to build a DBS system worthy of the trust that people place in it.

9.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): I thank the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) very much for securing this debate on an important issue. I am grateful to her and to all others who have contributed this evening. A good amount of ground has been covered, even in the relatively short time available, so I will respond to the various points that have been made.

First, I ask for the House's indulgence as I set out some of the factual background of the Disclosure and Barring Service. The wider disclosure and barring regime is there to protect children and vulnerable adults through the disclosure of relevant criminal records, helping employers to make informed recruitment decisions about the suitability of an individual to work with those groups. It does so through criminal record checks, with the standard, enhanced and enhanced with barred lists levels. Increasing criminal record information is disclosed at each level. The roles and activities that are eligible for the higher-level criminal records check are set out in legislation owned by the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. During the last reported year, the DBS issued a total of 7.2 million certificates.

The regime also allows for barring by the DBS of those who are considered to pose a risk, as has been covered. If someone is barred, they cannot work in what is defined as regulated activity in our legislation. As has been identified, regulated activity and institutions that are regulated are two different things—I make that completely clear. Examples of regulated activity include teaching, supervising children and providing health and personal care to children and adults. It does not matter whether it is voluntary or otherwise. Through the relevant arrangements, the DBS ensures that those it has barred cannot work in those roles and have access to vulnerable groups. The DBS's most recent annual report states that 104,000 individuals are on its children and adults barred lists. I should note that the disclosure and barring regime is not, as has been pointed out, a vetting regime.

The disclosure and barring regime focuses on providing employers with information on people, whether that is criminal records, relevant police information or barred list status. This can support robust suitability decisions while allowing ex-offenders to get back into work and employment. As Parliament and the public would expect, the regime is kept under review to ensure that it is effectively delivering on its key objectives, and I am always keen to hear suggestions, especially those, as laid out by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, that are based in real life—IRL, as my children would say—with regard to our constituents.

We are bringing in changes to respond to the DBS-related recommendations from the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. First, a measure in the Crime and Policing Bill will prevent those on the barred list from working closely with children, even in supervised roles working alongside somebody with a DBS certificate.

Currently, if a role involving teaching, instructing or supervising children is supervised by another member of staff, it is not considered to be “regulated activity” under the legislation. This means that an employer can ask only for an enhanced DBS check, which does not include a check of the barred list. That creates a risk that a barred-list individual could work as a volunteer in a school, or as an employee in a youth club or other setting, if supervised. We agree with the inquiry that the risk is too high, and we are changing the law accordingly.

Secondly, we are enabling self-employed or personal employees to access higher-level DBS checks if they work with children or vulnerable adults. The relevant provision will come into force on Wednesday—completely coincidentally! Before we made that change, people such as private tutors or paid personal carers could only access a basic DBS check, while their counterparts in settings such as schools or care homes would be expected to obtain the highest level of DBS check.

Tessa Munt: Should DBS checks not have a start date and a finish date, so that people who are not particularly worldly are clear about the beginning and the end, and understand that when the end date comes, a new check will be needed?

Jess Phillips: I will come on to that when I pick up some of the issues of portability from one person to another. However, from Wednesday those hiring personal carers, or families engaging private tutors, will have access to the same high level of check, with the same level of information, including information about whether a person is barred by the DBS.

Thirdly, we have enabled the disclosure of an individual's barred-list status on the international child protection certificate.

Vikki Slade: Will people have to go through some of the umbrella agencies, which can charge a lot of money? Will there be a cost differential for those individuals?

Jess Phillips: That is a very good question. There does seem to be a bit of a discrepancy. I know that when the hon. Lady was looking through different regulated systems to get people checked in her own area, they were found wanting. Individuals, families or those who want to employ a tutor or a carer on a self-employed basis, whether or not that involves direct payments, will have access to the enhanced check.

I pay tribute to Richard and the campaign of his brilliant wife Louise: she is absolutely on the money. The right to ask is a fundamental part of the system, and from Wednesday—give me 48 hours—parents will have that power. If I were sending my child to a tutor—which I have done, like many other people across the country—I would be able to ask whether that tutor had had an enhanced check. It may not be possible to access all the information, but it will be possible to question and scrutinise employers as well, to ensure that that is done. Parents will have that power.

As I have said, we understand that child protection is international. The ICPC, issued by the ACRO Criminal Records Office, is used for individuals who intend to work with children overseas. We changed the relevant legislation on 18 December, reducing the risk that an overseas employer could unknowingly hire a barred

[*Jess Phillips*]

person to work with children and thereby meeting the third of the inquiry's recommendations relating to the disclosure of criminal records.

Overall, our approach is underpinned by an unwavering commitment to safeguarding through the proportionate disclosure of criminal records and other relevant information. It is of course important that we listen to, and when necessary act on, any concerns raised by individuals, including Members of Parliament, and the sectors that interact with the regime.

Tessa Munt: The Minister refers to the fact that the DBS would be able to check whether somebody who was going to work abroad had a problem with their clearance. Will that work in reverse? For example, if someone is trying to employ an au pair from another country—I do not know if people can even do that any more—could the au pair be checked before they came in and worked with children?

Jess Phillips: I will get back to the hon. Lady on the specifics of that. This is about people who are barred from working with children, and ensuring that we have enhanced international knowledge sharing. In the cases raised by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, the fact that it was not known that somebody had all those issues was a real failure in the system.

I want to give some attention to the requirements that the hon. Lady calls for. The Disclosure and Barring Service does one thing. It is not the regulator, and it does not regulate services; it ensures that employers have the right information. The regulation of activities sits with the relevant Departments and institutions. The rules in residential settings are different from those in the Department for Education. We need to make sure that we do not introduce regulation that means that no one can ever start any sort of group—that is certainly something we have been mindful of in our work on the duty to report cases of sexual abuse among children. However, we need to have safeguards in place. The regulation of requirements sits with the relevant individual bodies; it is not for the DBS to say what the requirements should be. However, I am absolutely open to having conversations about what should and should not be regulated when it comes to safeguarding.

I go back to where I started: regulated activity. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole asks for clarity in the guidance. Regulated activity is activity that involves someone working with children and vulnerable adults. Frankly, I find it quite hard to imagine that the vast majority of the cases that she has raised would not fall under the scope of regulated activity, but I will absolutely take her point away.

Before I finish, I want to pay tribute to Lauren, whose heartbreaking case was mentioned. I speak as somebody who knows what drug addiction can do, and what it costs families. I do not know the full details, but in Lauren's case, I would consider the activity to have been regulated activity. If someone is teaching children, they are undertaking regulated activity, and parents will have the right to ask whether enhanced checks have been undertaken.

Tessa Munt *rose—*

Jess Phillips: I do not think I can take any more interventions, because my time will run out. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, and to work with her to make sure that we get the DBS to be the best it can be, within all the regulatory frameworks that are needed.

Tessa Munt *rose—*

Jess Phillips: I will give way.

Tessa Munt: Madam Deputy Speaker, can you confirm that we can witter on until 10 o'clock? I believe that we are not limited.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Just to provide clarity, the Minister can indeed continue until 10 pm, but she does not have to.

Jess Phillips: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. When I woke up this morning, I did not think that this debate would start until 10 pm, so any more time is a bonus. I apologise. The last time I replied in an Adjournment debate, I ran wildly over time, and somebody had to shut me up. I did not want anyone to be put in that position again.

The portability of checks was raised. I think people do not understand quite how many DBS checks are done a year—7.3 million. It gives me some comfort that quite a lot of the workforce in our country are undertaking checks. Incidentally, we do not have to undergo checks as Members of Parliament.

Vikki Slade: There are 7.2 million checks done a year, and I am sure that means multiple checks for individuals. I used to foster, and I obviously had very enhanced DBS checks for my fostering, but I then had to get a separate DBS check to undertake my work as a school governor. Frankly, that seems crazy. As a foster carer, I was being checked in far more detail. We could reduce the burden on the DBS by having a system of single portable checks, because I do not think that 7.2 million people a year are having checks.

Jess Phillips: We recognise that people may want to use their existing DBS check when moving from one role to another, where the new role requires a check. That is exactly the point that the hon. Lady raised. It is possible for employers to accept an existing criminal record certificate, but it must be for the same type of check in the same workforce—in the instance she has given, that would be working with children—such as enhanced with barred lists checks for the children's workforce. This is to ensure that the appropriate level of information is available. We do not want a random DBS to have been done, and for someone to just say, "Look, I've got a DBS". Over the years, I too have had more DBS checks than I can count.

On the delays, the DBS has a key performance indicator of getting 80% turnaround within 14 days, and it currently reaches 75%. It has been progressively working on that and ensuring that things are done more quickly. The enhanced check relies on police forces undertaking the work, and seven months seems like a very long time, but there can be a variety of reasons why delays may arise. However, the vast majority of checks are done within

14 days. My son had an enhanced DBS the other day, and it came back in three days. I do not think the DBS knew that he was my son.

Tessa Munt: I thank the Minister greatly for giving way. I want to pick up again the point I made about whether these checks will have a clear end date on them. I also have a second question, if I am allowed to ask it. I do not expect an answer now, but it would be nice to have an answer—one of the problems one finds constantly with police forces is that they are required to do checks, but they have no ability to recover the full costs through the charging system. Such a number of checks—7.2 million—will be very expensive. Do we know the cost of a single DBS check?

Jess Phillips: We absolutely understand that. Just to be clear, police forces are paid through the DBS system to undertake the checks. The resources are given by the

DBS system to police forces to undertake that work. I will ensure that the hon. Member receives the exact cost, but it comes under the costs of the DBS.

On the issue of exactly how long a DBS check lasts, there is no one simple answer, but we should encourage more people to be part of the updating system and the checking system. This system has been heavily scrutinised over the years, and it deserves that level of scrutiny, but I have seen a real effort to make sure that it is the best and the fairest that it can be, but we are always here to work for any possible improvements.

Question put and agreed to.

9.34 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 19 January 2026

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

Sale of Fireworks

4.30 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 738192 and 732559 relating to the sale of fireworks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. It is a privilege to introduce the debate on these two petitions on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

It is not the first time we have been here. In December 2024, I was asked by the Petitions Committee to lead a similar debate on fireworks after more than 120,000 people signed two similar petitions for change. Since then, I have met campaigners and organisations, including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Anxiety UK, Help for Heroes, the British Horse Society and many more. It is clear that public support for change is overwhelming. In this place, Members of Parliament across the political spectrum support calls for change, yet here we are again, debating this important issue. That should be a clear and loud message to Ministers to act right now.

The petitions we are debating today have received more than 183,000 and 193,000 signatures respectively: more than 376,000 signatures when taken together. I have spoken to the lead petitioners—Helen and Robert, who are in the Public Gallery today—about their deep love for animals and the reasons why they created the petitions. It is undeniable that the inappropriate use of fireworks can have a devastating impact on domestic pets, farm animals and the like.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I want to thank my constituent Robert Branch, who was responsible for starting one of the petitions, and whom I met last week. As a fellow dog owner, I know how important these issues are to local people in High Peak.

Robbie Moore: I thank not only Robert Branch but the numerous deeply concerned constituents; I am sure we all, as Members of Parliament, have received plenty of correspondence about how tougher action must be taken on fireworks. In Riddlesden in my constituency, just before Christmas, fireworks had dramatic impacts—

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab) *rose*—

Robbie Moore: Before I tell that story, I will give way.

Alex Ballinger: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. In my constituency, many people have written to me about the impact of fireworks on dogs. Two people in particular, Marianne and Rosleen, wrote about how excessive fireworks around fireworks night cause their dogs to tremble uncontrollably and run desperately away from their owners. Does he share my concern

about the impact on animals, and does he agree with the petitioners that the Government must do more to regulate and control the amount of fireworks we see throughout the year?

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Some hon. Members are standing. It is only convention that Members sit on a particular side of the room. Perhaps there will be a cross-party love-in today; we have started to see one already. If Members want to move to the other side of the Chamber where there are seats, they are able to do so. I will recognise your individual parties, so do not panic.

Robbie Moore: For a moment there, I thought there were some defections to the Conservative party coming across—we can live in hope.

In Riddlesden just before Christmas, fireworks led to the tragic death of a family's foal, known as King. I know we cannot use images in the debate, but I have an image of King on my desk. It is believed that King, terrified by fireworks, bolted in the night. He was found by local farmer Hannah the next morning, impaled on a piece of farm machinery. Hannah said:

"We had to lift the machinery off him and drag him out, but he sadly died from his injuries. It was just awful, like something out of a horror film."

Let that be a message to anyone who still says that fireworks are merely a matter of harmless fun—they are not.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful statement about the impact on animals. I thank the petitioners in Epping Forest who have signed the petition, including the Redwings Horse Sanctuary, which triggered this debate and has its Ada Cole stables in my constituency. As a veterinary surgeon, sadly I have seen at first hand the impact of fireworks: small animals go missing and get injured, and farm animal livestock and horses receive horrific injuries. Does my hon. Friend agree that something has to be done to keep people and animals safe from fireworks?

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This issue is about the negative impact on animal welfare—our pets and farm animals—but also the human impacts, which I will come on to.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): As a fellow veterinary surgeon, I reiterate what the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) just said. Every vet will have stitched up horses or treated dogs or cats that have been affected. It is not a niche problem or unusual: every vet dreads being on call on fireworks night because they know that they will be busy.

Robbie Moore: I agree with the hon. Member, who I know is a vet and has expertise from the number of dealings he had in a previous life before entering this place.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I pay tribute to my constituent Julie McMillan, who has emailed me with her concerns about fireworks every year for the 19 years that I have been a Member of

[John Lamont]

this place or of the Scottish Parliament. Many other people have raised the same concern. I urge caution about what has happened in Scotland. The Scottish Government introduced a new licensing regime, much of which does not work, and they have had to pause the whole system. Although we need greater control and consistency across the UK, the Minister should not follow what the SNP Scottish Government have done.

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. A UK-wide approach needs to be taken on this issue, so I urge the Government to work with the devolved Governments to ensure a strategy that works. We can take those lessons from north of the border.

The death of any animal is upsetting, particularly a family pet, and having grown up on a farm I know all too well that this has an impact on farmed animals too. It is easy to forget that many animals are not just pets. They are much more sensitive to sound than humans, and fireworks can be deafening.

Ms Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Before this debate, I was contacted by more than 100 constituents who raised concerns about animals. One constituent also raised concerns about the impact on her mental health. Does the hon. Member agree that, while a lot of people use fireworks responsibly, there are concerns about the impact of fireworks on people's mental health and wellbeing, as well as their impact on animals?

Robbie Moore: I agree, and I will talk about that in my speech, as well as the negative implications on veterans and those with anxiety-related issues.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Given so many people write to us about this issue, it is clear that we all feel the impact. On new year's eve, my constituent Kim reported that fireworks went on in Whalley Range until 4.30 am. The noise was so loud and persistent that it set off their house alarm. Does the hon. Member agree that the use of fireworks in the middle of the night is clearly antisocial behaviour and more must be done to tackle it?

Robbie Moore: I completely agree. In my constituency we are seeing the antisocial use of fireworks during the night and early in the morning throughout the year. That causes huge disruption to those hardworking individuals who just want to get a good night's sleep so they can get up in the morning.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Robbie Moore: I will make a little more progress and then take some more interventions.

Having spoken to Helen, one of the lead petitioners, who represents the UK's largest horse charity Redwings Horse Sanctuary, which has already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), I know how urgent these calls for change are. It is not just animals that suffer from the antisocial use of fireworks; many veterans can suffer attacks of post-traumatic stress disorder when fireworks are let off, deeply damaging their mental health. Vulnerable children and adults can also be confused and intimidated

by fireworks. There is nothing more frustrating for a working family than being kept up all night by a constant stream of fireworks. I am seeing that in my own constituency of Keighley.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Brave Derby veterans have contacted me. Those who suffer from mental health or are recovering from PTSD are really concerned about the negative effect that fireworks have on their lives. I am sure that the hon. Member would agree that those brave men and women who have put their lives on the line for our country deserve support when they need it the most.

Robbie Moore: I agree. For those who have anxiety-related issues, fireworks are an absolute trigger point when they are let off. The noise that they create and the resulting heightened levels of anxiety need to be noted by the Minister, who I hope will respond positively.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab) *rose*—

Robbie Moore: I will give way one more time; then I will carry on.

Peter Swallow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being generous with his time. I have had constituents contact me about this issue. Many of them recognise the importance of fireworks as a great British tradition on fireworks night and other such nights, but they want more regulation around the times of year at which fireworks can be enjoyed—and until what time in the evening—and around their volume, so that people are able to enjoy fireworks on great occasions in a responsible way that reflects that they are not as enjoyable for those with trauma, and those with pets. Does the hon. Member agree that we can get that balance right?

Robbie Moore: I agree that it is about making sure that we are not only introducing tougher regulation and enforcement but that those who use fireworks are using them appropriately. This does not necessarily need to be about a ban on fireworks; much tougher measures can be brought in with licensing on the decibels associated with fireworks. I urge the Government to look at that and not just respond, "We are going to take this away and think about it," because that is the response that we have had for far too long.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Robbie Moore: I will make a little more progress, then take interventions. We get this problem far too often in my constituency, in places such as Riddlesden, Braithwaite, Bracken Bank, Oakworth, Haworth, Ingrow and Silsden. Just this weekend, I put out a call across the UK asking people to contact me with their experiences of fireworks. I put that out only last night as I was coming down on the train and I received well over 900 responses, which just shows the strength of feeling on this issue. I have received much more correspondence on this issue in preparation for this debate. The stories that I have heard are horrifying. One resident wrote,

"I was at a care home caring for the elderly with Alzheimer's. There is no respite from fireworks for them and it is so unpredictable. I saw three elderly gentlemen walk around for hours a day thinking

it was a gas explosion. Some of the residents tried to leave the building and to run away as they didn't feel safe. Some of the residents were crying and distressed, some sat with their head in their hands. Meal times are disrupted, every aspect of their life is affected."

Enough is enough.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I, too, have had lots of constituents contact me about this issue with concern for neurodiverse people, people with mental health issues, veterans with PTSD and animal owners. My constituent Helen sent me video footage of her border collie Alf, cowering in fear under a table. I wonder if the hon. Member agrees that in today's modern age there are lots of beautiful alternatives for displays in the air that do not require fireworks—not to say that fireworks are not marvellous at the right time—and which can actually be silent. Does he agree that more people should be encouraged to use modern technology to deliver awe-inspiring displays?

Robbie Moore: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. There are many other ways of having entertainment in the sky beyond using very loud fireworks. That gets to the detail of what one of the petitions is about: the decibels associated with fireworks going off.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Robbie Moore: I will crack on a bit because I have two more pages, and I want to make sure that hon. Members have enough time to give their own speeches.

In a distressing number of cases, emergency services are also targeted, particularly in Keighley. They come under attack by those showing antisocial behaviour, with fireworks used as weapons. Yet fireworks do not seem to get the same attention as the illegal use of knives; they get a free pass. The time for talk is over and we need action now. Both today's petitions provide sensible ideas that would dramatically improve the situation for communities facing the inappropriate use of fireworks.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Robbie Moore: I will take two more interventions.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, pay tribute to Redwings Horse Sanctuary, which is headquartered in Norfolk. Norwich North was among the top five constituencies for the number of signatories to the petition. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as Redwings has pointed out, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 does not provide sufficient protection? That is why we need to consider measures such as reducing the decibel level of fireworks, to ensure that protection is there for both animals and people.

Robbie Moore: Following on from the hon. Member's intervention, there is an opportunity in the animal welfare strategy announced by the Government over the Christmas period. I feel that it does not go far enough in detailing what could be put in place specifically to deal with fireworks in the context of animal welfare over the rest of this Parliament.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Sitting on the Opposition side of the Chamber, I find it difficult to listen to the hon. Member saying what could and should be done now, given that for 14 years a lot of this

stuff could have been done but was not. However, my point is this: he has talked about domestic animals, farm animals, veterans and the elderly, but one group that has not been mentioned also needs to be considered—wild animals. Does he agree that we must also consider the perhaps unseen impact of these very loud fireworks on wildlife?

Robbie Moore: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, because a lot of this issue is about data collection. It is very easy to collect data and to demonstrate the impact of fireworks on pets and farm animals; it is much more difficult—almost impossible—to demonstrate the impact on wild animals. Even the data about pets and other kept animals is few and far between so it is less easy to demonstrate to the Government that action needs to be taken. Nevertheless, I urge the Minister to consider the impact on all animals of fireworks being let off.

The current legal limit for loudness of fireworks is 120 dB, which is equivalent to being at a rock concert or standing next to a police siren. By contrast, 90 dB, although still not quiet, is equivalent to a busy restaurant or a hairdryer. It is completely reasonable to suggest reducing noise levels to something more considerate—indeed, 85 dB is the threshold at which humans experience hearing damage. Reducing noise would mean that private fireworks displays could continue, but with be a reduced risk of distressing animals or inconveniencing neighbours.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): In my constituency, over 300 people have contacted me about this issue—100 just this year. I have also been aware of my own dog's trauma over fireworks. However, there is another issue. What the hon. Gentleman is saying about reducing the decibel limit is the right way to go, but there is also the issue of safety. I witnessed the house opposite mine being set alight on new year's eve as a result of its close proximity to fireworks; the people involved were made homeless for a time. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should also consider restricting the use of fireworks to public displays, rather than letting them be used in private residences?

Robbie Moore: That brings me on nicely to the next petition. Another option is for people to require the approval of their local council to hold firework displays. That would allow the council to control the number and the timing of firework displays, ensuring that they are more considerate of the whole community. In addition, it is safe to assume that no council would approve a display deemed unsafe; hopefully, requiring a permit for a fireworks display would reduce the number of firework-related injuries.

In addition to the two solutions proposed by the petitions today, I make one further observation.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his great speech and for the excellent way in which he is taking all the interventions. As someone who lives with a cat—I hesitate to say that I own one; it usually seems the other way round—I can see for myself, and from the emails I have had from Dartford residents concerned about their pets, that the disturbance caused by loud fireworks is hugely traumatising for them. Does he agree that we need not only to reduce

[Jim Dickson]

the maximum noise level for consumer fireworks, as he has already said, but to seek further restrictions on the dates when fireworks can be purchased from both licensed and unlicensed sellers?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree. As the hon. Member says, the issue is about tougher licensing as well. I have seen fireworks for sale in pop-up shops in my own constituency of Keighley; it cannot be right that no regulation is associated with that. The pop-up shops could be below residential flats or units and there could be a risk to life if a hazard is associated with that environment. I take the hon. Member's points on board; these are options that the Minister should explore.

The biggest problem with fireworks is enforcement. Until a firework is lit illegally, no crime has been committed. By the time the police spot and respond to a firework in the sky, those responsible have had plenty of time to flee the scene or to dispose of what little evidence there was to begin with. It is incredibly difficult to enforce laws that regulate firework use, so it is right that today's petitions—and wider reform—should focus on wider supply regulations. If permits were required by individuals, as opposed to on an event-by-event basis, that added hurdle when purchasing fireworks would deter a larger number of people who are looking for a cheap thrill.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. On his last point, there has been no new legislation to deal with antisocial firework use for over two decades. Some 557 of my constituents signed these petitions. Since being elected I have dealt with 150 separate cases in my constituency of Wolverhampton West; constituents have raised a number of issues, including fireworks going off at midnight or at 6 o'clock in the morning. Does the hon. Member agree that, as a start, the least this Government could do is what the first petition asked for—reduce maximum noise levels from 120 dB to 90 dB? Decreasing the volume of fireworks is one step forward to take now.

Robbie Moore: I have spoken about this issue for the last six years, so if the Government take any action after today's debate, I will welcome it. I want both the recommendations put forward by the two petitions, which have been signed by over 376,000 people, to be listened to, acted on and enforced.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Robbie Moore: I will, for the final intervention.

Mr Bailey: The hon. Gentleman is being extraordinarily generous. A mother in my constituency of Leyton and Wanstead was chased down the high street by some children firing fireworks at her and her kids. Her children spent the evening cowering under a table, suffering trauma. None of them was able to identify the perpetrators of what is clearly a crime. That is a police matter, but does the hon. Member agree that stronger restrictions are necessary to deal with situations where it is difficult to identify the perpetrators of firework crime?

Robbie Moore: I agree. Although enforcement is challenging, those carrying it out can be helped by tougher legislation. We need to learn the lessons from

north of the border, up in Scotland, and what the SNP Government have rolled out. However, recommendations upon recommendations have been put forward to Governments of all colours over a period of time. I hope that now we will see action from the Minister.

I say it again: enough is enough. Public support for national change on fireworks is overwhelming. They disturb the peace of entire neighbourhoods, terrify pets and leave vulnerable people trapped in their homes throughout the year. If we choose to continue to ignore the issue, I fear the inevitable: there will be more unnecessary deaths, injuries and traumas for victims of fireworks in the future. In the face of such concern, there must be action, and that cannot occur until we have the full weight of the Government behind us. The Government have the power to end this nightmare for all, and they should do so without delay. I thank hon. Members for giving me the time to take as many interventions as possible. Let us have a good debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members to bob if they wish to speak—I think that is happening right now, so thank you. Given the popularity and importance of this debate, there will be an informal limit of four and a half minutes on speeches.

4.54 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for presenting this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

My constituents were fourth on the list for signatures to these petitions, which call for controls on the decibel levels of fireworks and on the sale of fireworks. Those constituents include Stephen, who told me that his previous guide dog, so frightened by fireworks, dragged him across a main road in a desperate attempt to get away from the noise; and Natalie, who works closely with veterans and spoke about the serious impact that fireworks can have on mental health.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Hundreds of people in Epsom and Ewell have signed the petition and emailed in their concerns. As an ex-service member, I absolutely understand how triggering loud noises can be problematic for individuals with PTSD and mental health problems. Indeed, after coming back from Op Telic 4 in Iraq, I found myself in a prone position on Lewisham High Street after fireworks were being set off and it felt like we were under attack. Many constituents have also emailed to say how concerned they are about the impact of loud bangs on animals. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must review the maximum noise limit for fireworks and give a clear timeline to do so?

Lizzi Collinge: I absolutely agree that the Government should look at limits on the decibel levels of fireworks and other measures. As the hon. Lady set out, the impact on veterans can be severe.

I was struck by the fact that even the people who are worst affected are not looking to ban fireworks. They understand that it is an enjoyable activity for many people;

they just want some common sense around how they are used. One sensible place to start is with limits on decibels. It is entirely possible to have a lovely display, just slightly quieter.

I confess that I am more conflicted about the suggestion in the second petition to restrict fireworks to council-approved events. Of course, I understand the reasoning, but I also recognise that private celebrations bring a great deal of joy, so I am not convinced that removing them entirely is the right way forward. Instead, I would be more inclined to support a proposal that I have raised before and has been supported in comments from my constituents: limiting firework displays to a certain number of days a year, in line with key celebrations. At the moment, bonfire night feels like it stretches from mid-October all the way through to November, so in the same month as we celebrate remembrance, our veterans are being put under avoidable stress by constant unpredictable explosions.

Warinder Juss: I have spent many years celebrating with fireworks in my garden, as my hon. Friend mentioned, and I have had the pleasure of having firework displays with my children. However, does she agree that things have got a bit too far in that we are seeing fireworks throughout the year? Of course, we expect fireworks to go off during events such as bonfire night, Diwali and new year, but they are happening throughout the year and at all times of the day. Does she agree that it is time to limit the period during which fireworks can be used?

Lizzi Collinge: I absolutely agree. Time and again, people have told me that it is the unexpected nature of fireworks that causes the most harm. Just giving people the opportunity to plan and prepare for fireworks would be an enormous step forward, and we can achieve that by introducing set days for displays. For example, they could be on bonfire night and the nearest Saturday, and we could replicate that across the year for important events such as new year's eve, Diwali and so on.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I am so glad that we are having this important debate, because my constituents have contacted me to say how concerned they are about the decibels issue. The hon. Lady's proposal to limit displays to a certain number of days a year, which everybody can plan around, is important, and we should consider whether silent fireworks or reduced decibels are the way to go. I am glad that she has raised those points.

Lizzi Collinge: I must confess that I love fireworks—I absolutely adore them—and I want people to be able to experience that joy, but not at the cost of other people's safety and security.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I wonder if my hon. Friend prefers the whoosh as fireworks go up, rather than the bang; I think that is what most people are there for. My constituents get in touch with me to say that when they complain, they feel as if they are passed from pillar to post between the council and the police. Does my hon. Friend agree that it should be easier and simpler for my constituents to know who to make a complaint to?

Lizzi Collinge: I absolutely agree that for any issue, fireworks or otherwise, it needs to be clear to people who is responsible and who they can go to. Unfortunately, too many of our constituents, whatever their situation, get passed between different organisations, and that is unfair.

By placing some sensible regulations on noise levels and imposing a bit of predictability, it is entirely possible to allow people to enjoy fireworks as the spectacular displays that they are, while protecting people and pets from their worst effects.

I would also like to mention working animals; my constituency is partly agricultural, and we have a huge number of working and farm animals.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I am thankful to the more than 450 people from Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme who signed the petition. In the 100 emails I have received, there is a lot of talk about livestock in particular. This is not just about safety; it is about our farms losing animals and the impact on our trading organisations. Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Minister considers these petitions, she should consider the business case, in terms of the impact on small and medium enterprise, as well as the safety and welfare cases?

Lizzi Collinge: I absolutely agree that the impact on all groups, including businesses, must be considered.

As time moves on, I hope that more organised displays use moving drones, which are quiet and absolutely spectacular.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before I call Gagan Mohindra, let me say that, while the screen on my left is not showing the time, the screens behind me and on my right are. Members should be conscious of others when speaking.

5.1 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) on opening this important debate and thank the many petitioners who have brought this issue before Parliament. It is nearly a year since the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) brought this issue up in the Chamber, and it is refreshing to see the Minister at the time, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), here showing his continued passion for this topic.

I wish to reflect the strength of feeling among my constituents in South West Hertfordshire that the balance between the enjoyment of and the disruption caused by fireworks is not being struck and that they are in fact causing harm. In the autumn and winter of 2025 alone, continuing into this year, over 200 of my constituents have contacted me directly to raise their concerns about the impact of fireworks in our area. Their concerns focus on the serious distress caused to pets, livestock and other animals, as well as the effect of loud and unpredictable fireworks on people with mental health issues including PTSD and heightened sensitivity to noise.

My constituents are not calling for an outright ban. Instead, there is overwhelming support for alternatives such as quiet or low noise level fireworks, which preserve

[Mr Gagan Mohindra]

visual enjoyment while significantly reducing harm. Others have mentioned the replacement potential of drones.

In South West Hertfordshire, 383 constituents have signed petitions calling for the maximum noise level of fireworks to be reduced from 120 to 90 dB. A further 293 people have supported limiting the sale of fireworks to councils or licensed events. My only word of warning about licensed events is about ensuring that displays advertised in posts on social media, including in Facebook groups, actually happen. I am conscious that over the new year and in the run-up to fireworks night, there were some fake posts suggesting that fireworks displays were going to happen and a lot of people were disappointed, although that happened in the midlands rather than in my constituency.

Given the development and increasing availability of quiet fireworks, it is right to reassess the current balance between celebration and protection, including lowering the legal noise limit from 120 dB. Others have mentioned significant religious events; I represent a multicultural community, and sometimes there will be fireworks outside the normal cycle for things such as weddings and family celebrations. However, if we could mitigate the noise, no one would lose out: people could enjoy marking significant milestones in their lives without scaring the animals and the vulnerable in our communities.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My constituents, like those of so many of us, have written to me about this. I want to talk about Jessica, who wrote to describe how the impact that fireworks had on her father reduced him to a near panic attack. She also has a friend who served in multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a dog who is reduced to panting and drooling to the point where she fears that he is going to have a heart attack. At the weekend, the owner of Eden Valley Pet Foods spoke to me because the impact of fireworks on one of his dogs—a gundog—leaves him very traumatised. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is not about backing a ban, or banning the bang, but about achieving a solution that balances enjoyment with mitigating the trauma that so many people and animals experience?

Mr Mohindra: The hon. Member is 100% correct. None of us is looking to be a killjoy. We are trying to balance the requirements of all parts of our communities, so that people who wish to enjoy the lights and noise associated with fireworks are not doing so to the detriment of vulnerable humans or animals.

The Government must consider whether additional measures, such as reducing the legal noise limit, could encourage the use of fireworks in a way that helps to strike a better balance between celebration, animal welfare and community wellbeing. I have already mentioned the potential for more widespread use of drones to ensure that people can continue to celebrate without negatively affecting other parts of the community.

5.6 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. It is also a pleasure to follow my friend the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), who is a committed campaigner on this issue.

Here we are again, though: another fireworks petition, another debate and, unfortunately, another year without meaningful change on the important issue of fireworks laws. I said last year that we would have to have this debate every year. I know that the Minister will listen, and I hope that we will not all be here again in 2027. We are going to continue banging on about this, and I thank the campaigners and all the petitioners, particularly the Firework Impact Coalition, a cross-sector coalition of charities for veterans, vets, pets, animals and children, all of which want to see change in the law.

Fireworks laws are not fit for purpose—there is cross-party consensus on that. It was true in 2022, when I tabled the Misuse of Fireworks Bill on the enforcement of fireworks, and it was just as true in 2024, when I tabled the Fireworks Bill on the licensing of fireworks. We know that it has been a really hard year for many people, and the misery of fireworks has added to that. The last August to December period was one of the worst that I can ever remember, with families being kept up at all hours by huge, loud displays and fireworks being aggressively marketed on TikTok, not as family-friendly events, but as weapons and instruments of antisocial behaviour. The impact of that is huge.

There are impacts on animals, whether wildlife or pets, and in rural areas and the countryside. There are impacts for those with mental health issues, such as PTSD. It is not just veterans who serve in warzones, but those who work in charities and humanitarian organisations, who have contacted me to say that they have been traumatised by fireworks. There are also impacts on children. When I visit schools, particularly primary schools, I ask how many children are kept up each night because of fireworks, and every single hand goes up. If it is not the fireworks waking them up, they are woken up by their pet being absolutely terrified. That has a really bad impact, particularly on children with special educational needs.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech about the need for change in the law, and the impact on humans and animals. One of my constituents got in touch with me to talk about the massive detrimental impact that the irresponsible launching of fireworks had during bonfire night weekend. She talked about how the next day her horses were spinning around in their stables and sweating profusely, displaying flehmen responses and windsucking on doors. When she spoke to the Greater Manchester police, they essentially said in writing that the lack of legislation meant that they could not act. To quote my constituent, it was obvious from speaking to “so many different professionals” that all they could really say was that “their hands are tied”. It is clear to me, from the contributions we have heard today, that it is imperative for the Government to change the law, to protect the individuals and animals that are so detrimentally impacted by fireworks.

Sarah Owen: I thank my hon. Friend for sharing that horrific example, an example we will have heard time and again across the country. We hear of it throughout the year, but particularly on bonfire night and during the seasons when fireworks are most prevalent. There is a perverse loophole in our law, which my private Member's Bill would tighten, allowing unlicensed sellers to actually go and sell fireworks during the busiest times for them.

In Luton, during that period when unlicensed sellers can sell fireworks, we had somebody marketing them online with a balaclava on his face. The aim was to cause damage, not happiness and joy.

We absolutely need to close that loophole and we need to lower the decibel limits to 90 dB. Not only is that popular—one third of Brits want to see that happen—but it is necessary for animals, people with PTSD, veterans, and those who have sustained burn injuries as a result of fireworks. A change in the law cannot come soon enough. We have seen a change in the law in the Netherlands, where injuries and serious burns incidents have gone down considerably.

My Fireworks Bill is still on the books. Although it is not likely to progress, I suggest to the Minister that it is a really good place to start, and I am willing to work with anybody to see that happen. When we look at our fireworks laws, I know that everybody is onside with wanting positive change, not just for ourselves, but for our communities, for our animals and for residents who have frankly had enough.

5.11 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member from Yorkshire, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing this important debate. I stand here today to speak in support of the two petitions, both of which have attracted significant backing in my own constituency. More than 200 constituents signed the petition calling for a reduction in the maximum noise level of fireworks and more than 230 signed the petition seeking to limit their sale to local authority-approved events. Those numbers and the popularity of this debate reflect a genuine and deeply felt concern about the troubling effects that fireworks can have in our communities.

I have also had more than 100 emails since I was elected in July 2024. Paula, one of my constituents, wrote to me:

“They are constant, nearly every night...getting louder and are being let off at all hours. They are not only antisocial; they are harming my dog.”

Such stories are repeated across our nation.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I am very clear that I am owned by a chocolate labrador. Coco is 12 now and the problem seems to be getting worse every year. That is why the reduction in decibels would be the most effective way of dealing with the problem. People could let fireworks off when they wanted and where they wanted, as long as the sound was reduced. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Iqbal Mohamed: I completely agree that the biggest harm for pets, animals, children and veterans comes from the loud noises—and they are going off at all times of the day. I do not know how it is across the country, but I have people in my constituency setting off fireworks during daylight hours. What is the point of that? What should be a joyous moment of celebration has now become a source of fear, distress and disruption. The harm caused by fireworks is well evidenced and widely documented. Sudden, unpredictable explosions cause severe distress to animals, triggering panic responses and long-term behavioural trauma.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The hon. Member is making very good points. My guide dog Jennie is not bothered by fireworks—she seems to enjoy them—but Pepsi, my wife’s guide dog, is terrified of them. That is not only awful for the dog, but it means that at firework time, my wife cannot go out and socialise or conduct her business as a local councillor in Torbay. Would the hon. Member reflect on the idea of firework-free zones? I also have the pleasure of having Paignton zoo in my constituency, and the impact on zoos is massive.

Iqbal Mohamed: I completely support the hon. Member’s call for firework-free zones. I have in my constituency urban, industrial and rural areas and there are places where fireworks are not appropriate and cause more harm in certain areas, so I completely support that call.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The hon. Member is being very generous in allowing interventions; I thank him for that and for his passionate speech. Like him, I have had many constituents get in touch about the havoc created for months, not just on bonfire night, but around the year, by fireworks. They are asking Glasgow city council to take more action, and to put on public displays so that people can enjoy the fireworks without disrupting neighbours and communities. Does he agree that that is the sensible thing to do, and will he recognise that it is often local community councils, including in my case Pollokshaws & Eastwood community council, that bring issues caused by firework-related disorder to the fore?

Iqbal Mohamed: I agree that council-approved, community-organised events bring people together. Those who are going know what they are going to, and any pets that will be affected can be kept away from that area for that period. The timing of those displays is also critical. There should be a watershed, whereby fireworks are allowed beyond a certain time of day. I fully support the hon. Member’s acknowledgment of the role of councils in helping communities to enjoy fireworks in a responsible and less damaging way.

We have heard that fireworks can be equally distressing for people, including veterans with PTSD, autistic and neurodivergent individuals, young children and the elderly. For those people, loud and unexpected noise can provoke severe anxiety. Worse still are the routinely reported cases of emergency workers being attacked with fireworks. Those impacts are not confined to a single night, but repeated over weeks and months, creating prolonged periods of stress. The harms that emerge from fireworks are not hypothetical—they are recurring, predictable and preventable.

The petitions do not call for some totalitarian overreach by the state by pushing for an outright ban. They recognise the cultural importance of fireworks in bringing communities together, but rightfully argue that public access, in its current form, is outdated and irresponsible.

There was an incident in my constituency during the last bonfire night—well, not a night; it is more like weeks—when a firework rocket had been let off at the wrong angle and pierced the windscreen of a parked car. Thankfully, nobody was hurt, but the rocket was lodged in the windscreen. I do not know what the owner’s insurance company said about that, but that could have been a child, a human being or an animal, and the results would have been catastrophic.

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

Other European countries have introduced more stringent restrictions, leading to fewer injuries and continued public support. Even within the UK, Scotland and Northern Ireland have stricter regulations than England. Alternatives such as organised displays, quieter fireworks and modern light or drone shows harnessing technological developments are increasingly popular and far less harmful. Responsible celebration should not come at the expense of animals, vulnerable individuals or community wellbeing.

I therefore urge the Government to listen carefully to this recurring debate. It is the first one I have taken part in; I was not able to take part last year, but I know from research that this subject comes around every year, and it is really important that we do something about it. I urge the Government to listen carefully to the petitioners, to conscientious animal welfare experts and to those who diligently advocate for persons with disabilities, and to bring forward meaningful reform that strikes a better balance—

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Iqbal Mohamed: I was just finishing, but I will give way.

Tom Gordon: I completely agree with the hon. Member, and I appreciate the hundreds of people in my constituency who have signed the petitions. When we talk about Government action, does he agree that if we end up with a licence scheme, it must give local authorities the money to enforce these provisions? If not, we will all be going back to our constituencies, picking up the phone to our council chief executives and saying, “This is the law, why are you not enforcing it?”.

Iqbal Mohamed: I completely agree. Councils are overloaded and overburdened; they are asked to do more with less, and it is really important that any legislation giving them the authority and powers to help with fireworks is backed by finance and teeth.

To conclude, let me repeat that I hope the Government will listen to the petitioners and introduce reforms that strike a better balance between celebration and compassion.

5.19 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. It seems to me that we have been discussing the possibility of restricting the use of fireworks to organised public events for many years and, while we talk, more people suffer life-changing injuries that could be avoided if we had tighter restrictions on the use of fireworks. In my constituency 869 people signed the petition to limit the sale of fireworks to those running local council-approved events. I agree with them. The easy availability of fireworks, which are marketed and sold in the same way as sweets or toys, belies the fact that they are in fact dangerous explosives.

On the beaches in my constituency it is the custom for the public to gather and let off fireworks on days such as bonfire night and new year’s eve. I am not sure whether people understand that they could be taking their lives into their own hands if they go on to the beach. I vividly remember running for cover with my

children on Tate Hill beach in Whitby, as rockets were let off sideways. Tragically, last year two young men suffered life-changing injuries when fireworks were let off on the Scarborough foreshore near the lifeboat station. Sadly, incidents like those are frighteningly common. In 2025, there was a fourfold increase in firework-related burns to children compared with the previous year—the highest admittance rate in a decade. Most injuries are to the eyes, head or hands, resulting in loss of sight, life-changing injuries and psychological impact.

Some of my constituents will disagree with my call for fireworks to be restricted to organised displays; they will say I am spoiling their fun. I humbly disagree. The United Kingdom is out of step with other countries that have already put safety first. The Netherlands is the latest country to implement a nationwide ban on consumer fireworks, joining Germany, the Republic of Ireland, Australia and other countries that have significant restrictions or bans on public sales. Since that implementation, the number of firework-related injuries has been consistently lower.

The public are telling us that fireworks are no longer essential for celebrations. A recent poll by the Social Market Foundation found that 91% of the British public would be open to partial replacement of fireworks with alternatives such as drone or light shows. I recently attended a spectacular drone display at Scarborough castle to celebrate 400 years since the spa waters were discovered, and I am certain that not a single person watching will have felt short-changed.

Alongside the safety aspect, as we have heard, there is also the impact that the increasingly noisy fireworks have on vulnerable people and animals. Veterans have written to tell me that fireworks trigger their PTSD, and that the impact is even worse when they are set off randomly and on no particular special occasion. As an owner of a rescue dog and cat, I know how scared animals can be by fireworks. Research by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has shown that 66% of animals are negatively impacted.

Warinder Juss: My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. A constituent of mine has a dog that is terribly frightened whenever fireworks are going on. She is simply saying, “Can we not have some kind of a limit, where fireworks don’t go off after 11 pm, for example?”. She recalls an occasion where she had to get up at four o’clock in the morning to go to work, but could not because she had been disturbed by fireworks during the night. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about public displays; as someone who has enjoyed having fireworks in the garden, I get much more joy now from going to a public display, being with other people and seeing much better fireworks than I would be able to at home. Does she agree that the problem is that we have no control whatsoever and that steps need to be taken now?

Alison Hume: My hon. Friend makes an important point, as have others in the debate, that we have passed the point where we used to watch fireworks safely in our back gardens. Fireworks are being let off all the time, every day—all day, sometimes—and I too have seen the terrible effect on animals, particularly dogs that, despite being sedated or whatever the vets recommend, are terrified out of their skins.

The time for talking is over. The evidence is clear. The current guidance and legislation need to be urgently reviewed. The maximum decibel level must be reduced immediately to 90 dB, and I call on the Government to review fireworks regulation in England and Wales urgently with a view to limiting the dangerous and antisocial use of fireworks in private and public spaces.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I will call Sarah Dyke, then Juliet Campbell, and then Gideon Amos.

5.25 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I thank the Petitions Committee for bringing this debate forward and the combined 671 petitioners from Glastonbury and Somerton.

Firework displays have long lit up the skies in celebrations throughout the year, with illuminations capturing the imaginations of young and old alike. Many enjoy the spectacle, but we must also recognise the negative impact that such displays can have on people, animals and nature. Mel, from Street, recently told me that one loud bang will send their beloved dog into a state of severe anxiety—shaking, panting and fainting, with the seizures sometimes lasting up to 24 hours.

In rural communities such as Glastonbury and Somerton, it is not just pets that are impacted; fireworks can have a horribly damaging impact on livestock, too. Research into the impact of fireworks on farm animals found that sudden and unexpected loud or novel noises can be highly stressful, because animals are more sensitive to high-frequency noises than humans.

The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 state:

“Pigs must not be exposed to constant or sudden noise”,

and

“Noise levels above 85 dBA must be avoided...where pigs are kept.”

It is also illegal to light fireworks near fields and barns where animals are housed, yet every single year we hear about livestock being impacted by fireworks. Cows and sheep often panic and try to flee when they hear fireworks, often injuring themselves. Pigs, hens and chickens often instinctively huddle, which can lead to some being smothered or suffocated in the chaos.

Vicky, a dairy farmer, contacted me last autumn after fireworks were set off by her neighbour, scaring her cattle. Twenty of her cattle escaped; one heavily pregnant cow died; and another needed emergency veterinary treatment shortly after, and sadly had to be slaughtered a few days later because it had stopped eating, moving and ruminating. Vicky told me that her cows wear health collars, and all indicated high stress levels at the time that the fireworks were set off.

Like many rural communities, Glastonbury and Somerton is home to many horses. As with livestock, a horse's reaction to fireworks is often to bolt, which can result in injury or, worse, death. I was alerted to a heartbreaking story that took place near Curry Rivel, where a horse bolted in panic from fireworks, broke its neck and had to be put down, leaving the owner distraught by the painful and quite unnecessary death of their treasured steed.

Sensible precautions can be taken with domestic animals, but of course it is not possible to do so with livestock and horses. Concerningly, many livestock and horse owners report to me that they are not warned of local displays. Much more must be done to adequately alert people to organised public displays, and I thank all the responsible organisers who do so. However, the real difficulty often lies with the increasing number of small private displays. The Liberal Democrats share concerns that the current noise limit on private displays does not go far enough in protecting pets, livestock and wildlife.

It is not just animals that are impacted by fireworks; it is also people living with PTSD, who often struggle when exposed to fireworks. Some 11% of households in Glastonbury and Somerton are home to at least one veteran. Linda, from Martock, wrote to me regarding her son, who served in the Army for 25 years, detailing how much untold damage fireworks do to him. I am very proud that Service Dogs UK is based in the constituency and does a huge amount of work with veterans who are suffering with PTSD.

5.29 pm

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing the petition for debate. It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of constituents who have contacted me on many occasions about this very issue: the impact the widespread sale and use of fireworks has on their lives.

The issue clearly resonates not just in my constituency but for people across the country. I have received correspondence from residents, pet owners and farmers who are deeply concerned about the wellbeing of animals. I have a cat myself, and she is left inconsolable by the noise on bonfire night, which can cause lots of distress to pets and livestock. However, the problem is not just limited to animals; I have had emails from veterans, people with PTSD, elderly people and others who are sensitive to loud noises, who find fireworks just too distressing. I have had emails from people from Eastwood, Chilwell, Beeston, Bramcote, Cossall, Trowell and Awsworth—from across my whole constituency.

Some constituents have also written to tell me that there have been injuries from fireworks. I will give two examples. One constituent described an incident in which a misfired rocket headed towards a child's pram. It was only because of the quick thinking and actions of a bystander that the child was unharmed, although that courageous bystander suffered burns himself. Another constituent described how her son was shot at with fireworks on his way home from school. We can only imagine the distress that that caused. I am sure that many Members around the room will have equally troubling accounts from their constituents. Stories such as those show us why stronger measures are now essential.

That said, I do acknowledge the importance of fireworks in community celebrations such as new year's eve and bonfire night. Those occasions bring people across Broxtowe and the UK together, so it is vital that we do not diminish them, but it is clear that we need regulations.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): There is clearly a consensus across the Chamber on finding that balance between people enjoying firework displays and the wellbeing and safety of animals, people and communities. Does my

[*Martin Rhodes*]

hon. Friend agree that in finding that balance, we must prioritise the welfare, safety and wellbeing of communities, people and animals?

Juliet Campbell: I absolutely agree that the priority with any changes in policy or legislation must be to take into account all those who are impacted, including animals, as well as the behaviour of people making things dangerous for others.

Any policy put forward on this issue must strike a clear balance between appreciating the events I spoke of earlier and ensuring a long-term reduction in the potential harm of fireworks and in the noise they create. We could learn from our international counterparts, such as the Netherlands, Poland and parts of Italy, where low-noise fireworks have been mandated in certain places and people have felt the benefits.

In conclusion, I hope the debate results in practical, beneficial changes, and that consideration will be given to the valuable contributions made today.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I call Gideon Amos. I will then call Amanda Hack.

5.34 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. Thank you for the innovative heads-up on who is next on the speaking list. I too extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening the debate and taking so many interventions.

Noisy fireworks, especially at times when they are not expected—outside the given days for fireworks, such as new year's eve, Diwali and Chinese new year—cause real distress and, as we have heard, injury. I thank the 269 and 276 from Taunton and Wellington who signed the petitions on firework noise and on organised displays respectively for bringing the issues to Parliament's attention. Particularly affected, as hon. Members have said, are those who suffer from PTSD and those with autism. We need to take their concerns a lot more seriously than we have. It is possible for someone to ready themselves if they know that fireworks are coming or that explosions will be happening in their neighbourhood, but indiscriminate use can be really affecting. When it comes to animals, we know that many die as a result, including horses, dogs and wildlife. I agree wholeheartedly with the petitioners' concerns about the use of fireworks, for all the reasons they set out.

At French Weir Park in Taunton, a private display on new year's eve nearly turned into a disaster. After a big display put on by private individuals using the park at midnight, a big pack of spent fireworks was placed beside a group of litter and recycling bins, perhaps with the aim of being helpful. Unfortunately, it was left still smouldering; the fireworks had not gone out. The set of bins, encased in timber frame and boarding, went up in flames, with the fire reaching more than 10 feet into the air and coming within a foot of overhanging branches. It also came within two to three metres of the timber-built Centre for Outdoor Activity and Community Hub. Fortunately, as is so often the case, volunteers came out of their homes and the excellent members of Friends of French Weir Park were on the case immediately. The fire brigade was called, the building did not catch fire and the whole issue was safely dealt with.

The main message I want to get across is that it is completely illegal to use the park for private fireworks displays. If people are thinking of doing that, please do not; please go to a professional event instead, and keep our parks and buildings safe. The other thing that this incident shows is that even with really tough laws to prevent these things—breaching the current rules can result in on-the-spot fines of £90, fines of up to £5,000 or imprisonment—individuals still set fireworks off privately. By the time police officers, or in this case the fire brigade, arrive those concerned are long gone and the display is over.

I therefore feel that completely banning the private use of fireworks would not be the right approach. It would curtail enjoyment for people who are acting responsibly but would also be ineffective. However, we urgently need action, and the Liberal Democrats support reducing the noise limit from 120 dB to at most 90 dB, as other Members have mentioned, because it is the noise that causes some of the greatest harm to people and animals. We also need reasonable limits on the shops that sell fireworks, as the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley said, and on the durations and the dates, as other Members have proposed.

I will continue to support a change in the law; it is urgently needed. I hope that Parliament can work together on this issue, so that fireworks do not always have to go out with a bang—sorry about that.

5.38 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for leading this petition debate.

As the MP proudly representing semi-rural North West Leicestershire—a beautiful constituency at the heart of the national forest, surrounded by countryside and farmland, with an abundance of wildlife and livestock, as well as the main home base for Canine Partners—it is unsurprising that I have been emailed by hundreds of constituents about the need to further regulate fireworks, and that more than 650 constituents have put their signatures to both petitions.

Neither petition calls for the banning of fireworks, which is a common misconception around this debate. We are here to discuss minimising the impact they have on people, livestock, neighbours and pets, and it is important that we focus on that. Most people use fireworks in a responsible, safe and appropriate manner, and laws are already in place to address the misuse of fireworks, limiting their sale to licensed traders and making it an offence to use them after 11 pm and before 7 am without express permission.

However, as a dog owner, I know that that does not go quite far enough. Just yesterday, some loud fireworks went off at 5 pm next to my home, which meant no walk for the dog. Unusually, the cats were also frightened. The issue is not just that animals are scared by the noise, but that horses and livestock are caused distress and harm when fireworks go off. Animals are at risk of injuring themselves on fencing or farm equipment or on fixtures and fittings in housing if startled.

Of course, this issue impacts not just animals, but veterans and vulnerable people. For those suffering from PTSD, the loud bangs are huge triggers. Last year,

PTSD UK did a study on the effects of fireworks on those with PTSD; 85% of respondents said that fireworks made them feel unsafe in their homes, and 27.2% had sought medical or therapeutic support due to firework-related stress. Surely this cannot continue.

It is not difficult to be a little more thoughtful and kind to our neighbours—to collectively take a step back to think about those loud noises and the impact they have on so many people. Firework displays can be enjoyed without fear, but we must recognise the volume of fireworks, particularly in Leicestershire, where fireworks seem to go on for weeks. After the last fireworks night, when I was back in London in early November, I realised just how quiet it is here compared with my constituency. That is why I supported the Fireworks Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). I thank her for all her hard work, and share her hope for action going forward.

Reducing the maximum noise level for consumer fireworks from 120 dB to 90 dB, as called for in the Bill and as suggested in one of the petitions, seems such a sensible step forward, and could have real, positive impacts on our communities, veterans, vulnerable people, pets, livestock and wildlife. It would also limit the impact of home firework displays, although I agree that we need to look again at the regulations on the sale of fireworks. Ultimately, we must make sure that people are safe.

Firework displays can still be beautiful and fun if they are a little quieter. It is about being that bit more respectful to those around us. Imagine if people who are frightened of fireworks could go and enjoy them because they are that bit quieter. That would mean that more people could enjoy what fireworks displays can offer.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I will call Dr Scott Arthur, Sarah Hall, Kirsteen Sullivan and Elsie Blundell, and then I will vacate the Chair for my replacement. I call Dr Scott Arthur.

5.42 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Pritchard; surely you are irreplaceable.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): You have 10 minutes—that is a joke.

Dr Arthur: A change in this domain is inevitable. The Government can choose to be proactive, or they will end up reacting to events—perhaps when someone is killed. It is really important to remember that.

When we had this debate last year, I spoke about the lawlessness we saw in my constituency and in Edinburgh more widely in 2024. Across the city, police officers and firefighters were attacked with fireworks, bricks and bottles, our public transport system was heavily targeted, and a red panda in Edinburgh zoo died. In my constituency, disorder in areas that included Sighthill, Oxbgangs, Calder Road and Broomhouse left my constituents terrified and afraid to leave their houses, and a care home, petrol station and care dealership were attacked. It is shameful that disorder of that level took place, and that it was in large part fuelled by easy access to large stocks of fireworks.

In 2024, after that disorder, I visited the police. They issued me with photographs of fireworks they had confiscated from a gentleman who had them in the back of his van, and who was selling them to young people for a profit. In 2025, an individual was caught with £42,000-worth of fireworks that he intended to sell to people on the street. Since then, firework exclusion zones have been set up in Scotland, and those are important, but they are ultimately difficult to enforce.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important point on firework control zones. They were sold as a bit of a silver bullet, but unfortunately I heard from fire chiefs and police officers during my time as a councillor that they had been given no additional resources or funding to enforce them. That is surely a must.

Dr Arthur: Absolutely. The planning and resourcing that goes into enforcing these zones in Edinburgh is absolutely incredible, and I thank the police for the work they do—they often face real risks.

We have to tackle the import and sale of fireworks. Last year, in response to the events of 2024, my office undertook a local campaign where we wrote to all the supermarkets asking them to end their sale of fireworks. I thank Hannah from my office for doing that. I am proud that all the major supermarkets in Edinburgh South West have stopped selling fireworks—that is a fantastic achievement. The same is true across much of the city, because my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) were able to copy what we did and achieve the same in their constituencies.

Around that time, I was copied into an email from the British Fireworks Association to the chief executive of Asda, which had just agreed to stop selling fireworks in my constituency. The email said that the people behind the campaign in Edinburgh South West—my constituents—were from very small, ill-informed and vocal self-interest groups. These are pet lovers, veterans—we have a lot of veterans in my constituency—people who may be neurodiverse and people who have simply had enough. The email said that regulations ensure that customers are purchasing fireworks from a trusted source, often with clear instructions and safety warnings. “Often with instructions”—it is absolutely incredible.

Thankfully, with the supermarkets’ help, the situation across Edinburgh South West really improved in 2025, and I thank them. While the police were called to some antisocial behaviour incidents, those involved dispersed when officers arrived and no serious offences were committed. That may be because the police were able to prosecute quite a number of people who had been caught. I cannot commend strongly enough the work of community groups and the police in the build-up to 5 November last year. Many months of work paid off, and I am proud of the small contribution that my office made. The level of violence in Edinburgh South West was much lower, at least in part because it was harder to buy fireworks.

The Government have to look at that and think about the role of organised displays, such as Edinburgh’s Diwali and Hogmanay displays, as well as those organised by groups such as the Currie, Balerno and District

[Dr Arthur]

Round Table. The Government must think about whether anybody else really needs to be able to buy fireworks. Do we want to be proactive as a Government and keep people safe, or wait until more people are injured? It is incumbent on the Government to act. The Netherlands started 2026 with a fireworks ban. Would it not be great if this country did the same to start 2027?

5.47 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. When I come to Parliament, I try to bring my constituents with me—not just their names on a petition, but their views, experiences and the reality of life on their streets. In shaping my contribution to this debate, I asked constituents to share their thoughts and experiences of fireworks as they are used today. Many people spoke about animals and their pets: dogs and cats traumatised by loud bangs, hiding for days, injuring themselves in panic or becoming permanently anxious. Other people raised the wider impact on wildlife and livestock, and the distress caused when explosions happen without warning. I also heard from parents about their children with autism and other disabilities, for whom the noise is overwhelming and frightening, often leading to meltdowns and heightened anxiety. Many people expressed concerns about the impact on veterans and others living with PTSD.

Fireworks are no longer confined to one or two predictable nights. Constituents describe them being set off throughout the year, often late at night and often without notice. That unpredictability makes it almost impossible to prepare—to calm a distressed animal, support a vulnerable child or simply feel settled in one's own home. Fireworks are explosives, and we already accept that they need regulation, but the clear message from my constituents is that the balance is no longer right. No one who contacted me wants fireworks banned outright; they ask for better regulation that reflects how fireworks are used today. There is strong support for quieter fireworks, including silent options, and for a shift towards organised, licensed displays with clear start and end times. These approaches do not end tradition; they make it safer, more predictable and more considerate of others. We have a strong tradition of celebration and commemoration in this country, from bonfire night at Thelwall parish hall to ringing in the new year with Big Ben and celebrating Diwali and lunar new year.

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I love new year's fireworks, and I recall how enjoyable my local council-run fireworks always were. However, as someone who has had fireworks thrown at them and gets similar reports from constituents, I know how terrifying they can be. It definitely seems that we need more regulation. Constituents complain that because fireworks are not considered serious, the police do not necessarily come when called, or they only come a few days later.

Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the appeal of personal firework displays is that many local councils such as my own have had to cut their budget for firework displays and can no longer hold them, while other firework displays end up being ticketed so people across the area cannot necessarily participate?

Sarah Hall: I agree, and I think this needs to be considered in the round. If regulations are put in place, funding will absolutely be needed to fill the gap.

For too many people, fireworks no longer mean celebration; they mean disruption and nights without sleep. This debate is not about banning joy; it is about listening carefully to the people we represent and asking whether our laws still reflect the reality on our streets, in our towns and in our villages. People are not asking us to end fireworks; they are asking us to regulate them better. That is a reasonable request from my constituents and from thousands of others across the country.

5.51 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, Ms Jardine, to serve under your chairship today, and I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for presenting these petitions on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is clear that there is a strength of feeling about fireworks, not only in this place but up and down the country—not least with the 345 of my constituents who have signed the petitions.

As we have heard, fireworks can have absolutely devastating impacts on our neighbourhoods, leaving families afraid to go out, homes and drivers under attack, and animals in terror. For years Blackburn, in my constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow, was known to be a hotspot for dangerous bonfire night disorder. Emergency services came under attack, fireworks were routinely used as weapons, and residents were frightened in their own streets and their own homes. When I first became a councillor in 2017, I learned very quickly the depth of fear, frustration and anger within the community. At one memorable public meeting, anger at perceived inaction threatened to boil over into hostility. However, despite the fact that illegal firework sales were talked about widely and there were numerous incidents involving them, police and fire officers had not received any reports. There was a bit of a light-bulb moment as everybody realised that they had a part to play in making Blackburn a safer place around bonfire night.

Instead of allowing frustration to fester, everyone came together. Police and fire services co-ordinated their response with other services, including various council departments and members of the Blackburn community. That led to the establishment in 2019 of the Blackburn bonfire night action group. It worked throughout the year to provide diversionary activities for young people, and to co-ordinate police and fire planning and response alongside that of other services. Crucially, proactive community engagement increased reporting of criminal activity such as illegal sales of fireworks, the creation of dangerous bonfires, and incidents including fireworks being thrown at drivers, pets and so on. In subsequent years, Crimestoppers saw a major increase in reports from worried residents. The group worked because it was a genuine partnership, shaped and driven by the people who lived in the village—people who for years had felt terrorised by a small minority that was hell-bent on causing chaos and fear in the lead-up to 5 November.

Although the problems have not been completely eradicated, there has been a vast improvement on the scenes of 2017 and 2018. The Blackburn bonfire night action group has received national recognition for its work, being praised in the Scottish Parliament for reducing

antisocial behaviour during bonfire season. I commend everyone who has played a part in the initiative for their commitment and effort in addressing what has been a very complex issue.

Ultimately, people in our communities and our neighbourhoods know exactly what is going on, and they are the ones who have to live with the consequences. Fireworks policies must be made with communities and not imposed on them, and councils in Scotland and other vital public services, such as Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, must be resourced and funded to deliver those policies. Communities such as Blackburn deserve nothing less.

5.54 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to raise of the views of my constituents, more than 650 of whom signed the first of the two petitions being considered today. Many of those constituents made their views known to me, this weekend and previously, after I made it clear that I would be speaking in this debate.

Whether on 5 November, new year's eve or Eid, fireworks are part of our story and have become interwoven in this country's rich history. So many people enjoy these colourful displays, but some are filled with anxiety each time November comes around. Whether they are veterans working to overcome what they have had to endure while serving, those who work shifts or irregular hours, or families with young children, people have legitimate reasons for being concerned—not only about the level of noise involved, but about the frequent spillover into the days and weeks prior to or after the events themselves. Bonfire night is no longer just a night; as we all know, displays—organised or otherwise—take place throughout the winter months, much to the consternation of many in our communities.

We must also consider the fact that a small but dangerous minority misuse fireworks in antisocial behaviour that strikes fear into the heart of many vulnerable residents and adds further pressure to our emergency services, which are already under considerable strain. It is clear that some individuals have lost sight of what these events are all about; they instead use fireworks to intimidate and threaten, putting themselves and those around them at serious risk.

That is without considering the impact that weeks upon weeks of explosions have on our family pets, local wildlife and biodiversity. One constituent, Pete Knowles, from the Stoney Hill community wildlife area, said that in summer, barely a week goes by without disturbance to wildlife, pets and people in our area. He made clear the acute risk to hibernating wildlife, the local bat population, and nocturnal species such as badgers, foxes and wood mice.

Countless constituents have written to each of us to let us know of the damage that fireworks do to their family members, and I truly believe that we have to find a way to continue our enjoyment while remaining aware of people who hold such strong and genuine opposing views. That requires both common sense and compassion. We need to consider how we can further limit the use of fireworks outside of holidays, so that people do not need to endure weeks of potential anguish. We must also strengthen local enforcement in the run-up to

events and crack down on retailers that sell fireworks to anyone under the age of 18. We all know that that continues to happen, and it needs to stop.

We must look more closely at the actions of countries that have legislated for a reduction in firework noise from 120 dB to 90 dB. Some of the explosions are too loud, and we need to remember that behind every door could well be a person or animal being tormented. Finally, by enforcing laws that are already in place, we must prohibit the bulk buying and stockpiling of fireworks. There is no need for it, and it must be urgently curtailed.

As I said, fireworks can bring people together, but there are many who should not have to continue to endure the status quo. It would be remiss of us, as parliamentarians, to stand here again next year and indulge in the same debate without having achieved anything in the interim. I hope that the Minister can touch on some of these points in her closing remarks. I thank my Heywood and Middleton North constituents for their candour in relaying their views on this issue.

5.58 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the more than 1,000 Shipley constituents who signed the petitions.

The antisocial use of fireworks is a blight on our communities. Since I was elected a year and a half ago, hundreds of constituents have contacted my office. They have been in touch from across the constituency—from Baildon, Bingley, Wilsden, Wrose, Cottingley and Cullingworth. They tell me that loud fireworks keep them awake at night, and cause distress to young and old, as well as to pets and farm animals. For one veteran I met, who suffers with PTSD, they retraumatise him every time.

I have campaigned vociferously to put a stop to this. I have written to Ministers, spoken to the local police, met with campaign groups and raised the matter in Parliament on multiple occasions. In October, I launched my own petition, calling for a reduction in the legal decibel limit for fireworks sold in the UK. That petition is now supported by almost 5,000 people. This is a massive issue, and it needs to be addressed.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I shared my hon. Friend's petition with my constituents, and I thank her for her campaigning on that issue. On the general petitions website for this Parliament, there are 199 petitions with "fireworks" somewhere in the description. That is an incredible number when we consider that there are 601 on the NHS, which is a huge issue, 553 on housing and 367 on immigration. Does she agree that, compared with those other issues, this one is relatively easy to fix, and that the Government should grasp it?

Anna Dixon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am sure that the Minister will have heard his plea, along with those made by other Members.

To be clear, this is not about stopping anyone enjoying fireworks. I enjoy good fireworks as much as the next person—in fact, the sparkler is my favourite. Bonfire night, new year's eve, Diwali, Eid—these festivities are part of our social fabric, and celebrating them brings us together as families, friends and communities. This is about tackling the antisocial use of fireworks.

[Anna Dixon]

I am proud that the previous Labour Government did a lot on this issue. The Fireworks Regulations 2004 imposed curfews on fireworks, restricted their sale to certain times of the year for unlicensed sellers, and outlawed their use in public places. When we were last in power, we made great strides, but further change is well overdue. As many of my Shipley constituents would tell us, the antisocial use of fireworks persists, despite the best efforts of Bradford council, trading standards, the fire service and the police in enforcing the current law. In the run-up to bonfire night, some £10,000-worth of fireworks were seized from rogue sellers by West Yorkshire police. Thanks to the tireless work of the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service, along with partners in the community, on prevention and education, most celebrations in Bradford last year went off without incident.

Other Members—in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume)—have spoken with great passion about safety concerns, and I support a lot of what has been said today, but the most important area, where we want action, and soon, is noise. The volume of fireworks available for sale in the UK is 120 dB, and many Members have spoken powerfully about the need to reduce the noise. That could easily be achieved by a simple amendment to regulation 8 of the Fireworks Regulations, which already prohibits the supply, purchase or possession of category 3 fireworks whose noise levels exceed 120 dB. Furthermore, I would support a ban on the general sale of category 3 fireworks and limiting them to authorised events in the same way as category 4 fireworks.

I urge the Government to make these changes, and I urge the Minister to work closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who I commend for all her work, to find a way to change the law to reduce the distress that fireworks cause to people, veterans and pets—and to all of us, so that we can all get a good night's sleep.

6.2 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) on his breakneck introduction, in which he took so many interventions on this massive issue. He was right, as many other Members have been, to observe that we have had these debates year on year. I remember being sat across the Chamber while we were in opposition, I remember being sat in the Minister's seat a year ago, and now I am here again. Every year, we get more and more Members attending, and more and more members of the public demanding change. I think the case has been made that it is now time to act.

It is interesting to note that despite an increased awareness campaign in the last year, there were 550 child admissions to A&E on bonfire night for burns alone. That shows us that education and information can only get us so far. As we have heard, there are adverse impacts from using fireworks responsibly as well. People are impacted by the noise. For some, fireworks are a nuisance and can interrupt sleep or leisure; for others, particularly those with sensory challenges or conditions such as PTSD, bangs can be harmful. With that in mind, I understand why some want greater restrictions on who can put on displays and on the days on which they can do so.

In my time as the Minister responsible for product regulation, I engaged with businesses, consumer groups and charities to gather evidence on the issues with and impacts of fireworks. I also met with a number of MPs, some of whom are here today, to hear about the impact that fireworks were having in their communities. Of course, there was a wide range of views about what could be done, but my view, when I embarked on those discussions, was that, as a minimum, a relatively straightforward change that we could make would be to reduce the decibel level from 120 dB. Nothing I heard during those discussions, and nothing I have heard during the debate today, changed my view that we should take that straightforward step. The precise level should be determined by consultation, but we have heard strong cases this evening for what that level should be. That would reduce the noise, and the impact on people and animals, without harming manufacturers or impacting the quality of displays.

There have been plenty of other suggestions. One of the petitions calls for a limit on sales to local authority-approved events only. Other suggestions include limiting locations, days and times at which fireworks can be released. However, it is clear to me that those kinds of measures do not work unless we get enforcement properly resourced. The experience in Scotland was instructive: we can tighten the rules, but it does not necessarily deliver change. The reality is that trading standards is overstretched and underfunded, meaning that any form of close monitoring of fireworks sales will be very difficult. I do not think that there is a consensus on how best to move forward on that. There is also a concern that that would simply move sales into the black market.

Reducing decibel levels, as New Zealand has done, is a straightforward, simple step that we can take. I will be candid: I think that some in the Government hold the view that taking action on this is seen as nanny-statism. I think that view is wrong. When I hear today that we are looking to consult on banning social media for under-16s, I do not think that the nanny-statism argument can be consistently held any longer, so I will continue to advocate for a reduction in decibel levels. Sadly, I was not able to do that when I was in office, but I am convinced that taking this step would affect those most impacted by noise—those with certain mental health conditions, those who are neurodiverse and those who care about the welfare of animals—and could be done without taking anything away from the people who enjoy fireworks.

I wish the Minister well in trying to navigate the competing views and administrative blockages that she will face, but I hope that she will come to the same conclusion that I did: that the easiest and best way to address this issue is through a reduction in decibel levels. As we have seen from the consensus across Westminster Hall today, and the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), this will happen through Parliament, whether via Government or Back-Bench action, so I urge the Minister to act now.

6.7 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley

(Robbie Moore) for the way in which he laid out the debate, and the petitioners for taking the time to give us their views.

As we have heard, fireworks can be a source of entertainment and play a very important role in cultural celebrations, but, sadly, for many people and animals they are a source of anxiety, distress and danger. Product safety and the sale of fireworks are consumer safety issues and so reserved to Westminster. Current regulations prohibit the sale of fireworks to the public except during certain periods of the year: Chinese new year, Diwali, bonfire night and new year. However, the easing of restrictions, while intended to allow the marking of significant cultural celebrations, creates extended periods when private backyard or back-garden displays can occur sporadically with no prior warning.

The extended easing of restrictions over bonfire night has been highlighted by veterans charities as a particular point of concern. The bright flashes of light, loud bangs and smell of smoke lingering in the air can trigger PTSD in veterans. Moreover, that period of sale coincides with the period during which we remember those who have fallen in war and compounds the distress already associated with that time.

The unpredictability of backyard displays also places an unnecessary burden on vulnerable groups in our society and on pet owners, preventing them from planning ahead and putting precautions and coping strategies in place to limit the distress. In Scotland, when and where fireworks can be discharged is a devolved issue. As we have heard, some measures have been introduced to further restrict their use.

In response to the antisocial behaviour associated with fireworks, the Scottish Government's Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Act 2022 provides local authorities with the power to designate firework control zones. In Glasgow, three such zones were implemented last year between 1 November and 10 November, although, frustratingly, the bid for a zone in my constituency was rejected by Glasgow city council. Residents living within those zones have reported a calmer environment, a quieter evening and a better experience, but Glasgow as a whole still recorded the highest number of firework-related calls to the police in Scotland—in fact, double the second-highest reported number, which was in Edinburgh. Sound does not observe boundaries and does not understand the limitations of zones, and residents living in control zones noted that firework-related noise continued to be an issue, so there is a question of how to police such areas. To tackle noise and antisocial behaviour effectively, the implementation of a city-wide control zone would have made more sense, but the current legislation does not allow that, which seems to me a real problem.

The Scottish Government's 2022 Act also legislated for the establishment and implementation of a new licensing scheme, which would require members of the public to obtain a licence before being allowed to purchase, possess or use fireworks. However, at the end of last year the First Minister announced that the implementation of the scheme would be paused due to its complexity, which I understand, and the cost of introducing it.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): In my constituency, on 5 November last year we experienced not only horrific effects on animals but unacceptable

criminal conduct and large-scale chaos. Police riot vans were deployed after a 40-strong mob pelted people, local businesses and cars with explosives, and emergency services were attacked at several locations. Bonfire night is just an excuse for antisocial behaviour now, frankly, as are the weeks before and after. Does my hon. Friend agree that the SNP Scottish Government need to get a grip? Their failure to deliver the promised legislative protections has left communities such as West Dunbartonshire exposed.

Patricia Ferguson: I thank my hon. Friend. I was just saying that as well as its complexity, which I understand, another reason for not introducing licensing in the way that the Scottish Government originally wanted to was the cost, which seems particularly ironic given that they have had a record devolution settlement for the second year running. I understand his point, and his constituency neighbours mine. In previous years—fortunately not for some time now—we had instances in my constituency of thugs, frankly, using scaffolding poles to fire fireworks at the police, who ended up having to bring in the riot squad to deal with it. That kind of behaviour cannot be allowed, and any action that is taken must show understanding that not everyone is a good actor.

Apart from anything else, I do not actually think the Scottish Government's licensing scheme would work. We need measures that are easily understood and easily enforceable. As we have heard, silent or much quieter fireworks and organised displays seem to be the way forward. If we do not listen to what people are telling us, we will continue to perpetuate an environment that detrimentally affects animal welfare and the welfare of vulnerable groups in our society.

This has been an interesting and worthwhile debate, and I hope that we will all resolve, and the Minister will agree, that we should not be back here having it again next year.

6.14 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for the expert way in which he opened the debate. I think the last time I spoke in a petition debate that he led, Members across the Chamber agreed about mandatory digital ID, so I am hoping for a similar outcome today.

I thank the petitioners, Helen and Robert, everyone else who is in the Public Gallery here today, and the people across the country who have signed the two petitions. In my constituency alone, 361 people signed the petition calling for firework sales to be limited to council-approved events and 227 signed the petition calling for lower noise levels. I have also received 114 emails from Hartlepool residents, all calling for tighter controls or an outright ban on personal use. That tells us something very clear: this is not a niche concern. It is widespread and persistent across the country, including in Hartlepool.

I want to be clear from the outset that I support public firework displays. When they are organised and well managed, they bring communities together. As a child, I loved attending the firework display at Ward Jackson Park in Hartlepool. Hartlepool is fortunate to have a major public display still at Seaton Carew, supported by Hartlepool borough council and sponsored by X-energy, and I am grateful that it continues.

[Mr Jonathan Brash]

What my constituents are experiencing now, though, goes far beyond a few celebratory nights. Fireworks in Hartlepool begin in September, and intensify through October, November, December and into early January. For weeks at a time, there is no predictability and no break—and that has real consequences: children awoken night after night and elderly residents reporting fear and anxiety. In 2024, Hartlepool police was forced to issue a dispersal order on the Bishop Cuthbert estate where fireworks were being used as weapons, seriously injuring at least one young person. Pets suffer distress, and veterans and others living with trauma are affected by the sudden loud explosions.

Calling for action is not being anti-fun; it is respecting others. There is nothing nanny state about protecting the most vulnerable in our society. Limiting sales to council-approved events would bring order and safety to communities such as Hartlepool. Reducing the maximum noise level to 90 dB is a simple, common-sense approach. Quieter fireworks already exist; alternatives are available.

People in Hartlepool are not asking for celebrations to end. They are asking for balance and fairness. I urge the Minister, who I know has listened intently all afternoon, to listen to the petitions and to the messages from Members across the House and from the people of Hartlepool. The current system is not working and needs to change.

6.17 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine, and to contribute to this important debate. I enjoyed my close-up view of the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) introducing it, but I am glad to be back on the right side of the Chamber.

More than 740 constituents across Aylesbury and the villages have signed petitions raising these concerns, and I am grateful to them for doing so. That shows clearly how important this issue is to people, and to their pets, farm animals and other livestock, as we have discussed. I also pay tribute to charities such as the RSPCA and Dogs Trust, which have worked tirelessly to highlight the impact that fireworks can have. In their survey, 45% of surveyed dog owners report that their dog has been negatively affected by fireworks. During the bonfire night and Diwali period, Petlog, the UK's lost and found microchip database, recorded an 81% surge in missing dog reports compared with the prior two weeks, showing the devastating impact that fireworks can have on animals and on the households that own them.

At the same time, I acknowledge that for many families across the country—and for me—fireworks are a source of joy and celebration that mark new year, Diwali, bonfire night, Chinese new year and many other special occasions. In no way would I want to discourage those important moments where our communities come together and celebrate. We do not have enough of those. However, I recognise that the majority of people in Aylesbury and across the country want to celebrate and enjoy those moments responsibly, and I am glad that they do.

The questions seems to be how to strike the right balance between safety and welfare on the one hand and celebration on the other. The Government have

done some good work to build on; restricting the sale of fireworks to licensed traders and for certain occasions, alongside the public safety campaigns that we have seen, is a good start. I welcome the Government's ongoing engagement with consumer groups, businesses and charities to keep gathering the evidence that we need—but for many of my constituents, the evidence already feels clear and they want more action.

One constituent, Patricia Walker, wrote to me describing the distress that her household experienced on new year's eve. She said,

"Fireworks from 4 pm til 3 am, some sounding like missiles, nobody using fireworks wisely there. My dog shook for hours and was sick. I was up all night. Not responsible or appropriate".

I ask the Minister to look at three points that have been raised with me. First, as we have heard from others, there is a strong case for reviewing the maximum permitted noise level for consumer fireworks. At present it stands at 120 dB, but that is far louder than is necessary to enjoy the visual celebration. Campaigners and petitioners have called for a reduction to 90 dB; since low-noise fireworks are already widely available, that would not stop celebrations, but it would significantly reduce the harm to animals and the distress to people. Of course, we would need to make sure that that limit was enforceable online as well as in shops.

Secondly, I ask that we look again at how the existing limits on times and days are enforced and whether further clarity might be needed. Many of the most distressing experiences arise from not just one evening, but fireworks being set off repeatedly over several days or late into the night. Clearer enforcement and better public awareness around permitted use would help ensure that more responsible behaviour becomes the norm.

Thirdly, there is more we can do to improve predictability and consideration for others, particularly people who live near farms, stables and animal sanctuaries. Stronger guidance on, or encouragement of, advanced notification of firework use would allow animal owners and vulnerable residents to take simple steps to prevent harm to them. That is already happening in some areas, but it could be promoted much more widely, including in Aylesbury and the villages, and would go a long way to help. I am grateful for the Minister's consideration—I know she has been listening carefully during this long debate—and I look forward to hearing her responses.

6.21 pm

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for securing this important debate and speaking so passionately on the issue.

Every year in the weeks leading up to bonfire night on 5 November people suffer life-changing injuries and animals and people suffer stress and fear, which continues throughout the winter. Guy Fawkes night celebrates a failed terrorist attack on the very building we are sitting in. Had it succeeded, the Palace of Westminster would have been destroyed and hundreds of lives would have been lost. Is that really a tradition that we should continue to celebrate in the 21st century?

More than 600 of my constituents have signed the two petitions to reduce firework noise and limit sales. I wholeheartedly support those measures, but I would

go further, as the Government in the Netherlands have recently done. As of 1 January, the sale and detonation of fireworks is illegal in the Netherlands, due to the large amount of deaths and serious injuries they cause. One physician spoke of treating a patient in Amsterdam who was “clutching their own eyeball” after a firework injury. The Government there rightly decided that that could not continue. Germany, the Republic of Ireland and many Spanish cities have also implemented heavy restrictions on the sale and use of fireworks. It is time that Britain caught up.

In previous debates on this subject I have spoken of my 20-year career in the NHS, where I saw many, mostly young, people coming into hospital with life-changing injuries, including loss of fingers, limbs or sight. Fireworks are putting increased pressure on our already overstretched NHS, while causing long-term harm to people who have suffered those injuries.

The impact on pets and livestock is both horrendous and heartbreaking. Animals have much more acute hearing than people and are sensitive to high-pitched and sudden loud noises. According to the British Veterinary Association and other surveys, more than 60% of dog and cat owners say their pets are negatively impacted by fireworks and, as a cat owner, I can relate to that.

Local charities and pet rescues such as Stourbridge RSPCA, Stour Valley Cat Rescue and CatsMatter have told me of heartbreaking cases of pets suffering from firework noise. Since 2021, at least 26 horses have died and hundreds more have been injured in the UK as a result of firework-related incidents. There are many cases of cows, chicken, deer and other animals facing awful injuries due to fireworks. Sadly, the Animal Welfare Act has failed to provide sufficient protection against such appalling acts of animal cruelty. It is often difficult to compile enough evidence that the use of fireworks is causing significant suffering, or to prove who set off a firework in a busy urban neighbourhood or where there is a crowd involved.

The petitions highlight the growing support for stronger restrictions on the sale and use of fireworks. A recent YouGov poll found that 91% of those surveyed were open to replacing fireworks with drones or light shows. We cannot keep pretending that fireworks are just harmless fun. Our constituents have spoken, the evidence is overwhelming and the suffering is undeniable. Other nations have acted with courage and compassion; Britain should not be the outlier that shrugs its shoulders while people are maimed and animals are terrified just for the sake of a few minutes of noise and light. Let us build a future where celebration does not come at the cost of people's wellbeing or animal welfare. Let us ban the public sale and detonation of fireworks, and save them for public organised displays.

6.25 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening this debate. Rochdale has the second highest number of signatures of all constituencies in the country on the petition to limit the sale of fireworks to approved events only—813 people. If we add the 222 who also signed the petition calling for a lower maximum noise level, there are more than 1,000 people in my constituency who take this issue very seriously.

As many hon. Members have said, fireworks are meant to be a cause of celebration but for far too many animals, pet owners and other humans they are a cause of distress and terror. My dog Oscar, like so many others, is absolutely terrified of fireworks. I used to be able to handle that, because the use of fireworks was a rare event, but now it is not a one-off every now and then; it is a regular event, all year round.

Constituents such as Marina Berry from Wardle in my constituency have been in touch with their stories, including of panicking dogs at risk of heart attacks and horses running into barbed wire and causing themselves injury. The data shows that 41% of UK dog owners say that their dog is afraid of fireworks—that is 4 million dogs—while 35% more dogs go missing on bonfire night than on any other night of the year, as do 22% more cats. Janet Gough from Littleborough wrote to me to say

“they started in the middle of October, every night... They are so loud my dog is now a nervous drooling wreck, I'm scared she will have a heart attack or something—it's getting out of control now.”

Janet is absolutely right: it is out of control now.

I love a fireworks display as much as anyone else. They can be beautiful and spectacular. In Rochdale, we have many displays that we are proud of: the bonfire night celebrations with fireworks on Cronkeyshaw common, at Littleborough cricket club, and at Milnrow cricket club. Everyone enjoys them and no one wants to be a killjoy, but for so many people fireworks are not a matter of joy; they are a matter of fear.

The use of fireworks has gone far beyond being enjoyed a couple of days a year. Many in my constituency have written to say that they heard fireworks every night throughout the autumn months, and often far past the curfew. Such late-night use affects not just pet owners, but shift workers, families with young children, families with children with special needs or autism, and the elderly. Charities supporting veterans have repeatedly raised awareness of the effect that fireworks can have on those with PTSD, as has been said in this debate. Research by Combat Stress and Help for Heroes found that 74% of veterans want tighter restrictions on the days and times when fireworks can be used. Theresa Mitchell, head of the “Hidden Wounds” therapy service for veterans, said:

“Sudden, loud noises, unpredictable flashes of light and the smell of bonfires and fireworks can trigger anxiety. Some people may feel on edge and overwhelmed, others may be reminded of moments in combat and can be troubled by past traumatic events.”

Those former servicemen and women are not snowflakes; they are people who did their duty for this country and they deserve to be treated with respect. Almost a quarter of military veterans say that fireworks have triggered a negative experience for them.

Children suffer too: some 343 children needed specialist burns care between 2019 and 2023—that is specialist burns care in a hospital with a specialist consultant, separate from the thousands who are injured every year.

We should also not forget the impact on our firefighters. The Fire Brigades Union says that, every year, the consequences of fireworks—fires, injuries and the spread of fear—have a direct impact on its members. It says of the current law:

“it is our members who are put into dangerous situations trying to deal with the consequences.”

[Paul Waugh]

I have full sympathy for local law enforcement officers, who are already short of resources, trying to enforce the curfews under the current law. The problem is that loud fireworks can effectively be bought by anyone, wherever they like, and set off anywhere. This, ultimately, is also a matter of respect: respect for our neighbours. Most people who hold firework displays for weddings and birthdays, for example, probably are not even aware of the distress that they are causing—but they need to be made aware of it.

I am a Labour and Co-operative party MP, and it is worth pointing out that, years ago, the Co-Operative Group decided to impose a total ban on the sale of fireworks after work with animal charities. Other retailers should take note of that and take action, before any change in the law.

Fireworks at important recognised events throughout the calendar year, such as bonfire night, Diwali, Eid al-Fitr, new year's eve and Chinese new year, could all still be celebrated, as lots of people have said today, with lower noise levels, with low-noise and no-bang fireworks. Knowing that those specific events are coming up gives pet owners time to prepare for the possibility of noise disruption.

Fireworks are often a way to bring people together but, sadly, they are currently tearing people apart. With tighter restrictions in place, we can do something: we can protect pets, wildlife, and human beings too.

Christine Jardine (in the Chair): Thank you. If contributors could please keep to the informal time limit, it would be a huge help. After Ruth Jones, I will call Rachael Maskell and then Tom Hayes.

6.31 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing these important petitions, because the sale and use of fireworks is of great concern to my constituents and is frequently one of the top issues in my postbag. Over the last year, I have received correspondence from residents right across my patch, from Newbridge to Blackwood, Abercarn, Cefn Fforest, Risca, Rogerstone, Crumlin and even Bassaleg.

Given that widespread concern, I am not surprised that 700 residents in Newport West and Islwyn signed the petitions up for debate today. The petitions have clear asks: reduce the maximum noise of consumer fireworks and limit the sale of fireworks to licensed events. The changes are backed by 65% of the public, as well as a broad coalition of charities, and could easily be introduced through amendments to regulations. Critically, something must be done to address local communities' lack of control, as residents can report incidents to their local councils, but they are powerless to do anything about it.

Fireworks are an important part of many celebrations and are enjoyed by millions across the UK each year, overwhelmingly at large organised displays. A startling 78% of the public have never bought fireworks, which highlights the public's general preference for the safety of organised events. Despite that, residents are still too often exposed to surprise explosions late at night—unexpected loud bangs that startle children, distress

older people and frighten pets and livestock. Vulnerable groups, including children with sensory needs, older residents living alone, or those managing health conditions or trauma are particularly affected. Sudden firework blasts can also be deeply distressing for many veterans; 93% of those living with PTSD say that fireworks negatively impact them, and Help for Heroes found that almost a quarter of veterans reported fireworks triggering negative experiences, including panic attacks; similarly, Combat Stress, the veterans charity, sees a 25% spike in helpline calls around Diwali and bonfire night.

Loud fireworks are also a significant concern to pet owners and livestock farmers, as the unexpected explosions and flashes of bright light panic animals into desperate attempts to find safety. These instinctive reactions risk animals fleeing into traffic, injuring themselves or getting lost. As we have already heard, Petlog found that the number of missing dogs doubled between 27 October and 10 November in 2024. Appropriate restrictions on the use and sale of fireworks are essential to safeguard animals' health and welfare.

Further consideration is also required for the risks posed by the household use of fireworks. While organised displays often use trained professionals and adhere to rigorous health and safety requirements, such protections are not always in place for small events or family gatherings. In 2025, there was a fourfold increase in firework-related burns to children and the highest admittance rates to A&E in a decade, with 550 children admitted in the four weeks around bonfire night. Those stark statistics cannot be ignored.

I need to declare an interest here: as a former physiotherapist working in a burns and plastic surgery unit, I have seen at first hand the long-term difficulties and disfigurement that these injuries cause. These children face a lifetime of impairment. I therefore call on the Minister to heed these clear concerns and the overwhelming evidence supporting a change of approach. Ministers must update the Fireworks Regulations 2004. I look forward to the Minister outlining a clear timetable for these desperately needed changes. We cannot be here again after 5 November this year. Let's get it done now.

6.35 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I thank the 636 constituents of mine who signed the petitions. Guy Fawkes hailed from my constituency; in 1605, he came to this place to set the building alight. That sort of antisocial behaviour is what we are talking about today—the harms, not the goods, that come from fireworks. There are two key areas: impact and safety. The whizz, the crackles, and especially the bangs have an impact on animals, people who are neurodiverse and those with mental health challenges or trauma. We have heard about the consequences of that in this debate, and putting in restrictions to safeguard people's and animals' wellbeing is a logical step. I welcome set dates, reducing fireworks' decibel volume from 120 dB to 90 dB, and ensuring that only licensed public events put on displays, to safeguard all our communities.

Having personally experienced a firework being lobbed at me when I was cycling home from this place one night, I certainly believe that we need to ensure that they are placed in the hands only of those who hold a licence. However, I want to turn to another event: the new year

tragedy at Le Constellation bar in the ski resort of Crans-Montana in Switzerland, in which 40 young people lost their lives and 100 were hospitalised. It demands a response from this place too.

Over the weekend, I read the research from Professor Ed Galea, who identified 38 similar fires that have claimed about 1,200 lives since the year 2000. Fifteen involved some form of pyrotechnics, and 13 involved the acoustic foam that was present in the Switzerland case. That places new questions on our regulations on using fireworks indoors. We see a sparkler on a birthday cake, someone flambéing food or special effects at theatres as perfectly innocent occurrences, but the events of new year's day must cause us all to question whether our regulations are fit for purpose for the future.

Although we have pressed on outdoor fireworks in this debate, it is also important that we press on the use of indoor fireworks—it clearly takes just a spark to ignite a building and cause tragedy. Therefore, I ask the Minister also to consider the use of fireworks indoors—perhaps it is time we say no to that—and the consequences surrounding that, and the wider safety measures needed around indoor venues. Exit routes have always been highlighted in these tragedies, as well as the use of foam and cladding—of course, we remember debating that so much in this place—and the human response. Often, people stop to film these events rather than respond; instead of fleeing, they freeze in the face of a fire. We need to ensure that people have the right psychological plan when entering venues.

Of course we understand the impact of outdoor fireworks on our communities, but I ask the Minister to include in her wider consideration the impact and potential risks of indoor fireworks for our communities, and to review the regulations to ensure that we never experience a tragedy like the one that families in Switzerland sadly experienced on new year's day. Will the Minister look at the use of indoor fireworks as well as those in public displays?

6.39 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Nearly two hours into this debate, I am pleased to have the chance to speak. The fact that so many have spoken shows just how much this issue matters to our constituents. I thank the 497 people in my constituency who signed the two petitions, showing just how much this matters to Bournemouth East.

In preparing to speak today, I was struck by what some colleagues have noted: it feels like we have been debating this for a very long time. In fact, as far as I can tell, the first time that Parliament debated fireworks legislation was in 1697. The first regulations to support the public use of fireworks were in the Gunpowder and Fireworks Act 1860. As one who can be frustrated by the pace of change in Parliament, I was a bit concerned that it took just 56 calendar days to get that piece of legislation through, from the First Reading in the House of Commons to Royal Assent. We might be able to learn something from our colleagues way back in history.

In thinking about what my constituents have told me about fireworks, I am struck by the words of Sandra in Muscliff, who described some of her evenings as resembling living in a warzone. Carl, who lives in Townsend, told me at my surgery appointment at Boscombe library the other week about his and his wife's cat Chester, who

suffers significantly during noisy fireworks displays, to such an extent that he has blood in his urine, which is horrible to hear. Carl was asking what more can be done about the intensity and frequency of fireworks, and echoed an awful lot of views that I have heard from my constituents in doing so. I think also of Jeanette Shepperd, who lives in Pokesdown, who has called on me to represent her call for a limit on fireworks, particularly on the Bournemouth fireworks display, which happens annually in Litterdown, where there can be loud and unpredictable displays not just on that evening, but on the days leading up to it.

There are also people on the other side of the argument, such as Gayle on Beaufort Road in Southbourne, who is very clear that she wants a live-and-let-live approach. James in Queen's Park says that his “very, very beautiful dog Penny”—those are his words as well as mine—has never been bothered by fireworks. That tells us that we need to find a balance, between safety and welfare on one side and the ability of constituents to enjoy coming together and have happy experiences on the other. Let's face it, our country has been denied many opportunities to join together and to feel a sense of hope and happiness for a long time.

As an animal lover, I have been calling on the Government to do more. I have been calling on Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council in my area to regulate fireworks displays better and, crucially, to enforce existing rules more effectively. There is no point in making regulations if they are not enforced, and we should remember that we do have means of enforcement. The last Labour Government introduced the Fireworks Act 2003 and the Fireworks Regulations 2004, which were about restricting the antisocial use of fireworks. It has been said very well today by a number of colleagues that we are not against people being sociable, and we are not against the social use of fireworks; we are against the antisocial elements, the excessive noise and duration, the significant intensity, and the fact that we do not have reserved days for fireworks, but they happen throughout the course of the year.

I and many colleagues recognise that when one person's actions cause harm or distress to others, and when individual freedoms come into conflict, we must always consider whether the balance is right. When it is not just the owners of pets, but the beloved pets themselves who bear the consequences, all of us feel the very great need to be compassionate towards them, but this is not just about pets. As we have heard, it is also about veterans, who are triggered as a consequence of hearing loud fireworks displays. It is about pensioners and it is about shift workers; it is about a spectrum in our society.

If the Government move forward with a limitation on the quality, duration, hours and noise of fireworks displays, that would be very much in keeping with our new animal welfare strategy. One of the best things that this Government can do as part of that strategy is to look at this issue again, bring forward the legislation that will finally protect animals, and make sure that we have more cohesive societies and a reduction in antisocial behaviour.

6.44 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. As all hon. Members here will know, throughout October and November our

[Josh Newbury]

inboxes and DMs fill up with messages from constituents sharing their concerns about fireworks and to what extent they should be controlled, so I welcome the chance to discuss that today. I thank the hundreds of my Cannock Chase constituents and the thousands of people across the country who lit the fuse on the two petitions. They include pet owners, parents, farmers, veterans and people with disabilities. They all ask a very simple question: why, when the harms caused by fireworks are so well evidenced, do we continue to allow their widespread sale with few meaningful restrictions?

My experience of the issue is perhaps different from that of many people who would pose that question; growing up, I enjoyed many professional displays at council-run bonfire nights, and I married into a family that considers a small fireworks display in the back garden to be a closely guarded new year's eve tradition. I do not have any pets, and my two children are about as heavy sleepers as it is possible to be. But I am also an animal welfare advocate, so I very much understand the concerns. The Kennel Club has reported an 81% increase in dogs going missing during periods when fireworks are used. Animal rescue centres continue to document animals fleeing in panic, and farmers talk of miscarriages and even deaths among livestock. And we know that wildlife disruption is very significant.

We also have to acknowledge the impact on people. Parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities have told me how distressing it can be when fireworks are set off late at night, especially without warning; how difficult it can be to calm a child in sensory overload; and the effects that can be felt for days and days afterwards. For many veterans and survivors of trauma living with PTSD, fireworks season means the exact opposite of celebration. The organisation Combat Stress has extensive research on how certain bangs, flashes, whistles, smoke and smells can replicate the sights and sounds of warfare. It is telling that polling shows that 74% of veterans support further restrictions on when fireworks can be set off. If we had concrete nationwide statistics on the amount of time and money our police and firefighters spend dealing with accidental and criminal fireworks-related incidents, that would also add strength to the arguments for action on this issue.

Most people, it must be said, use fireworks responsibly, and there are restrictions on what they can buy and who can buy. Yet the fact that we hear the same concerns raised consistently year after year tells us that doing nothing is no longer an option. Members of the public can buy fireworks as loud as 120 dB, roughly the equivalent to a jet engine taking off. As anyone who has been a councillor will know, noise limits are difficult to enforce unless the disruption is repeated, and with sales increasingly happening online information and advice is more and more difficult to give.

Having once been confined to a few days of the year, many of my constituents have noted, the fireworks season is getting longer and longer every year, so I agree with calls to limit firework sales and use to specific periods of the year. I also wholeheartedly support the e-petition that calls for a 90 dB limit on fireworks. The petitions we are debating reflect a shift in public opinion. People are not calling for the end of celebration, but a more balanced approach.

Before I conclude, I acknowledge the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who, as we have heard, has introduced a Fireworks Bill that I think makes sensible, proportionate proposals. I welcome the fact that Ministers are listening and reviewing the evidence from animal welfare organisations, veterans' charities, parents, local authorities and the public, which I believe is clear. My ask of the Government is this: commit to meaningful reform. We should reduce permitted noise levels, tackle the ballooning length of fireworks season and tighten controls on sales. Our understanding of animal welfare has evolved. Our awareness of trauma and neurodiversity has grown. Technology has moved on and public expectations have changed. It is entirely reasonable and in fact necessary for the law to evolve, too.

6.48 pm

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I love watching fireworks, whether it is at East Ardsley cricket club, Morley rugby club for bonfire night or at the Gildersome and Drighlington Christmas lights switch-on events. They are spectacular, certainly when part of an organised display. My son Arthur, who is a year old now, absolutely loved the ones in Gildersome last year and I am certain he would have said thank you to the parish council if he were able.

In the past, I have also tuned in to watch the fireworks in London on new year's eve on TV, but these days I typically watch them all go off in unison across Leeds from Wortley. I want to be clear that I approach this debate as somebody who enjoys fireworks as much as anybody else, but for a long time now it has become clear that something is not right.

My constituents have been contacting me in great numbers to state that both the volume and frequency of firework use have increased. Consequently, fireworks are having a much more negative impact on constituents' lives than they used to. Their freedom to live their lives in peace is being restricted at certain times of the year, and it is not just when the big events are on; it is actually the weeks and months of fireworks before and after those events that are driving people to contact me.

Fireworks are set off every day for a whole week straight, and from the same location. There are loud explosions every night, lasting for days on end. People with PTSD, those with special educational needs, and those with pets or other animals constantly have to mitigate the impact of fireworks on their lives. The freedom to buy and use fireworks needs to be balanced against the freedom to live our lives in peace. Fireworks affect people in different ways. One of my constituents, Gareth, has been diagnosed with autism. He told me that fireworks give him sleepless nights and put him in a state of high alert, especially when he cannot plan for when they are going to be set off.

We have also heard repeatedly from Members across the Chamber about another group affected by fireworks. The charity Combat Stress says that 74% of the veterans it surveyed want restrictions on when fireworks can be set off. I have spoken to a veteran in my constituency who served our country with great distinction. I will share their words with the House now:

"November arrives, and I have to adapt my routine to make sure I've always got headphones in my pocket...Otherwise I'll be taken straight back to being on tour, experiencing feelings and emotions that I'd rather never encounter again.

Fireworks trigger the memories, the sounds, the gunfire...scenes replay over and over with every firework. The smell comes back, the noise, the image, the grief....Whilst I understand the joy fireworks bring some and the heritage and history of our country that we should hold on to, I fail to see why they need to be so loud.

I am greatly in favour of planned firework displays, so I know what time they're going to go off and I can plan ahead... and be ready with my headphones.

I would urge a reduction in the maximum noise allowed and the sale only to be for organised displays."

Ahead of this debate, I received so many comments from constituents, but I wanted to share those words as they get to the heart of the argument that has been made today.

At this point, I have some questions for the Minister. First, do the Government have any plans to reduce the noise that fireworks make? In addition, do the Government plan to go any further and restrict the sale of fireworks, so that only people using them as part of organised professional displays can get their hands on them? My constituents have also asked me to talk about the enforcement of existing laws. What can the Government do to ensure that no fireworks are set off between 11 pm and 7 am, which is currently the law for every night of the year except key holidays? What will the Government do to crack down on those who sell fireworks illegally, which we know is happening?

Even if the current legislation was enforced, the persistent issues with the frequency and volume of fireworks would endure. My asks today are very straightforward. At a minimum, we must turn down the volume on fireworks sold to the public and enforce existing laws. Beyond that, the Government should seriously consider the merits of going further and restricting the sale of fireworks to those involved in professional displays.

We should all do our bit to support our veterans and other vulnerable constituents. We should continue to enjoy the wonderful firework displays at key times of the year; I know that I certainly will. However, we should readjust the scales to get the balance right between different freedoms: the freedom to enjoy fireworks must be carefully balanced against the freedom to live our lives in peace.

6.53 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. You were not here at the beginning, so you will not have seen that this was the most crowded Westminster Hall debate I have ever attended. It is a bit of a blast from the past to see Labour Members sitting on this side of the Chamber; we have not seen that for a while. I have to say that it is the first time I have been pleased to have a reserved seat; otherwise, I would not have been able to participate in the debate at all.

In that spirit, I particularly congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), who made a really good opening speech. I am pleased to respond to the debate on behalf of the Liberal Democrats; there can be no doubt about the strength of feeling on this issue out there in the country given the number of people who signed these particular petitions. In my constituency of Richmond Park, there were 217 signatories, but that is a relatively small number compared with some of the other numbers that we have heard about today.

The very fact that there were so many MPs in Westminster Hall for this debate shows the extent to which Parliament wants to see movement on this issue.

I am really grateful to all the Members who contributed to the debate for sharing the stories of their constituents. However, I was particularly moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), who talked about her own experiences as a veteran. That really brought home to me the impact that fireworks can have on those suffering from PTSD.

Many other hon. Members talked about the impact of fireworks on people suffering from conditions such as autism and ADHD and on shift workers. I can say from my own experience back when I was a parent of young children how terrifying it was for them and how difficult it was for them to sleep when the fireworks displays went on late into the night.

I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), who gave a really detailed description of the impact on livestock and farm animals, from which I learned a great deal. That is not a common experience in my personal inbox, but we do speak a lot in Richmond Park about the impact on pets. It was interesting to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) about his experience as a vet and that no vets want to be on duty on 5 November because they know that it will be a very traumatic night. In a similar vein, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) talked about the impact on Paignton zoo in his constituency. I can only imagine how incredibly difficult it must be to manage the animals in the zoo on nights when there are lots of fireworks around.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) talked about the actual physical dangers of fireworks and gave a very graphic description of how dumped fireworks are an enormous fire hazard. It was—"enlightening" is maybe not a great word to use—interesting to hear everybody's reflections on the different aspects of this debate.

Fireworks are a sign of celebration. In this country, we typically associate them with Guy Fawkes night, but in my constituency and, I am sure, many other London constituencies, they are increasingly let off during Diwali. I tend to hear more on new year's eve now than I do on 5 November. The occasions when people let off fireworks are increasing in frequency. Like many Members who have contributed to this debate, the Liberal Democrats certainly do not want to limit people's enjoyment of fireworks—they remain a spectacular sight and perhaps one of the best expressions of celebration that we have—but there is no doubt that fireworks can have an incredibly harmful impact.

Sarah Dyke: My hon. Friend talked about the amazing firework displays that we have across the country, but there are some fantastic alternatives to fireworks, such as demonstrations using drones and light shows. Does she agree that we should implement a noise limit on fireworks of below 90 dB for those that want to use noise fireworks, because that would make a significant difference to ensuring that people and animals in communities feel safe?

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend mentioned drones, which I know can provide really spectacular sound and light shows, but I would be slightly nervous about

[Sarah Olney]

endorsing the use of drones instead of fireworks. Richmond Park has some of the most contested airspace of anywhere in the country. We are very used to the impact of noise from aircraft in my constituency. I certainly do not want to add drones to the congestion in the skies over our heads. I will come to this shortly, but my hon. Friend is exactly right about needing to strike a balance between the enjoyment that fireworks can give and their impact on not just people, but animals.

Fireworks are explosives and can be dangerous, so there are strict rules in place regulating their sale, possession and use. They include essential safety provisions, conformity to the relevant tests and correct application of kitemarks. The 2015 regulations categorise fireworks according to their net explosive content, discharge, safety distances and noise level. Category F1 fireworks present a low hazard and are intended for use in confined areas, although they must not be sold to anyone under the age of 16. Categories F2 and F3 are low to medium hazard and intended for outdoor use. Category F4 is high hazard and can be supplied only to persons with specialist knowledge. There already exists a range of regulations, although the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley made the important point that it is hard to enforce those regulations until after the firework has exploded, by which time it will obviously be too late.

Dr Arthur: The safe distance for a category F3 firework is 25 metres, but at the point of sale no questions are asked about where these things will be ignited. Very few people in Edinburgh South West have 25 metres of space to let off a firework in their garden.

Sarah Olney: And certainly not in London, I can confirm. The hon. Member is absolutely right about the regulations that exist for the sale of fireworks, and I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether she thinks more could be done to enforce the existing regulations, as the hon. Member suggests, or whether we need to look at a wholesale change of regulations on sale to address some of the issues that Members have raised.

As I mentioned, I represent a constituency that is much blighted by aircraft noise. We know as well as anybody the impact that regular, ongoing noise, particularly late at night and early in the morning, can have on residents' health and ability to sleep, particularly young children.

Almost every Member here has called for the limit on the decibel level to be reduced it from 120 dB to 90 dB. Whatever fireworks are sold, whatever use they are intended for and whichever celebration they are intended to mark, reducing the decibel limit would strike the right balance between our human need for celebration and our need for sleep and peace of mind.

7.1 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I start by offering my gratitude to Robert and Helen, the two petitioners who—forgive the phrase—lit the fuse for these petitions to get the number of signatures they did, and enabled this debate today. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), who eloquently set out the reasons

why we need to have this debate and the issues involved, which have also been ably raised by many other representatives in this room.

This is not the first time that the House has discussed whether additional restrictions on the use of fireworks are necessary, but with more than 370,000 signatures on the two petitions, including 632 from West Worcestershire, it is clear that the public want a system that better protects people, animals and communities from the misuse of fireworks.

We have heard from almost everyone who has spoken that fireworks bring joy, and I shout out the many responsible groups up and down this country that are committed to the safe display and enjoyment of fireworks. They often raise money for good local causes. However, as we have heard so often in this debate, we cannot ignore the real problems—the dangerous misuse, the antisocial behaviour and the distress that is caused to pets, livestock, wildlife and many vulnerable people. I welcome the Government's engagement with stakeholders, and their campaign encouraging responsible use and low-decibel displays.

We have heard in all the contributions today that we are a nation of animal lovers. We are also a nation that wants to continue to enjoy firework displays, but we also heard loud and clear that no action is not the answer here. The Government will need to listen to all the points that have been made.

We have heard from across the land—from South West Hertfordshire, Dewsbury and Batley, Glastonbury and Somerton, Taunton and Wellington, Morecambe and Lunesdale, Luton North, Scarborough and Whitby, Broxtowe, North West Leicestershire, Edinburgh South West, Warrington South, Bathgate and Linlithgow, Heywood and Middleton North, Shipley, Ellesmere Port and Bromborough, Richmond Park, Glasgow West, Hartlepool, Aylesbury, Stourbridge, Rochdale, Newport West and Islwyn, Bournemouth East, Cannock Chase, Leeds South West and Morley and York Central. Every Member here this afternoon represented so well the concerns expressed to them by those in their constituency who have written to them.

We recognise that fireworks are already heavily regulated, but many of the contributions highlighted gaps in enforcement, weak penalties for illegal sales, problems with stockpiling, and the devastating consequences both for property and in terms of burns when things go wrong. The age limits on purchases, which many believe are no longer appropriate, have been shown to be not properly enforced.

There is a clear need for a proper, evidence-led review of the regulations. If reforms are proportionate and grounded in that evidence, I suspect that they will attract unanimous support from across the House. From the point of view of my party, and of many Members in this debate, although a ban on fireworks should not be a first resort, it should not be taken off the table as a last resort.

Through the petitions, the public have spoken loudly. Through their representatives in Parliament, people have spoken loudly. Parliament has raised these issues repeatedly, and communities want action. Clearly, the existing regulations are not doing what society wants them to do. I am keen to hear about how the Minister plans to respond.

7.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for leading today's important debate, which is based on two petitions, one calling for a reduction in the noise limit for consumer fireworks from 120 dB to 90 dB and another for limiting the sales of fireworks to local authority-approved displays. I have only just over 10 minutes to respond, so I might not be able to take as many interventions as the hon. Gentleman did. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), for putting on record her thanks to everyone who has spoken today—she shaved a good minute off my speech. I thank her for that contribution.

I thank all hon. Members for their brilliant contributions. It has been an interesting debate. It is one of the longest and most well attended debates that I have been to, not only since I was appointed to this role but since I was elected. That shows the strength of feeling on both sides of the House. I thank hon. Members for representing their constituents.

Like other hon. Members, I am regularly contacted by residents who have been impacted by the antisocial use of fireworks, and I thank constituents for continuing to raise the matter with me. I assure them, hon. Members, campaigners and those in the Gallery, who have been with us through this afternoon's debate, that I recognise the challenges that our communities face, and recognise the direct personal experiences that colleagues and constituents have shared.

I acknowledge the important work of Helen Whitelegg, from Redwings Horse Sanctuary, for beginning this petition as part of her organisation's work to safeguard horses and advocate for their welfare, and I thank Robert Branch for starting his petition. Animal welfare charities such as Redwings and my local RSPCA branch in Halifax have been calling for a reduction in firework decibel levels for some time. The strength of feeling among the public is clear from the number of signatures that the petitions have received, as many hon. Members have mentioned.

I pay tribute to the family of Josephine Smith, who sadly passed away in October 2021 after a firework was placed through her letterbox. I express my condolences to Josephine's family, and I am very grateful to her son Alan, whom I met earlier today, for his continued advocacy on this matter.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) for her dedicated campaigning and advocacy on this issue. I also thank her and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) for their recent private Members' Bills on fireworks misuse and on fireworks noise control.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and for Leeds North West (Katie White) for their advocacy and engagement with me since my appointment. I know how important tackling antisocial firework use is to them and their constituents.

I also want to express my gratitude to the emergency services. Our firefighters, paramedics and police officers work tirelessly to keep our communities safe during the firework season.

As we have heard from hon. Members, this time of year, and the past couple of months, can be particularly challenging for pets, veteran communities, those with PTSD, those with mental health conditions, those with autism and those who are vulnerable. Members have raised many important ideas to consider: restricting the number of days of fireworks per year; controls on volume and evening hours; date restrictions on sale, purchase and types; further promoting advance notice of firework use; and a ban on indoor fireworks.

On that point, I want to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I was so saddened to hear about the tragic fire that claimed 40 lives at new year in Switzerland. My condolences go to the families and friends of all who lost their lives in that devastating event. I understand that the investigation into the cause of the fire is ongoing; it has been reported that the authorities have banned the use of indoor pyrotechnics, which my hon. Friend spoke about.

Those suggestions were in addition to the support demonstrated here today for the topics of the e-petitions: noise level and limiting the sale of fireworks to organised displays. That strength of feeling has absolutely been heard and recognised today, and I thank Members for all their contributions.

My aim is to minimise the negative impact of fireworks and to ensure that they are used responsibly and can continue to play a role in celebrations and festivities across our country. There is no doubt that fireworks are a popular feature of community and family events and bring people together. A lot of Members have brought examples of those events to the Floor of the House today. They range from bonfire night and new year to birthdays, Eid and Diwali, among many others. Although many—77%—of our constituents enjoy using fireworks, only 15% believe that the existing regulatory framework is sufficient. Research from the Social Market Foundation found that one solution would be to reduce the noise limit for consumer fireworks. That, of course, is one of the subjects of today's debate.

The research also highlighted the potential for alternative kinds of light displays, using drones or lasers. The recent new year's eve fireworks display in London showcased an alternative, pairing fireworks with Hologauze technology. The highly reflective, silver-coated gauze reflects projected images while remaining transparent, allowing viewers to see fireworks behind the visuals. This and the use of drones show how technology is changing our experience of the traditional fireworks season and offering a more sustainable, visually rich alternative for large-scale events. We of course encourage attendance at those organised public displays.

I will touch on current legislation and safe use, and then respond to colleagues' points. Members will know that, as they are explosives, the sale and use of fireworks is extensively regulated, with controls placed on their import, storage, supply, possession and use. In Great Britain, the Fireworks Regulations 2004 introduced a package of measures to reduce the nuisance and injuries caused by the misuse of fireworks. A lot of colleagues have referred to the 11 pm to 7 am curfew on the use of fireworks. Use later in the night—to 1 am—is permitted only on the traditional firework days, which I have already mentioned. I am grateful that many councils—including Calderdale council, which covers my constituency

[Kate Dearden]

—have hard-working community safety teams in place to collect intelligence and allocate enforcement officers to hotspots of antisocial usage.

The Pyrotechnic Articles (Safety) Regulations 2015 contain provisions about the manufacture, import and distribution of pyrotechnics across the UK. That includes labelling, conformity assessment testing and other requirements to ensure the products' safety. The legislation also sets out the requirement for manufacturers to ensure that their products do not exceed the 120 dB noise limit.

Robbie Moore: The Minister need not panic, because we have this room until 7.30 pm and so there is plenty of time for her to carry on speaking and to take interventions. She is kindly outlining the legislation that is currently in place, but it is not working. We know that there is a threshold of 11 pm on most nights, but across Keighley, Silsden and the Worth valley, I have constituents who experience fireworks going off throughout the night and throughout the year. Could the Minister explain what action the Government will be taking in response to the petitions that have been debated today?

Kate Dearden: I thank the hon. Member for the reassurance about time. I absolutely recognise the need for enforcement—colleagues have mentioned the existing framework and the regulations that are in place. I will get to the consideration that we are making as a Department of further legislation and regulations, as suggested in the e-petitions, when I focus on antisocial behaviour and the comments that colleagues have made today.

Hon. Members will be aware that retailers storing fireworks must be licensed to do so and are able to sell them to consumers only for a limited period around seasonal celebrations. Retailers who wish to sell fireworks to the public outside those periods must obtain an additional selling licence from their local licensing authority. The brilliant local trading standards and fire and rescue authorities in metropolitan counties like West Yorkshire can take action against those storing or selling fireworks without an appropriate licence. They work closely with retailers to ensure that the fireworks being sold are safe, and they have powers to enforce against those who place non-compliant fireworks on the market.

I am grateful to have met with the Calderdale district fire service to understand the role they play in reducing risk and engaging with my local community. As a Minister, I will also continue to engage with colleagues, stakeholders and organisations on a national level to ensure that this Labour Government continue to work with the Health and Safety Executive and local authorities, including Border Force and trading standards, to take action against anyone who imports or sells fireworks illegally in the UK. That enforcement is important, as is providing them with the resources they need to do their jobs.

As many colleagues have said, among those most impacted by the illegal and antisocial use of fireworks are our pets and veteran community. Colleagues have given some real, personal examples; my labrador Bruno is one of the many dogs that have been deeply impacted by fireworks in recent months. Since October, I have been contacted by hundreds of colleagues from across

this House, by charities and campaigners, and by more than 100 constituents who have shared their experiences, including one who had to move away from their home during peak firework periods to protect their family pet. That engagement as a constituency MP, and the stories of colleagues here today, drives my work as a Minister to minimise the negative impact of fireworks.

Following my appointment, I have continued to build on the brilliant work of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), in engaging with groups, organisations, charities and businesses to gather evidence on the year-round impact of fireworks, as we have heard today. I have been continuing that engagement with a wide range of consumer groups and charities. I have also met Members of this House—I thank them for those meetings—and of the other place, and the devolved Governments: I recently met the Scottish Government to understand the recent implications of their policies to build that evidence base. We will consider the effectiveness that further legislation may have in reducing antisocial and illegal firework use, and I will continue to build on that.

Ruth Jones: The Minister has explained what has happened in the past and what is happening now, but we are interested in the future. We need legislation, and we need it before 5 November this year. May I press her for a timeline for what is going to happen next?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and for her powerful speech. I hear and understand the urgency for action, and colleagues' reflections on having been here in Westminster Hall this time last year, debating fireworks. I am not able to provide a timeline at this stage, but I would of course be happy to work with her and colleagues across the House on next steps as the Department progresses. We will be building on the work and evidence base of my predecessor, working with devolved Administrations to understand the work they are undertaking and their evidence base, and looking at examples from countries that are taking action across the globe to understand, first and foremost, how we can safeguard our communities.

Safety is paramount. One of my first acts as a Minister was to launch a public campaign during firework season, promoting considerate use and focusing on the safe use of fireworks, including their disposal. Colleagues have talked about encouraging responsible behaviour and safer celebrations at private displays.

Dr Arthur: It would be good to see an evaluation of the campaign that the Minister launched, which I thank her for running. It seems that the Government accept that there are impacts on pets and veterans, and they thank the emergency services for all they do and the risks they take on that evening, but all those people—the pet owners, veterans, emergency services and, I expect, even the Minister—must be a little frustrated that there is no timeline for even the start of some action. Does she share that frustration?

Kate Dearden: I am working at pace with my colleagues in the Department, building the evidence base, speaking to as many people as possible, and looking to understand not only those frustrations, but the real life stories that colleagues have shared, today and since I was appointed to this role, as well as those from my constituents.

Robbie Moore: What discussions has the Minister had with Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the animal welfare strategy that has been launched? I have read that strategy, and it does not really address the issue of fireworks. Given that so many animal welfare concerns have been raised, what conversations is she having with DEFRA colleagues?

Kate Dearden: I thank the hon. Member for raising animal welfare, which has come up time and again in this debate. I am proud of the strategy we launched as a Government, and work with my colleagues across Departments on a range of issues in my brief. It is an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any domestic animal under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. I understand the hon. Member's reflections and those of colleagues from across the House today on the strategy and where we might be able to go further; we will continue to engage with colleagues on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) mentioned the impact of the campaign, with a total reach of around 130,000; there is always more that we can do. I thank colleagues who shared those social media posts and the guidance that we provided with their constituents. I am keen that we always continue to build on that, regulation aside. As we promote safe and responsible usage, I will continue to work with national charities such as Combat Stress, the RSPCA, the Firework Impact Coalition, Help for Heroes and so many more to ensure that our messaging reaches the general public.

While the majority of people who use fireworks do so appropriately and have a sensible and responsible attitude towards them, as many colleagues have said, a minority of people use fireworks in a dangerous, inconsiderate and antisocial manner. We have heard some horrendous stories today highlighting examples of that. I understand the impact that inconsiderate and antisocial use can have: loud bangs are disturbing communities, particularly those with elderly residents, young children and pets, and in far too many places fireworks are set off late at night, disturbing hard-working parents, waking up children and causing terror to our most vulnerable constituents.

Dangerous misuse is a serious concern. Reports of fireworks being thrown at people—colleagues have mentioned that they have been thrown at prams—vehicles or buildings are completely unacceptable. We will continue to support the work of our council officers and police community support officers who work tirelessly to ensure that the vast majority of those who use fireworks for celebrations—

Sarah Owen: I thank the Minister for giving way on that point. As we have heard, quite often, this falls between the response of the police, post 11 o'clock—and they will not, understandably, come out unless there is a threat to life, especially with scarce resources—and the council, which will treat it as a noise pollution issue. Neither of those are suitable for dealing with nuisance fireworks. Luton council has developed, with Love Clean Streets, the ability to report firework misuse through an app. Yet councils up and down the country are unable to get that off the ground. We need councils and communities to be better resourced to report nuisance fireworks.

Kate Dearden: I agree with my hon. Friend, and that work in Luton to enable people to better report issues outside of those hours is appreciated and valued. Where we can, we should share and promote best practice. She made a valid point about the frustrations and difficulties in doing that on the enforcement side of things, and we would be keen to take that further. Tackling antisocial behaviour is a top priority for this Government. It is a key part of our safer streets mission, which is why we want to take action against those who seek chaos and terror on our streets.

Kirsteen Sullivan: In my contribution, I spoke about the contribution of people from Blackburn to changing what was going on in their community. Will the Minister reassure me that the Government will engage directly with communities, to hear from the very people whose lives are blighted by this antisocial behaviour?

Kate Dearden: I can absolutely provide that reassurance today. I want to hear from as many people and communities that have been impacted as possible, and ensure that they have the opportunity to share their stories directly with me. I thank her for raising that today, and can give her that reassurance.

John Lamont: The Minister is being exceptionally generous with her time. The reality is that we will be back here again this time next year, because there will be another petition calling for the same things. What guarantees can the Minister give about the progress that will be made between now and this time next year on the petitioners' asks—in terms of decibel levels and the licensing regime? What progress will have been made, fast-forwarding the clock to when we are having this debate this time next year?

Kate Dearden: I am always happy to meet the leads of the petition, campaigners and colleagues in this House to update them and provide the opportunity for them to feed back directly to the Department and me, so they do not have to wait for another Westminster Hall debate—if there is one. I am happy to provide that clarification, as well as my availability today, to ensure that we hear from colleagues on this issue, and that it remains a key priority for me and the Department. We recognise the urgency and passion of colleagues in their desire to see change—we heard it today. I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley, to Helen and Robert for their work in bringing this debate to the House, and to Members for their contributions.

I assure Members and advocacy groups that I have heard their concerns, and will be asking for better regulations and urgency for action. I will continue to seriously consider them as I look to further mitigate the negative impact of illegal and antisocial firework use on our communities. We will continue to gather that evidence and continue to hear from organisations, charities and campaigners to ensure that any changes to legislation are effective.

While I recognise the vital cultural importance of fireworks at a diverse range of festivals and celebrations, I will not apologise for continuing to support our emergency services working to promote their safe usage, raise awareness of the risks and take action against the minority of individuals who use fireworks illegally and

[Kate Dearden]

antisocially at the expense of their communities. The safety of the public and fireworks' impact on people, animals and property will be central in decisions and how we proceed with their regulation.

I thank everybody for their contributions today; I again thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley for opening this debate and the campaigners in the Gallery for their patience in listening to colleagues from across this House, and for ensuring that we continue to work closely together. I thank all Members for their contributions.

7.26 pm

Robbie Moore: It has been a thought-provoking debate in which we have heard from Members from across the House. There are very few petitions debates where the whole Chamber is full, so I once again thank Helen Whitelegg and Robert Branch for bringing forward two really good petitions—signed by 376,000 people—that enabled us all to discuss this issue. I thank all the charities that have continuously engaged with Members from across the House, and also the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) for her consistent work raising this important issue for as long as I have been lucky enough to be a Member of Parliament.

We know the impact fireworks have on our animals—our pets and livestock—as well as on veterans, those with anxiety issues, our elderly, our children and hard-working people who just want a decent night's sleep. This issue consistently comes back to this House, year after year, at every opportunity. The points that the hon. Member

for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made about indoor fireworks are noted and, dare I say, will control the nature of future debate.

I will end by reiterating some of the points made by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), by saying that time is of the essence. I have a lot of respect for my neighbour, the Minister, who represents a constituency next door to my own. I am sure that she gets similar types of correspondence in her inbox. Her speech felt a little bit like it was brought off the shelf, dusted off from Ministers who have come and gone. I say that with the greatest respect to Conservative Ministers, too, who have delivered the same type of speech. I am getting very frustrated that this issue keeps coming back time and again, and I am sure many others in this House are, too. The Minister has not outlined any timeframes or strategy. Is it the Government's ambition to bring forward a strategy that deals with the licensing and noise reduction of fireworks? I sincerely hope, on behalf of the 376,000 petitioners, that there will be some sort of a positive announcement from the Government—more than just the Minister's warm words. I say that with the most respect for the Minister, who I know and who has been kind enough to reach out and speak to me many times on this issue. I thank her on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 738192 and 732559 relating to the sale of fireworks.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 19 January 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Ukraine: Trade Measures

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): Following Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine, in May 2022 the United Kingdom led the world by removing all remaining tariffs under our free trade agreement with Ukraine. In 2024, the Government confirmed that tariff liberalisation would be extended on all goods for five years until 31 March 2029, with the exception of poultry and eggs, where a two-year extension until 31 March 2026 was adopted to reflect feedback from those sectors.

The Russian invasion has impaired Ukraine's ability to export goods and disrupted its usual supply chains and transport routes. That is why it was so important that the UK acted when it did to liberalise remaining tariffs and provide much-needed economic support to Ukraine. As intended, Ukrainian businesses have benefited from the liberalisation, with goods such as cereal grains, poultry and eggs benefiting from tariff-free trade. Ukraine continues to defend itself against Russian aggression while rebuilding key infrastructure destroyed during the war, and with tariff liberalisation remaining an important component of the UK Government's wider package of support.

This Government remain as committed as ever to supporting Ukraine in its hour of need. Given that our agreement with Ukraine on poultry and eggs is due to expire at the end of March, the Government have agreed with Ukraine to extend tariff liberalisation on these two products for two years, from 1 April 2026 until 31 March 2028. This will continue to provide much needed support to Ukraine and its businesses. My Department will work with His Majesty's Treasury in due course to lay the necessary statutory instrument to extend the temporary tariff liberalisation to early 2028.

We will continue to monitor trade flows and market conditions throughout the period of liberalisation and maintain regular engagement with the UK poultry and egg sectors. The agreement extends to the whole of the United Kingdom and the Crown dependencies. As is the case with the current agreement, the extension is reciprocal, with Ukraine also removing tariffs on UK goods entering their country.

This work aligns with the undertakings made in the UK-Ukraine 100 year partnership agreement which was signed last year. As the Prime Minister has made clear, the United Kingdom will continue to do everything in its power to support Ukraine's fight against Russia's brutal invasion for as long as needed.

[HCWS1247]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tour de France and Tour de France Femmes Grand Départs 2027

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): This Government are committed to delivering international events with pride,

creating a legacy to inspire the next generation of talent and promoting exercise and healthy living. Major sporting events have a unique ability to bring communities together and to tell our national story, as well as spread significant economic and social benefits across the country.

As part of our pipeline of major sporting events, the UK Government will provide £32.17 million in funding to support the delivery of the Tour de France and Tour de France Femmes Grand Départs in 2027. This funding will support the world's premier cycling race to return to Great Britain, speeding through Scotland, Wales, and England, connecting our nation and bringing the joy of cycling to the heart of British communities. Government funding will be used to ensure the safety and security of the event, support local authorities and deliver a lasting legacy and impact programme.

Staging both the men's and women's Grand Départs in the UK is a historic first for the tour, and will cement the UK's reputation as a leading destination for international sport. Hosting these events will drive economic growth, attract international visitors, and provide a monumental moment in our sporting history. Over 900 km of free-to-spectate cycling action will pass through towns, cities, and national parks across Great Britain from Galashiels and Caerphilly to Blackburn and Sheffield. By bringing the race to communities across England, Scotland, and Wales, we will ensure that the socioeconomic benefits of the tour are felt in every corner of the country. Past editions of the Grand Départ in the UK have demonstrated significant benefits—the 2014 Grand Départ in Yorkshire, generated an estimated £128 million in economic return—and staging the races in 2027 is forecast to deliver more than £150 million in economic benefits to the UK.

Hosting the Tour de France Femmes for the first time in the UK represents a significant milestone in this Government's mission to drive a decade of change for women's sport. Just as the 2014 Grand Départ in Yorkshire sparked a surge in cycling participation, with one million people cycling more as a result, the 2027 races will inspire a new generation of athletes, particularly young girls, to take up the sport and break down barriers to physical activity.

We look forward to working with local authorities, community leaders, and engaging with Members of Parliament and peers to ensure the tour makes a lasting positive impact throughout Great Britain.

[HCWS1250]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Low Carbon Hydrogen Standard

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I am making this statement to fulfil the commitment to inform Parliament via a written ministerial statement whenever the ambulatory reference to the UK low carbon hydrogen standard in the Hydrogen Production Revenue Support (Directions, Eligibility and Counterparty) Regulations 2023 is updated. A new version of the standard (version 4) has now been published.

The Energy Act 2023 makes provision for the implementation of the hydrogen production business model, which is intended to provide revenue support to overcome the cost gap between low carbon hydrogen and higher carbon counterfactual fuels. The HPBM is designed to incentivise the production and use of low carbon hydrogen, supporting the UK's net zero and energy security ambitions.

Section 57(1) sets out the overarching power for the Secretary of State to make regulations in relation to revenue support contracts. There are a number of provisions in chapter 1, part 2 of the Act which set out the matters that regulations made under section 57(1) may cover. The provision in section 66(5) of the Act enables revenue support regulations determining the meaning of "eligible" in relation to a low carbon hydrogen producer to make ambulatory reference to published documents, including standards, external to the regulations, i.e. as the documents have effect from time to time. Given the nascency of the hydrogen industry and the need for regulations underpinning the hydrogen production revenue support contracts to provide sufficient certainty to investors, the ability to make ambulatory reference in regulations provides flexibility to help ensure the scheme is in line with the latest technological developments to encourage ongoing innovation and investment. This approach also aligns with consultation feedback to ensure alignment with the UK Government definition of low carbon hydrogen when allocating support to projects under the hydrogen production business model.

The regulations were laid in draft in Parliament on 8 November 2023 and came into force on 20 December 2023. Bar certain exceptions for low carbon hydrogen producers who applied for financial support before the commencement date of the regulations, the regulations determine whether a low carbon hydrogen producer is "eligible" in relation to proposals it makes for the production of hydrogen produced in accordance with the low carbon hydrogen standard. The regulations define "the low carbon hydrogen standard" as the document published by the Secretary of State in April 2023 entitled "UK Low Carbon Hydrogen Standard—Version 2" or such standard as may be from time to time published for the purposes of these regulations by the Secretary of State. The regulations provide that where the Secretary of State publishes a new or revised low carbon hydrogen standard for the purposes of the regulations, the publication of the new or revised standard must include, or be accompanied by, a statement in writing that it is published to replace the previous version of the standard.

The standard sets a maximum threshold for the amount of greenhouse gas emissions allowed in the production process for hydrogen to be considered "low carbon hydrogen". It sets out the methodology for calculating the emissions associated with hydrogen production using production pathways in scope of the standard, and the steps producers should take to prove that the hydrogen they produce is compliant with the standard.

On Monday 19 January, version 4 of the standard was published and focuses on ensuring that the requirements set out in the standard are clear and can be effectively applied under hydrogen production revenue support contracts. This update reflects lessons learned from the application of the LCHS to the first hydrogen allocation

round, stakeholder feedback and evolving policy priorities to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and keeps pace with the growing hydrogen economy.

Version 4 of the standard replaces any previous versions of the standard for the purposes of the regulations. This means that currently version 4 of the standard is the one that is to be used for assessing eligibility under the regulations, bar certain exceptions as mentioned above.

[HCWS1252]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Prostate Cancer: Access to Treatment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): Today I am pleased to update the House on significant progress in improving treatment options for men with prostate cancer across England.

This Government are committed to improving cancer survival rates. Too many families across the country are affected by late diagnosis, unequal access to treatment, and variation in outcomes, and we are determined to change that. Our national cancer plan for England will set out how we will transform outcomes for cancer patients and improve their experiences of treatment and care.

That is why I am delighted to inform the House that for the first time, thousands of patients in England with prostate cancer will be able to receive the drug abiraterone, as the NHS expands access to this important treatment. Around 2,000 men diagnosed in the last three months with non-metastatic prostate cancer will now be able to receive abiraterone where it is of clinical benefit, alongside prednisolone. An additional 7,000 men each year are expected to become eligible for the drug, given in combination with prednisolone.

NHS England has been able to expand access to the drug for thousands more eligible patients thanks to the health service buying and delivering treatments at better value, following the clinical advice to roll this out last year.

Clinical research shows benefits for patients at earlier stages of the disease. Trials have demonstrated a six-year survival rate of 86% for men taking abiraterone compared with 77% for those receiving standard treatment—hormone therapy with or without radiotherapy. This represents a substantial improvement in outcomes for thousands of families affected by prostate cancer.

The NHS already commissions abiraterone, now available as a lower-cost generic medicine, for advanced prostate cancer, following the commissioning policy introduced in December 2024. Today's important announcement extends these benefits to patients at an earlier stage of their disease.

I also want to acknowledge the important role of our partners, who have campaigned extensively on this issue and worked closely with NHS England to support this roll-out.

This decision marks a major step forward in our ongoing work to improve cancer outcomes, ensure earlier access to effective treatments, and support men and their families across England.

[HCWS1248]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Tower Hamlets Council: Best Value Duty

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): This Government will do what it takes to fix the foundations of local government. That includes taking prompt and direct action in the small number of councils that are failing their best value duty and not meeting the high standards expected by local residents. In that context, I would like to update the House on the London borough of Tower Hamlets.

On 22 January 2025 Ministers announced a statutory intervention for the London borough of Tower Hamlets, to be in place until 31 March 2028. The intervention was established to secure the council's compliance with its best value duty following failings identified during a best value inspection in 2024. The statutory support package centred on the appointment of ministerial envoys to act as advisers and oversee improvement work that the council had already begun. The Government were clear that the council would need to drive forward changes at pace and that further action would be taken should it prove necessary. This was reiterated following the envoys' first progress report in July. One year into the intervention, I welcome the early signs of progress and the council's constructive engagement with the envoys. However, I am concerned that the council has not understood the severity of its situation or moved beyond planning for improvement into action and impact. These are concerns which have also been raised with the council by the envoys as part of their routine engagement.

I consider that the council is not sufficiently mindful of, or able to assess its own position. This is a view shared by the Local Government Association in its October progress review against the 2023 corporate peer challenge, where it describes the council's "tendency towards optimism bias". The council's external auditor has also observed

"an ongoing reluctance within the organisation to fully acknowledge the scale of the challenge it faces".

The council will not be able to move forward without a clear understanding of where it is now and how it needs to change.

This is slowing improvement. The council's auditor has raised concerns about a lack of urgency from the council in response to its statutory recommendations issued in February, as well as a slow response to other significant issues such as the departure of the section 151 officer and investigating serious matters of non-compliance. Where the council has recognised issues and made plans for improvement, such as the developing continuous improvement plan, it is unclear that these are translating into measurable delivery. The Local Government Association also noted in its progress review that the council has "lots of plans" and "a plan for a plan"—but that "consistency, coherence and a strong delivery narrative" and the "use of evidence and data" are needed to develop and demonstrate the fulfilment of any strategic vision for Tower Hamlets.

I also have material concerns about the council's financial management and governance, which appears to be deteriorating. The significant weaknesses and statutory recommendations from the external auditor

represent areas of serious risk and the auditor highlights the ongoing absence of an effective internal controls environment to safeguard public money. This is in the context of continuing allegations about leadership, governance and culture coming from a wide range of stakeholders. These risk weakening public confidence in the council. While not a best value issue, recent reports of councillors abandoning their constituents to stand overseas will only have further undermined the public perception of members' commitment to the borough and to the improvement journey. This behaviour demonstrates an appalling lack of respect for residents and should not happen in any local authority.

Having carefully considered the auditor's November draft annual report and interim value for money report for 2024-25, the Local Government Association's October progress review against the 2023 corporate peer challenge and other relevant material, I remain satisfied that Tower Hamlets council is continuing to fail to comply with its best value duty in relation to continuous improvement, governance, leadership, culture and partnerships. I am also satisfied that the council is now failing to comply with its best value duty in relation to its use of resources.

I am therefore minded to exercise my powers of direction under section 15(5) and (6) of the Local Government Act 1999 in relation to the London borough of Tower Hamlets council to secure its compliance with the best value duty. Given the evidence of ongoing concerns, I believe that a strengthened and expanded version of the current intervention is necessary to get the council on track for sufficient improvement by the scheduled end of the intervention. This Government are committed to taking whatever action is needed to limit the length of statutory intervention to that which is absolutely necessary.

I am proposing a revised package of statutory support, which builds on the collaborative working to date between the envoys and the council, but recognises that the scale of challenge facing the council requires greater capacity for support and oversight. The proposal is therefore centred around increasing the powers available to the envoys and increasing their overall capacity, including through the appointment of an additional assistant envoy with expertise in finance. In detail:

I am minded to issue the envoys with powers to exercise council functions associated with governance, financial management and the recruitment, performance management and designation of statutory and senior officers. These powers are intended to safeguard the process and to be treated as in reserve, similar to the approach in Warrington borough council, to be used only where necessary to ensure compliance with the best value duty.

I am proposing to increase the allocated working days to 150 days for the ministerial envoy, and 120 days for each assistant envoy. This is commensurate with other interventions and proportionate to the scale of work required.

In order to strengthen the council's finance function as part of its corporate core, I propose to expand the envoy team through the appointment of an additional assistant envoy with expertise in finance.

The envoys have written to Ministers outlining the terms of a new project designed to address the long-standing allegations made against the council, and unfavourable perceptions of the council's activities which persist among its staff, stakeholders and the community at large. These perceptions are of real concern to the envoys. They are planning a series of "deep dives" regarding patronage in

recruitment and staff promotions, resource allocation (community assets and community grants), housing allocations, licensing and planning decisions, and the structure, functions, activities and roles within the mayor's office and mayoral advisory team. I share the envoys' concerns, in particular regarding the mayor's advisory team, and I am pleased that the council recognises this project as an opportunity to demonstrate transparency. However, considering issues faced by external bodies investigating non-compliance and the council's tendency towards optimism, I propose to issue new directions requiring the council to support the project to the satisfaction of the envoys. This will ensure the project is appropriately independent and delivers its objectives comprehensively and in a timely manner. To that end, and to more broadly establish appropriate governance for this next phase of the intervention, I am also proposing to streamline all assurance mechanisms to sit under a single improvement board, to the satisfaction of the envoys.

In line with procedures in the 1999 Act, I am inviting representations from the London borough of Tower Hamlets and any other interested parties on the proposals on or before 2 February. The council is due to report to me later this week on delivery against the current directions. I have extended this submission deadline until the end of the representation period, should it wish to make changes. The envoys will also report during this period and I will carefully consider both reports alongside any representations before deciding how to proceed. If I decide to amend the intervention package in the manner described here, I will then make the necessary statutory directions under the 1999 Act and nominate a further assistant envoy. Any directions that I make will be without prejudice to making further directions, should this prove necessary.

This action is not proposed lightly. It is clear that there are some officers and members in Tower Hamlets working hard with the support of the envoys to improve the council for the residents of Tower Hamlets, and this announcement should not deter them from their commitment. Rather, I consider that the proposed package will provide them with the focused support and challenge necessary to hasten the pace of improvement and provide local residents and businesses with greater assurance that the council is on a path out of intervention and towards longer-term stability. This Government are committed to providing the London borough of Tower Hamlets with whatever support is needed to ensure its compliance with the best value duty and to realise sources of growth in the borough. Growth is the defining mission of this Government, and I expect all parties to continue to work in partnership to secure Tower Hamlets' contribution to a stronger economy.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents I have referred to, and publish the relevant letters on gov.uk. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS1253]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Modern Digital Government: 2025-2030 Roadmap

The Minister for Digital Government and Data (Ian Murray): I have published "A roadmap for modern digital Government 2025-2030" on gov.uk. The roadmap

follows on from the state of digital Government review and a blueprint for modern digital Government that were published earlier this year which set out how we will use technology to fundamentally improve and simplify the daily lives of the people in the UK. Our collective priorities are clear: to enable easier lives, faster growth, firmer foundations, smarter organisations, and higher productivity and efficiency. This roadmap now sets out our plan to 2030 to deliver those tangible benefits for every citizen and business in the UK, committing to the bold action we will take against the six-point plan for reform outlined in the blueprint:

Join up public sector services: we are creating a more seamless, secure and connected experience for people and businesses. This includes enhancing the gov.uk app to provide personalised and proactive services, launching the gov.uk wallet for convenient digital credentials and a national digital ID scheme that will simplify and secure access to services alongside gov.uk one login. Initiatives like CustomerFirst and GDS Local are accelerating system-wide improvements and fostering collaboration across central and local government. Key to all of this is driving digital inclusion for all.

Harness the power of AI for the public good: we are actively building and testing AI tools to boost public sector productivity and improve services, contributing to significant efficiency gains that translate into faster decision-making for citizens. This involves the rapid prototyping capabilities of incubator for AI, establishing an external responsible AI advisory panel, and accelerating AI adoption through the Prime Minister's AI exemplars programme, which is already testing AI products in areas from job seeking to tax compliance.

Strengthen and extend our digital and data public infrastructure: we are building a secure and reliable digital public infrastructure. We are committed to embedding safety in its very foundations. This begins with gaining a comprehensive view of our digital estate, removing legacy technology, and providing common platforms and shared direction across Government. It involves enforcing "secure by design" principles across all Government systems. We will strengthen cyber defence through new more interventionist models to rigorously protect people's data, as well as make our infrastructure resilient against evolving threats. Beyond our own systems, we are enhancing strategic supplier agreements to ensure supply chains are resilient by enforcing baseline security standards and raising broader awareness. Furthermore, we are creating new infrastructure like the national data library to unlock the value of public data for economic growth and improved services.

Elevate leadership, invest in talent: we are committed to making Government a leading digital career choice. This includes implementing a new digital pay framework, and equipping civil servants with essential digital, data, and AI skills through programmes like the AI accelerator and TechTrack apprenticeships, ensuring the public is served by the very best digital professionals.

Fund for outcomes, procure for growth and innovation: we are reforming how Government fund, buy and manage technology, working closer with industry to deliver the best outcomes for citizens. By shifting to agile, outcome-focused funding models and leveraging our buying power through the digital commercial centre of excellence, we will ensure public money delivers maximum value and fosters a more competitive and vibrant technology marketplace. Procurement will prioritise resilience through a diversity of suppliers. We will actively support sovereign capabilities in sensitive areas such as AI and leverage UK assets to guarantee secure and resilient connectivity. This coherent approach ensures that our spending not only delivers value but strengthens our national digital infrastructure and supports growth and innovation.

Commit to transparency, drive accountability: we are changing to be more open, accountable, and focused on what matters to the public. We are creating consistent ways to measure service performance, working in the open, and publishing clear information on how and why we are using algorithmic tools through the algorithmic transparency recording standard. This helps every citizen know how their Government are performing and why decisions affecting them are being made.

Work to deliver this plan is already well under way.

The gov.uk app was launched in July 2025 and has achieved over 200,000 downloads and trials for gov.uk chat have recently concluded to explore the use of conversational AI for helping users navigate complex Government services;

The first digital credential was added to gov.uk wallet providing almost 2 million veterans with a secure and convenient way to prove their status and access services from their phone;

As of October 2025, over 13.2 million people have proven their identity through gov.uk one login, and its identity verification app;

We completed a discovery phase for the “Get Britain Working” service transformation to explore how to help people find or keep a job while managing long-term health conditions, which has helped to inform the creation of a new unit that will drive this end-to-end service transformation approach across the public sector;

Our first cohort of 24 data scientists from across Government complete the AI accelerator programme and have upskilled into machine learning engineers;

Over 600 public sector organisations have signed up to our free vulnerability scanning service to help them identify cyber weaknesses;

We recently announced our plans for a digital ID scheme so that everyone in the UK can easily and securely prove their identity to access public and private services, welfare and other benefits.

We will now take this roadmap forward at pace, building on the momentum already in place. By working collaboratively across Government, with researchers, businesses, and most importantly, with the public, we will unlock the full potential of digital and AI to deliver transformational outcomes for citizens across the entire

country. This roadmap will be iterative and we will provide annual updates on our progress against milestones and blueprint outcome metrics.

[HCWS1249]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit Entitlement: Offenders Detained in Hospital

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Our welfare system, through benefits like universal credit, provides a crucial safety net to millions of people across this country but it cannot be right that individuals who have been convicted of serious crimes continue to receive substantial support from this system while their living costs are being met in hospital.

It is important that the people of Great Britain see fairness in their welfare system and that it has their confidence. I have therefore made the decision that I intend to bring forward proposals that would remove benefit entitlement for offenders who are detained in hospital following conviction for serious violent offences. I will begin a programme of engagement this month, that will seek the views of experts and stakeholders including clinicians, victims’ groups and the mental health sector on the best way to do this. The Department for Work and Pensions will also work closely with the devolved Governments to ensure there is a consistent approach.

[HCWS1251]

Petitions

Monday 19 January 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Pornography and Violence Against Women

The petition of residents of the constituency of Gower,

Declares that pornography use is fuelling sexual violence; violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography; and sexual coercion is inherent to the commercial production of pornography.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography distributed online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform – and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tonia Antoniazzi, *Official Report*, 25 November 2025; Vol. 776, c. 354.]

[P003135]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) [P003138], the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) [P003139], the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) [P003142], the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) [P003144], the hon. Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid) [P003145], and the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) [P003147].

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The Government fully understand and share the public concerns about pornography and its potential impacts on crime and society. We are grateful to Baroness Bertin for carrying forward the independent pornography review, and for her report, which was published last year.

The IPR found that violent pornography is widely available and easily accessible online. Recommendations in the IPR suggest that Government should explore regulating certain pornographic content online, just as it is regulated in the offline world, as well as ensuring that companies that host pornographic content have processes in place to ensure that all performers are of age (18 plus) and are consenting adults.

The issues raised in the report are complex and challenging, and may be best dealt with alongside wider work to ensure we live in a safe and secure digital world, and to tackle violence, abuse and misogyny more generally.

There are already a wide range of laws in this area, from the Obscene Publications Act 1959 onwards, and specifically the Protection of Children Act 1978, which deals with indecent images and videos involving children and young people under the age of 18. The Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 introduced a new offence

making it illegal to possess extreme pornographic images. The Online Safety Act 2023 created new offences of sharing and threatening to share intimate images, including deepfake pornography, without consent.

The Online Safety Act 2023 has strengthened the law in a number of areas—for example, in the area of age verification for access to adult content. This puts a range of new duties on companies in scope of the Act, making them responsible for users' safety on their platforms. Under their illegal content safety duties, companies must put in place safety measures that mitigate and manage the risks identified in their illegal content risk assessment. This ensures that providers implement "safety by design" measures to mitigate a broad spectrum of factors that enable illegal activity on their platforms, reducing the risk of users carrying out illegal activity. They also need to take illegal content down when it does appear. These duties cover illegal pornographic content.

Companies in scope of the Act that provide user-to-user services must take action to prevent access to the most harmful content. This includes pornography. Companies have a duty to use highly effective age assurance to prevent all children under 18 from accessing this content. Additionally, services are required to protect children from other harmful content including violence and abuse, providing age-appropriate experiences for this. The Government are committed to implementing the Act as quickly and effectively as possible to ensure that UK users, particularly children, benefit from its wide-ranging protections.

The Government are already committed to strengthening the law still further around specific issues—specifically, to banning nudification apps and other tools principally designed to create synthetic non-consensual intimate images. Through this legislation, we will target the individuals and companies who design and supply these tools, who can make vast profits from the distress and victimisation of others, often women and girls. We will legislate to ban nudification apps and related tools as soon as parliamentary time allows. Beyond the nudification offence, Government have legislated to create a new offence that criminalises the creation of non-consensual intimate images of adults, and will urgently be bringing the offence into force. The Government have also announced that this offence will be a priority offence under the Online Safety Act.

Beyond this, the Government will need to consider carefully whether further changes may be needed to address any potential gaps and weaknesses in our laws. We are grateful to the petitioners for raising a number of potentially valuable proposals. We will need to consider carefully the legal and practical implications of these, including around enforcement and practical impacts.

"Freedom from Violence and Abuse: a cross-Government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls" was published on 18 December last year, and sets out the Government's overall approach to these wider issues.

We must stop violence before it starts, by focusing on prevention and tackling the root causes of radicalisation of perpetrators. We will focus on boys and young men, working with schools to challenge misogyny and promote healthy relationships. We will also support parents and teachers to intervene early, and we will make Britain the hardest place for children to access harmful content

online. We will relentlessly pursue perpetrators of violence and abuse, using the best cutting-edge technology at our disposal to improve the police response to these crimes, and we will provide support for victims and survivors to recover, and to live free from abuse, through a whole-of-Government approach, so that victims can access housing, health, justice and the support that they need.

Within this, the Government intend to create a joint team, across the Home Office, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Ministry of Justice and Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to inform the Government response to the IPR recommendations. As part of this, the Government will consider carefully the specific issues raised by these petitions.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Vale View Day Centre, Lancaster

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Vale View Day Centre provides care and activities for older adults and supports their carers and families by giving carers time for themselves; further notes Lancashire County Council is running a consultation on the future of this service; further declares that this service is deeply valued by local residents across North Lancashire as reflected by comments in local media.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to make representations to Lancashire County Council to protect users of adult social care in Lancashire, and encourage the Council not to close Vale View Day Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Cat Smith, *Official Report*, 18 November 2025; Vol. 775, c. 746.]

[P003128]

A petition in the same terms was presented by the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) [P003132].

Observations from the Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I fully recognise the pivotal role that adult social care plays in nurturing local communities and in helping people live as independent and fulfilling lives as possible. I also appreciate how significant these services are for those who rely on them, as well as for their families and carers. It is therefore essential that any closure of adult social care services is handled with the utmost sensitivity and care.

I met my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) and other local MPs on Wednesday 26 November 2025, with a follow-up meeting—which included an official from the Department of Health and Social Care—taking place on Wednesday 17 December 2025.

The meetings focused on Lancashire county council's consultation on the future of 10 adult social care services (including Vale View), set within the local authority's statutory duty to shape the adult social care market and ensure the long-term availability of a diverse range of care and support options.

Local authorities are best placed to understand and plan for the care needs of their residents and to develop and build that local market capacity. In doing so, I expect that the local authority will continue to fulfil that statutory duty, and support those impacted by any resulting closures.

A local authority, having determined that individuals have eligible needs under the Care Act 2014, must ensure those needs continue to be met, including where provision changes or is brought to an end. Local authorities should consult with impacted individuals on the suitability of their living accommodation and must have regard to their views, wishes, feelings and beliefs.

Written Correction

Monday 19 January 2026

Other Correction

ALEX SOBEL

Ukraine

The following extract is from the debate on Ukraine on 14 January 2026.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op):... I spoke with Lesia Vasylenko—I know many people here know Lesia—who chairs the British group in the Rada, and who is in Kyiv. She told me...

“Putin’s invasion nearly four years ago has resulted in millions fleeing their homes, hundreds of thousands of casualties, and relentless attacks on hospitals, homes and schools. This includes Russian state sponsored abductions of Ukrainian children,”

which my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) spoke brilliantly about,

“and the arrest of my colleagues at the OSCE, Dmytro Shabanov, Maksym Petrov, and Vadym Golda,”

who I know my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) is raising as an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

rep on Ukraine. Lesia is the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly chair of the parliamentary support team for Ukraine. I am happy that we can support her and continue to support the work going on now.

[*Official Report*, 14 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 1015.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel):

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op):... I spoke with Lesia Vasylenko—I know many people here know Lesia—who chairs the British group in the Rada, and who is in Kyiv. She told me...

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who I know my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) is raising **through** the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe—**my hon. Friend chairs the OSCE’s parliamentary support team for Ukraine**. I am happy that we can support her and continue to support the work going on now.

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**not later than
Monday 26 January 2026**

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