Thursday
18 June 2026

Volume 787
No. 18

# HOUSE OF COMMONS
## OFFICIAL REPORT

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

## (HANSARD)

**Thursday 18 June 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.

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2026
*This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.*

# House of Commons

*Thursday 18 June 2026*

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

**PRAYERS**

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

**BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS**

Contingency Fund Account 2025-26

*Ordered,*

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2025-26, showing:

1. A Statement of Financial Position

2. A Statement of Cash Flows and

3. Notes to the Accounts, together with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

# Oral Answers to Questions

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

**Exchange of Cultural Artefacts: Greece**

1. **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with her Greek counterpart on mutual exchanges of cultural artefacts. [R] [900493]

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** It would be churlish of me not to recognise England's wonderful victory in the world cup last night, but there is only one European nation that has three points at the world cup without conceding a goal, and that is indeed Scotland—the new favourites to lift the trophy.

Culture, Media and Sport Ministers have had no recent discussions with counterparts in the Hellenic Republic on mutual exchanges of cultural artefacts. As the hon. Member knows, the Parthenon sculptures are legally owned by the trustees of the British Museum. The chair of the museum has been in discussions with the Greek Government about a partnership, including reciprocal loans. As I said to the hon. Gentleman from the Dispatch Box last time, this Government would not stand in the way if such loans were agreed.

**Andrew George:** There is an opportunity for another victory for the United Kingdom if we can find a way of co-operating. Clinging on to half of the Parthenon sculptures while assuring ourselves that we own them, when they were obtained in, at best, highly dubious circumstances two centuries ago, is not a great look for this country. Does the Minister agree that the imminent restoration of the British Museum provides the museum and the Government with a golden opportunity to engage in what would be a better look for this country—a gracious act, reflecting a partnership and a shared love of classical history, but also natural justice—and to see all the sculptures displayed in Athens, where they belong?

**Ian Murray:** I can only repeat what I have said in previous answers and in my initial response to the hon. Gentleman. The sculptures are owned by the British Museum. The chair of the trustees, the former Chancellor—the hon. Gentleman's Chancellor in the coalition Government—has had talks with Greek Ministers on this issue to seek a constructive partnership. We support those talks, but it is for the British Museum trustees to reach an agreement with the Greek Government. As I have said, we would not stand in the way if such an agreement was put in place.

**Access to Music and Dance Training**

2. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What steps she is taking to help ensure that children from less privileged backgrounds can access music and dance training. [900495]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** This Government believe that every child in this country has the right to access high-quality arts provision, including music and dance, which gives young people the chance to live a richer, larger life. I am really pleased to tell the House that the music and dance scheme's allocation of future funding for this financial year represents an increase on the commitment of the previous year.

**Tessa Munt:** I thank the Secretary of State for her response. Wells Cathedral school is in my constituency, and it has 80 young people who are on the music and dance scheme. It is a fantastic scheme, and I pay tribute to the outgoing headteacher, Alastair Tighe, who has done his very best to ensure that the scheme reaches deep into the community and those from less advantaged backgrounds, including one of our local cleaners—she is able to pay just £200 a year for what is a £50,000 a year education. However, there has been a 10-year drift between inflation and the amount of the money that the scheme receives. Can the Secretary of State have another look at this issue and make it absolutely certain that pupils benefit from better funding—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We have only 30 minutes.

**Lisa Nandy:** I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to Alastair Tighe and all the people who make this commitment real. They change children's lives, and this Government cannot do that alone from Whitehall. What we can do, however, is fund such schemes adequately. Even in these difficult financial circumstances, we made a £36.5 million commitment to the music and dance scheme last year, and we have increased that by £1.3 million to ensure that it can continue.

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Musical theatre and dance are important parts of the creative industries. Kristian Thomas Company in my

constituency provides extensive training for young people aged four upwards, up to formal qualifications at BTEC and foundation degree level. What financial support is given to organisations such as KTC so that they can continue offering valuable education in the arts for all young people in North West Leicestershire?

**Lisa Nandy:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for North West Leicestershire and for all the young people in her constituency. As I said to the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt), we have been investing in music and dance in particular, but we have also invested £425 million in the creative foundations fund to support arts venues across the country, because one of the key things that we have identified is that it is not just about the bursaries that we provide to enable access for all; it is about those institutions existing in every part of the country.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that the music and dance scheme supports so many talented young performers from lower-income backgrounds to access an arts education. She will also know that such specialist schools and conservatoires are now subject to VAT, because of changes brought in by her Government. In many cases, the bursaries do not even begin to cover the extreme costs, which are made up by family members, parents and everybody clubbing together to try to find the money. The VAT is still there, and it still makes a difference to whether they can afford it. What assessment has the Department made of the number of families paying VAT on the remaining fees, and how many talented young artists are now unable to attend as a result? I think I heard her right in saying that the bursaries will continue in the 2026-27 academic year, but could she please confirm that?

**Lisa Nandy:** I am very happy to confirm that the bursaries will continue in the 2026-27 academic year, and we have been able to increase the amount of funding available, which is a recognition of the cost pressures that families face. I very much agree with the hon. Member that bursaries are absolutely essential, which is why we have protected them even in these difficult financial circumstances. However, she will recognise the difficult circumstances we inherited from the previous Government. We have done our best to protect such things, and in the case of music and dance, we have been able to uplift the funding available.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Sam Ashford and the Livewire theatre in Harlow on 25 years of supporting young people into music, dance and the theatre with its hard-hitting shows? I pay particular tribute to the work it did to support young people remotely during covid.

**Lisa Nandy:** Of course, I will. I appreciate the efforts that my hon. Friend puts in not just to ensure that Harlow is referenced in this Chamber at every opportunity, but, sincerely, to change the lives of young people in Harlow and across the whole country. He really is one of the best champions for young people in this House.

## UNESCO World Heritage Sites

3. **John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase funding for UNESCO world heritage sites. [900497]

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** Responsibility for managing and funding UNESCO world heritage sites is devolved to local authorities and the devolved Governments. As such, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport does not typically provide direct funding. Heritage sites can apply for UK Government funding through our arm's length bodies, notably the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England, which can provide support to world heritage sites through capital grants for conservation, education and community resilience projects.

**John Whitby:** Cromford Mills in Derbyshire Dales was the world's first water-powered cotton spinning mill and the birthplace of mass production. In recent decades the Arkwright Society has transformed this UNESCO world heritage site into the much-loved tourist attraction it is today. However, the renewal of the site is not yet complete, with another £1.2 million in match funding needed to help secure its financial viability. Will the Minister therefore agree to officials meeting the Arkwright Society to see what support the Department can give to help Cromford Mill secure this much-needed financial support?

**Ian Murray:** I pay tribute to the Arkwright Society, which does amazing work in managing Cromford Mills, which is an integral part of the wider Derwent Valley Mills world heritage site. I am therefore pleased that it has already secured £1.3 million of investment from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. I understand the remaining challenges my hon. Friend set out about the longer-term financial viability. He asked for a meeting with officials, and we should set up that meeting, but also with the Minister in the other place, Baroness Twycross, who would be very happy to meet him and the Arkwright Society.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The Roman forts of Reculver and Richborough, linked by the Wantsum channel and the River Stour in east Kent, are ambitious to secure UNESCO world heritage site status. Those ambitions will be killed stone dead if the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero supports the building of a 90-foot-high converter station on the Minster marshes. Would the Minister have a word with that Department to make sure that does not happen?

**Ian Murray:** It is important that any new site put forward for UNESCO world heritage site status first goes through a robust national assessment process—and the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raises will be considered as part of that—before being put on the UK's tentative list of prospective world heritage nominations. However, I am very happy to arrange a meeting with him to discuss what may have to be done to make that application as strong as possible.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Bob Blackman—not here.

**Support for Creative Industries**

5. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps she is taking to help support creative industries. [900500]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** The UK's creative industries are world leading, which is why the Government have made them a priority. We are backing them in our industrial strategy as one of eight industries that we believe have the greatest potential for the future. Our sector plan is working, with the creative industries expanding 3.1% in the last quarter, outperforming the wider economy.

**Sarah Green:** The Secretary of State will know that nearly a third of those who work in the creative industries are self-employed. I have been contacted by creative freelancers in my area who feel that their voice is not always heard. One of them is a licensed chaperone, responsible for safeguarding those under 16 working on productions away from their parents. She told me that some chaperones are waiting for up to eight months to be paid, caught between agencies and production companies, which blame each other, before everyone moves on to the next production. That is just one example of many. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss ways we can better support freelancers in our creatives industries to help them and the sector thrive?

**Lisa Nandy:** The Government are acutely aware of the challenges of a very casualised industry in which freelancers often do not have the voice they need to stand up for their rights, protect them at work and make sure the industry they work in is fair and safe, so I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue in this House and for being their voice. I would be delighted to organise a meeting with the relevant officials so that she can discuss this issue. I can also update the House that we have recently appointed the freelance champion role. They will advocate for the creative sector's freelancers within Government. We will be in a position to announce those names shortly.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Dame Jessica Morden. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"]

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Grassroots venues in Newport such as The Cab and Le Pub, where the fan-led review was launched recently, are a vital part of our city's creative industry, drawing thousands of people into our city centre each month. The ticket levy announced by the Government could help such venues to manage rising costs and develop talent. Larger events were encouraged to participate voluntarily in the scheme, so could we have a bit of a progress report and an idea of next steps?

**Lisa Nandy:** My right hon. Friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to update her on the progress we have made on protecting these vital venues. If I may, I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate her on the long overdue recognition for the work she has put into this Chamber and for what she has done in public life.

Mr Speaker, may I also take this opportunity to have a rare truce between Wigan and Chorley and thank you for the work you have done over a long period of time to campaign for Sir Kevin Sinfield to be given a knighthood? It is an absolute privilege to be the Secretary of State who has been able to ensure that both Sir Billy Boston and Sir Kevin Sinfield have been rightly recognised as the first two people from rugby league ever to receive knighthoods, which were long overdue.

**BBC Funding**

6. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What steps she is taking to help ensure the sustainability of the BBC's long-term funding. [900501]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** The BBC is one of our most important national institutions. Now, more than ever, the need for trusted news and high-quality programming is essential to our democratic and cultural life. We are currently conducting the charter review, which I believe will be the most consequential in the BBC's history, given the current political climate. We have already announced that, as part of the charter review, we will be putting the BBC on a permanent charter, so that it exists in perpetuity for all of us, forever.

**Olly Glover:** Yesterday, as part of £500 million cuts, the BBC announced the scrapping of BBC Radio 4's "The World Tonight" programme after 56 years, among others. It is very welcome to hear the Secretary of State's support for the BBC, but can she say a little more about what she is going to do to protect the future of the BBC, following the end of the BBC charter consultation in March?

**Lisa Nandy:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, because I know this issue has raised significant concerns across all our nations and regions. I met the BBC director general recently to discuss the announcement that has just been made. Obviously, those decisions are a matter for the BBC. What is squarely within the Government's remit, however, is ensuring that, as part of the charter, the BBC is adequately and sustainably funded. We will not accept a smaller BBC. A core objective of the charter review is to expand both the scope and reach of BBC services.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) mentioned reports that BBC Radio 4's "The World Tonight" programme may be cut. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that in the age of fast news, disinformation and misinformation, we need more programmes such as "The World Tonight", not fewer, and that we need more contemplative journalism so that our voters can understand politics and the world around them more effectively? Does she agree with me that the BBC perhaps ought to look at the vast salaries they pay their stars, both in entertainment and in news, in order to retain programmes such as "The World Tonight", which will be much missed if it goes?

**Lisa Nandy:** I concur with my hon. Friend's view that, now more than ever, the BBC's role in providing trusted news and information is essential. For all the

challenges that the BBC has faced, it remains the most trusted source of news in this country, and one of the most trusted sources of news across the world. I recognise that the BBC has had some serious challenges to deal with, and has had to make some difficult decisions, but this Government are determined to support its efforts by ensuring that it is adequately funded. We have recently published the first ever local news strategy. Colleagues will know that in the current by-election in Makerfield—next door to me in Wigan—there has been a huge upsurge in the amount of misinformation and disinformation targeted at residents. The BBC has a role to play in countering that, but so too do tremendous outlets such as the *Wigan Post,* which provide much needed balance.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): Last year the BBC lost another 300,000 licence fee payers. The BBC's current scale and financial model is clearly unsustainable. Yesterday the BBC announced controversial cuts, including "The World Tonight" and "Money Box Live", without anyone in Parliament expressing a view. That is not right. The Government appear to be restricting parliamentary debate about the future of the BBC. They announced the BBC charter via written statement, not a debate. They have already ruled out some alternative funding models and consideration of the size, scope and scale of the BBC's operations, leaving the BBC to take action unilaterally. Will the Secretary of State reconsider the scope of the charter review, and ensure that Parliament has a proper say on the future of the BBC?

**Lisa Nandy:** I will try to reassure the hon. Member on that, because we have no intention of restricting debate on the future of the BBC. I share some of his concerns about the way in which the BBC made the recent announcement. One of the things that I was keen to ensure was that decisions that could affect the future of the BBC, and the services on which we all rely, were made by the new director general and not in the interim, in the absence of a permanent director general. The charter process sets out a clear role for Parliament, which this Government will respect and uphold. There will be adequate opportunity to debate the proposals that the Government put forward with the White Paper on the future of the BBC later this year.

## Ticket Tout Ban

7. **Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to publish the draft ticket tout ban Bill. [900503]

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** We are fully committed to implementing the measures that we announced last year, which will put fans back at the heart of live events, and eliminate industrial-scale ticket touting—it has been fleecing fans for far too long. We are working at pace to prepare the legislation and intend to publish a draft Bill in this parliamentary Session for pre-legislative scrutiny. That will allow us to draw on expertise from Parliament and across industry to ensure that our legislation is effective and enforceable.

**Pete Wishart:** It would be churlish not to acknowledge the result last night. The whole House can rowdily congratulate Ghana on their fantastic victory last night. I do not think the Minister fully understands the real sense of disappointment and frustration that those in the live sector feel because there is no full Bill, as has been promised by everybody, from the Prime Minister down. While this Government dither, fans continue to be ripped off by the touts, the profiteers and the spivs, as they suck the lifeblood out of our live music sector. Can the Minister clearly set out how the Bill will progress and when the sector is likely to see an outcome? Can he possibly explain why the outlawed company Viagogo was recently in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, weeks before the announcement was made?

**Ian Murray:** It is important to lay out that it is a manifesto commitment—from the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and all of us—to get that legislation through. It is incredibly popular legislation. We need to stop fans being ripped off by ticket touts, but it is important to get the legislation right. Given the complexity of what we are proposing, with a price cap, a cap in service fees, resale volume limits, strict legal obligations on the platforms, and strict enforcement, it has to be done right. If there are any loopholes or edges to the legislation, they will be exploited by ticket touts, who are already exploiting fans and the system. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join us in trying to get the legislation right.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I would also like to start by congratulating the England football team on their win yesterday. While fans are rightly excited to finally see England bring it home this summer, some world cup tickets this year have surged to over £24,000. Fans should not be forced to choose between remortgaging their homes or missing out on supporting their country. Will the Minister therefore support the Liberal Democrats' call for an international fans charter to safeguard supporters against unfair ticket pricing?

**Ian Murray:** It is well documented that there have been issues with tickets for this world cup. My hon. Friend the Sport Minister has been having meetings about tickets for Euro 2028, which will take place in this country. It is really important, whether it is sport, music or festivals, that fans are not ripped off by ticket touts, who make huge profits out of ordinary fans who just want to watch their favourite sports or bands. The hon. Member did congratulate England on winning yesterday, but I am disappointed that she did not also congratulate Scotland for their wonderful win on Sunday morning.

## Tourism and Leisure

8. **Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help support the tourism and leisure sectors. [900504]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** Tourism drives growth and jobs across the country, including in Cheshire. VisitBritain's "Starring GREAT Britain" campaign is

showcasing a range of film and TV locations, such as Lyme Park, to global audiences, while our Great British summer savings scheme is encouraging family visits, supporting businesses dependent on summer footfall with a temporary VAT cut on eligible attractions.

**Aphra Brandreth:** Tourism is vital to Chester South and Eddisbury's economy. From Snugburys and the Ice Cream Farm to BeWILDerwood and Beeston castle, we are fortunate to have fantastic attractions, and I encourage the Minister to visit them. But as one business told me following the Government's summer savings announcement:

"It feels a bit like having £100 taken off you, then being given £30 back and being expected to be grateful".

The scheme is a drop in the ocean compared with the costs imposed by this Government's damaging policies. Will the Minister tell those businesses what more she is doing to support the sector, not just for the summer but for the long term?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady; I know she is a great champion for her constituency, and I know that tourism is incredibly important to her constituency. I recognise the challenges, some of which she has outlined. I have done a number of meetings with the sector. Just this week, I was at the Tourism Alliance's annual general meeting, and I met VisitScotland last week. We do recognise the challenges, but we think that the Great British summer savings will make a big difference to attractions up and down the country.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): Next week Stafford's Gatehouse theatre will launch its annual Shakespeare festival with Richard III. Last year we had over 180,000 visitors. I know that the Government are committed to cultural venues. They have put £1.5 billion into supporting them, but please can the Minister tell me what more the Government are doing to support local theatres, and would they like to attend the gala night with me next week to get away from all the drama?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I know that my colleague has been working incredibly hard on this issue, and I wish the theatre the very best of luck for next week.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Soaring taxes are putting visitors off coming to the UK—that is what the boss of British Airways says. Does the Minister agree?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place; I know that he is a big champion for his constituency and the issue. As I outlined, I met with the tourism sector a number of times just in the last week. We do recognise the challenges it is facing, but we back the sector.

**Joe Robertson:** Oh dear, that is not an answer to the question I asked. My question was about the tax burden on the tourism sector in this country. National insurance is up, and we have new taxes on part-time work. An overnight visitor levy is in the pipeline, and there are extra taxes on air passengers and ferry passengers. This Government's assault on the Great British holiday has been brutal. It is no wonder young people are struggling to find their first job. Will the Minister recommit to the Government's target to have 50 million international visitors to the UK by 2030, and will she tell the Chancellor to cut the brutal tax regime in order to get us there?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman, given the inheritance from the previous Conservative Government. If he had been paying any attention—I know he does not usually sit on the Front Bench—he would know that I have indeed committed to increasing visitor numbers. I regret his talking down our tourism industry, especially with the Isle of Wight festival starting today. It is going from strength to strength and I wish it the very best of luck.

### UK Artists Touring in Europe

9. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester Withington) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support UK artists touring in Europe. [900505]

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** A tremendous question. Helping touring artists is a manifesto commitment. At last year's UK-EU summit, the UK and the European Commission committed to supporting cultural exchange, recognising those touring artists. I discussed cultural professionals' working conditions with the European culture commissioner at the first high-level meeting on culture in March. Digital ATA carnets that enable movement without customs declarations or duties were launched on 1 June across the UK, EU, Norway and Switzerland. We continue to engage with our EU counterparts at all levels and with industry to support touring.

**Jeff Smith:** I thank the Minister for that answer; there is some good news there. One of the many negatives of Brexit is that it has placed barriers on UK artists being able to tour in Europe. The Culture, Media and Sport Committee has just published its report, featuring a number of practical measures that the Government can take to remove those barriers. Will Ministers act on those recommendations? I point to one in particular. As well as leaving the EU, the UK decided not to participate in the Creative Europe scheme, which we were net beneficiaries of. Ahead of the upcoming EU-UK summit, a signal that we intend to participate in the successor scheme, AgoraEU, would be a positive message to our creative artists.

**Ian Murray:** I congratulate the Committee on its report, and I welcome its continued interest in recognising the importance of international touring to the UK's world-leading arts and creative industries sector. We are carefully considering the recommendations and will form the response in due course.

The Prime Minister agreed with the European Commission President on Tuesday to press ahead with the UK-EU summit on 22 July, so that people on both sides can feel the benefits of the UK-EU collaboration as soon as possible. Touring artists were mentioned in the summit agreement last year. I cannot comment on the ongoing negotiations, but we are determined to ensure that UK touring artists can tour again in the EU as best as possible.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am very fortunate that I have exceptional talent in my constituency, and for those who wish to take their talents across Europe and other parts of the world, the opportunity is there. The Minister was positive in his answer to the hon. Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith). Will the same enthusiasm, energy and commitment be shown to our Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that he does the same for my constituents in Strangford?

**Ian Murray:** As well as sending artists across the European Union, Strangford sends the very best to this Chamber. There is a firm commitment on the EU side to take this forward. I met Commissioner Micaleff at the high-level meeting, and also discussed the matter at the Culture Ministers' meeting. We are determined to ensure that there can be as much ease as possible for UK touring artists in Europe. That is the manifesto commitment, and we are doing everything that we possibly can. It is complicated. There are a number of Commission elements to this—it is not just about visas but transportation, marketing and all those kinds of issues—but we are trying our very best to get through those as quickly as possible.

## Topical Questions

T1. [900512] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** I know that Members across this House will be horrified and disgusted at the serious allegations of abuse against women in the TV industry that have emerged recently. Everyone has the right to be safe and treated with dignity. The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts recently met Channel 4 about the serious allegations that have emerged about "Married at First Sight". We are not satisfied as a Government with the response that we have received, and I will discuss that further with Channel 4 in the coming week.

Since we last met, Mr Speaker, we have launched a new partnership with Gareth Southgate and the King's Trust to provide mentors for young people, as part of our commitment through the national youth strategy to ensure that every young person in this country has somewhere to go, something to do and someone who cares. We have also launched "Every Child Can" to give young people, wherever they live, the chance to find their spark and build the confidence and positive relationships they need to succeed. As the world cup gets under way, and after such a strong start, the whole House will join me in wishing both home nations every success.

**Mr Speaker:** And Bolton Wanderers, who got promoted.

**Peter Swallow:** Whether it is cheering along to every one of those England goals, bawling our eyes out as we watch the heartbreaking social drama "Tip Toe", or even following the latest twists and turns at Westminster from trusted news sources, it is undoubtable that public sector broadcasting enriches all our lives. We have heard about a lot of the challenges today, but what will the Secretary of State do to champion public sector broadcasting and ensure that it is fit and ready for the future?

**Lisa Nandy:** My hon. Friend will have heard my answer to colleagues about the future of the BBC. The Government are committed to ensuring that the BBC is set up on a sustainable basis for the future through the charter review, so that it can thrive for many years to come. But the BBC, he is right to say, is not the only public service broadcaster in this country. We have public service broadcasting that is the envy of the world, and the Government are determined to do everything we can to support and safeguard it, including by challenging where necessary—as we have with the response to "Married at First Sight" by Channel 4—when we believe that those standards are not being upheld.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): I echo the Secretary of State's introductory comments and congratulate England and Scotland on a great start to the world cup.

Since coming to power, this Government have cut funding for school sport, listed places of worship, tourism marketing and so much more, yet they have found billions for welfare, Chagos and inflation-busting pay rises for their union mates. Last Sunday, the Secretary of State went on telly to say that she was in discussions about cutting DCMS spending even further. Well, where and when? And who is to blame: is it the Prime Minister, for his weakness and failure to tackle welfare spending, or is it the Chancellor, for her utter economic incompetence?

**Lisa Nandy:** One thing I learned at school was that the answer to a multiple choice question is usually option (c). The hon. Member missed option (c) out, because the real answer to "Who is to blame for the situation this country is in?" is him and his colleagues, because of the appalling mess they made over 14 years of Conservative government. They cut our armed forces to a size that has not been seen for generations, they refused to treat our veterans with respect, they crashed the economy and they left working-class people in every nation and region paying a very heavy price.

We are investing: we have announced the biggest uplift to arts funding, in a single Parliament, in history; we are investing additional resources in young people to turn around the life chances of a generation; and we have invested more than £1 billion in school sport, which the hon. Member's Government squandered. He should be ashamed of himself—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We have only four minutes left, and we have to get through the Order Paper.

T2. [900513] **Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): There are not one but two England teams that currently have a 100% record of success in world cups: not only did the men's football team have a cracking result against Croatia last night, but the England women's cricket team have won two from two in their world T20 tournament games so far. Will the Minister say a little more about how we will capitalise on the success of the women's world T20 and ensure that cricket is a sport that grows and is available to all?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Please help me, because nobody is going to get in.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I congratulate England on their brilliant win last night, and he is right to mention the T20 world cup. I was delighted to be at the tournament launch; I held a women's sport taskforce event in Southampton to coincide with the match on Tuesday. The Government are investing £3 million in all-weather domes. I visited the England and Wales Cricket Board schools programme at Worsbrough in my constituency, which is increasing attendance at cricket in state schools.

T3. [900514] **Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): We are now over a year out from the Government's debacle over their consultation on AI and the creative industries. There seems to be a welcome commitment towards the copyright framework, but website owners still cannot see who is taking their content, and rights holders, publishers and journalists are watching their work being scraped in real time. There was a commitment to transparency, so when will we see the Government's plans?

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** As the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology laid out to the House on 18 March, we are taking forward four big strategic priorities—digital replicas, AI labelling, creative control and licensing—to get this right. No country in the world has been able to resolve this problem, but the UK is uniquely placed to try to resolve it. We want to work across the House and with both the tech and creative industries to get it right.

T4. [900515] **Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The National Centre for Arts and Music Education is due to be up and running this September. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether it will be ready in time and who will run it, and can she give us an overview of its remit?

**Lisa Nandy:** We are working very closely with the Department for Education to ensure that the national centre is launched in September, and we will update my hon. Friend and the House very shortly on the progress that we are making.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): Grassroots sports clubs such as Wokingham Town football club are at the heart of our communities, but many clubs struggle to find and maintain facilities and equipment. Would the Secretary of State consider convening twice-yearly meetings with grassroots sports governing bodies to strengthen collaboration and advocacy for community sport?

**Stephanie Peacock:** The Government are fully committed to working with the sports sector to support our vital grassroots clubs. We work closely with Sports England, an arm's length body, to engage with grassroots sports across the country and ensure that all sports are seen, heard and supported. Rather than duplicating existing forums, I welcome the creation of groups such as the national governing body coalition and look forward to working alongside it to effectively support the sector.

T5. [900516] **Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State advise what steps will be taken and what funding provided to encourage young people to take up sport, drama and other activities when the social media ban comes into place?

**Lisa Nandy:** Through the national youth strategy, we were absolutely horrified to find that a majority of young people in this country spend all, or almost all, of their free time alone in their bedrooms online. As part of the commitment to keep young people safe online and to get them out of their bedrooms and into the real world, we have been pleased to announce a significant uplift in funding for young people to ensure that we build the next generation of youth clubs and grassroots sports facilities, rebuild youth work and ensure that every young person has those opportunities in our country.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Recognising the answers that the right hon. Lady gave earlier, may I ask her to ensure that before the charter review comes out, she absolutely emphasises the need for radio news? Many people do not get to watch television news—I am sure she will be travelling later today and will not be able to watch the TV. May I ask her at this early stage to ensure that the BBC recognises just how important these radio news programmes are?

**Mr Speaker:** He's got a face for radio!

**Lisa Nandy:** Wow—can I not associate myself with those remarks? *[Laughter.]*

I agree with the hon. Member about the importance of radio and regional news. Recently, the outgoing director general of the BBC told me that regional news now has greater reach than national news. That includes local radio as well, and we will of course ensure that it becomes a priority through the charter review.

T6. [900518] **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): Redditch local history museum tells the story of our new town, our proud industrial heritage and much more. However, the museum was recently evicted from its premises and is now searching for a new home. Can the Secretary of State advise me on how her Department might be able to assist me in helping provide the museum with a new place?

**Ian Murray:** The Redditch local history museum deserve all the support it can get. Local museums are hugely important, and decisions on the operation of cultural organisations are taken locally, independent of Government, through Arts Council England. The national development agency for museums may be able to offer some advice, and I wish Redditch good luck in the town of culture bid.

**Hannah Spencer** (Gorton and Denton) (Green): Grassroots music venues in the constituency I represent, such as the Talleyrand, face increasing costs from business rates despite the emergency relief that has been provided. Can the Minister tell me how the music plan will help tackle the structural issues facing grassroots venues, such as the Talleyrand, and how it will secure the venue's long-term future in our community and cultural landscapes?

**Ian Murray:** The music plan is to help grassroots music. It is part of a whole package that this Government are putting in place to ensure that music thrives, and continues to thrive, in this country, including the £30 million music growth fund. We have the music plan, which will be coming out and announced shortly, but we also have the ticket levy—a £1 voluntary ticket levy on every single ticket sold for major concerts—which is putting money straight into grassroots music. That has put in half a million; there is another million to come, so that is hugely good news for grassroots music.

**Claire Hazelgrove** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): I am so proud to back Filton's bid to become the UK town of culture 2028. From our vibrant community to our vast heritage, including as the British home of Concorde, we have so much to offer the whole country. Will the Minister agree to meet me to hear more about this bid and what makes Filton so special?

**Lisa Nandy:** I thank my hon. Friend for being such an outstanding champion for her constituency. She and I have discussed the great, vibrant, diverse cultural offer and contribution that her community has to make, including the fact that it is the home of Concorde. Through the town of culture, we hope that many towns across the country can up their cultural offer, shout loudly about their achievements, take wings and soar.

**Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Will the Secretary of State rule out extending the BBC licence fee to streaming services such as Netflix?

**Lisa Nandy:** We have been very careful not to get drawn into speculation about the future funding arrangements for the BBC, except to say that we have ruled out a levy on streamers, and we have also ruled out direct taxation going to fund the BBC because of the need for the BBC to retain its independence. But I look forward to debating this issue with the hon. Member and for the whole House to come together to ensure that we get this right through the charter process.

## ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

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

### Polling Stations: Blind and Visually Impaired Voters

1. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What recent assessment the commission has made of the adequacy of polling station provision for blind and visually impaired voters. [900482]

**Sir Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam): All voters, including blind and visually impaired voters, should be able to vote independently and secretly. In its reports on elections in 2024 and 2025, the commission found that there have been improvements to the support available and that returning officers provided a range of accessibility equipment and support. The commission will publish a report on the May 2026 polls in the autumn, including consideration of accessibility. However, there is more to be done, and the commission has recommended improving awareness of the support available, including providing clear information on poll cards and in polling stations.

**Ms Minns:** I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his answer. Responses to a survey by the Royal National Institute of Blind People at the time of the last general election showed that 73% of people who are blind and visually impaired did not know that those adjustments were available at polling stations. I have tabled an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill that would require those adjustments to be made available. In the meantime, could he set out what more the commission can do ahead of the next elections to ensure that blind and visually impaired people can vote independently and in secret?

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** As I have said, the commission will review what happened in the May 2026 polls and make any further recommendations it feels necessary as a result. The hon. Lady makes two important points. It is important that equipment is available, and she will know that tactile devices have been found by the commission to have been available in every polling station. Her other important point is that people who are blind or partially sighted need to know about that, and communicating that information is crucial—she is absolutely right.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for that answer. The RNIB has been in touch with me in relation to an issue in Northern Ireland. Access to elections is imperative if we are to encourage true democracy, and there must be confidence that any and every polling station has easy access. Will he consider ensuring that those with blue badges are permitted to drive into polling stations and do not have to park outside the gates, as is currently the situation in some Northern Ireland polling stations? It is a very specific issue for us in Northern Ireland but hopefully one that the right hon. and learned Gentleman can help us with.

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** I will certainly make sure the commission hears what the hon. Gentleman has said. He will appreciate that judgments on these things are often for returning officers or for those managing individual polling stations, but he makes an important point about access. As I say, I will make sure the commission hears what he has said.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### Cruelty-free Cleaning Products

2. **Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): What steps the Commission is taking to reduce the number of cleaning products used on the parliamentary estate that are not certified as cruelty-free. [900483]

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): I am pleased to report that good progress has been made on reducing the number of cleaning products we use that are not certified as cruelty-free. My hon. Friend has rightly pushed us on this matter. In total, we use around 40 cleaning products. Since early 2025, we have reduced the number of products used that are not certified as cruelty-free from nine to three. For the remaining three products, the cleaning contractor is in the process of identifying suitable replacements that meet the required standard.

**Alex Mayer:** I very much welcome the progress that is being made; we are going in the right direction, from the figure of nine when I originally asked to three today. Would my hon. Friend be willing to meet with the body that runs the international approval programme for cruelty-free products, to see whether we can speed this up and make Parliament fully cruelty-free?

**Nick Smith:** The cleaning contractor will continue to work on identifying suitable alternatives from its suppliers, and I would be pleased to put it in touch with the body that my hon. Friend suggests can provide good advice.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

### Churches: Disabled Access

3. **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to ensure that churches are accessible for disabled people. [900484]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova):** The Church of England is committed to improving accessibility, so that all who wish to attend churches, whether for worship or community activities, are able to do so. Parishes may apply to the parish accessibility fund for up to £50,000 or a small grant of up to £5,000 for project proposals to improve accessibility features, such as the installation of an accessible toilet, step-free access and production of large-print materials.

**Daniel Francis:** In April, St Paul's cathedral opened a Changing Places toilet, providing disabled people with an accessible, dignified and safe toilet. That new facility gives visitors who require specialist toilets the ability to access the cathedral, as well as contributing to the local economy. Can my hon. Friend outline how other cathedrals across the UK can be supported to open Changing Places toilets, to provide disabled people with the facilities they need to visit these historic locations?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question and note all his work in this area; he is a true champion for disabled people, especially since coming to this place. The opening of the Changing Places toilet in St Paul's is incredibly welcome and, as he points out, it will open up access to that historic space for many people to enjoy. I am pleased to say that places like Blackburn cathedral already have such a facility, and Lambeth Palace, just over the river, is also soon to open a new space. I encourage all hon. Members to contact their local churches to encourage them to look into the disability project and to apply for the parish accessibility fund, so that they can improve their welcome to all their communities.

### Cost of Living: Support for Families

4. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Church of England is taking to help support families with the cost of living. [900487]

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Church delivers community projects across the country to support individuals and families with the cost of living. These programmes offer practical support, companionship and advice to those facing hardship, demonstrating the Church's ongoing commitment to serving and standing with all our communities nationwide.

**Chris Vince:** I want to pay tribute to three fantastic women in Harlow: Caroline Hatton, Alison Taylor and, in particular, the Rev. Jokey Poyntz at my local church, St Mary's in Little Parndon, who for many years has run a church furniture fund—she has got me to move the odd sofa—providing furniture to those in need across our town. What work are the Church Commissioners doing to recognise the work of local churches, like St Mary's in Little Parndon, and to learn from that good practice?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I join my hon. Friend in noting the incredible work in his constituency and the work of Rev. Jokey at both St Paul's and St Mary's churches. I believe that St Paul's runs the Bounty café, in association with the Harlow food bank.

**Chris Vince** *indicated assent.*

**Marsha De Cordova:** Wonderful! That café offers low-cost refreshments and light lunches at an affordable cost. My hon. Friend's constituency really is a fantastic example of community support in the Church, and I know what a champion of that work he is. I encourage Members across the House, if they have not already done so, to make contact with their local churches to see the work they are doing in their community and their huge impact locally.

### Places of Worship Renewal Fund

5. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): How parishes can apply for the places of worship renewal fund. [900488]

8. **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to ensure that rural churches are aware of the places of worship renewal fund. [900492]

**Marsha De Cordova:** The places of worship renewal fund was announced at the start of this year and formally launched in May. Historic England is managing the operation of the new fund on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The first application window closed on 14 June and the second round is expected to follow soon, in September this year.

**Douglas McAllister:** While the UK Labour Government introduced a £92 million fund for places of worship in England, the scheme does not apply to Scottish parishes now that it has gone from being a VAT rebate to a capital grant. The Scottish Government received the Barnett consequentials. However, no similar scheme was set up, despite the fact that they were told about the change by the UK Government as far back as January 2025. Will the Church Commissioners, with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, raise this matter with their Scottish counterparts as a matter of urgency to ensure that Scottish parishes have access to much-needed funding?

**Marsha De Cordova:** The National Church Institutions are very conscious that the new places of worship fund is not available in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend is correct to say that there has been a conscious decision by the Government to move away from the old VAT rebate scheme to a grants-based system, and he will know that that decision was not made by the Church. The Church has been supporting the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, as well as churches in Wales and other parts of the UK, and I would be happy to put my hon. Friend in touch with the team in Scotland if that would be helpful. I also urge him to do what all hon. Members should do when they want something to happen: to lobby the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the issue.

**Ben Goldsborough:** There are 124 round-tower churches in Norfolk. In South Norfolk, we have St Peter's church in Forncett and St Mary & St Walstan church in Bawburgh, to name just two. I have written to all my local churches to make them aware of the fund, but will my hon. Friend help to ensure that all rural churches are encouraged to apply?

**Marsha De Cordova:** What a fantastic question. My hon. Friend champions the beautiful churches across his constituency, and he is absolutely right to highlight both their cultural importance and the opportunities provided by the places of worship renewal fund. I thank him for writing to all his churches to share details about the fund, and I encourage hon. Members across the House to do the same if they are able.

The National Church Institutions have actively encouraged all parishes to make full use of the new fund and share the details as widely as possible through their clergy network, church wardens and so on. I know that they are regularly in touch, through targeted advice, newsletters and engagement with diocesan officers, to make everybody aware of the new capital grant scheme.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### Education and Engagement Outreach Team

6. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Whether the Commission has made an assessment of the potential impact of closure of the Education and Engagement Outreach Team on schools. [900489]

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): It is good to give my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) a break.

The Commission has considered the proposed changes to the education outreach model. The changes are designed to save money—over half a million pounds every year—and to ensure that we reach more students across the UK and increase the opportunities that Members have to meet children and young people. Although more than 30 Members have signed an early-day motion on the topic, in 2025-26 no events were held in nearly a third of our constituencies.

Under the proposals, the current model will be replaced by a digital model of outreach to increase opportunities for Members to speak to students. The proposed new service will help to reach schools in every constituency. A final decision on the proposals will be made following the consultation proposal.

**Tom Rutland:** The parliamentary education outreach service plays a vital role in delivering in-person democratic engagement workshops in schools across the country, especially those that are disadvantaged and harder to reach, by engaging them in the work of our political system. Does my hon. Friend agree that the closure of the in-person service risks making Parliament more removed from young people across the country?

**Nick Smith:** We understand my hon. Friend's concerns about these proposals, but the new model is designed to increase engagement with schools across the UK. Given the high number of constituencies that receive no outreach visits at all, the key benefit here is that the proposals would remove geography as a barrier so that schools everywhere can access these sessions. Furthermore, the proposed model will sit alongside other UK-wide programmes that continue to provide in-person opportunities, including our UK Parliament Week; teacher training activity delivered around the country; the travel subsidy scheme, which supports visits to Parliament; and the "Learn with the Lords" programme. With those programmes taken together, Parliament will continue to have a strong and visible presence beyond Westminster.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I have to say, I am dismayed by the fact that there will not be humans in contact with young people. From my experience, I know that young people are really engaged when somebody turns up in their place, particularly in their school. At a time when we are trying to reduce the screen time of young people, I want to speak up in support of having people going into schools, especially when they are slightly more distant from London—it is something so very different. I shall certainly reply to the consultation when it comes along, if I have not missed the boat, and I will speak up for this particular scheme; it is fantastic.

**Nick Smith:** The scoping work focused on large-scale and ambitious digital education outreach work across the UK. Case studies included in the research were the Royal Ballet and the North East Museums' "Hadrian's Wall Live" focus day, which both attracted very high levels of interest.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

### Support for Christians in Palestine

7. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to support Christians in Palestine. [900490]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova):** The Church remains steadfast in its support for Palestinians. The relentless attacks on the Christian population in Palestine and the wider region by the Israeli Government are abhorrent. We have also seen Christian communities in Lebanon cut off, with Palestinian refugees being the main target there. We have seen settlement expansion again in the west bank, too, which we know is in breach of international law. The bishops in the other place have publicly highlighted their concerns by condemning the violence, and they have joined His Holiness the Pope and the local heads of Churches, who have called for the protection of all innocent civilians.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith:** One of my constituents has written to me about Natalie Abu Dayyeh, a young Christian girl from Birzeit in the west bank who was seized at gunpoint by Israeli forces earlier this month. Her family do not know where she is being held—they do not even know whether she is alive and being treated well. This is a repeated pattern of behaviour: Layan Nasir, another Palestinian Christian, was treated in the same way last year. I have written to the relevant Minister at the Foreign Office, but can I also ask what representations the Church has made to advocate for Natalie's release and for the protection of other Palestinian Christians facing detention?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. It is clear that the Israeli Government are breaching international law, and this must be called out. The attacks on Palestinian Christians, and indeed any Palestinians, are totally wrong, and we need them to stop. The Bishops of Southwark, Gloucester, Norwich and Chelmsford wrote a joint letter on 5 June to the Right Rev. Dr Imad Haddad, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, about the case of Natalie Abu Dayyeh. They were clear in their letter that Natalie's detention is a violation of article 76 of the fourth Geneva convention. The bishops have renewed their call on the Government of Israel to immediately abolish their punitive practice of administrative detention, and to immediately release Natalie and all those who are presently being held. We all know that these are cruel measures, and as Christians, we must all speak out for the defenceless, the destitute and the voiceless. I will continue to do all I can in my capacity as both a Member of Parliament and the Second Church Estates Commissioner to ensure that the Church stands against the violence we have seen across the region for far too long.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Bob Blackman.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and apologies for not being in the Chamber earlier. The sad reality is that many Christians in the west bank and Gaza face direct challenges for forced conversion to Islam, and in the Holy Lands now there is not an attempt to increase the number of Christians and bear witness. Will the Church reach out to encourage and promote Christianity in the Holy Lands, so that we can see more Christians there, rather than fewer?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I thank the hon. Member for his question. He may or may not be aware that the situation in Palestine and across the region features regularly at Church Commissioners questions, and I have highlighted in the past the work that not just the Church, but the wider Anglican communion, is doing in that region.

## Grooming Gangs: Independent Inquiry

10.32 am

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the progress made since the publication of Dame Louise Casey's review into group-based child sexual exploitation, and the impact of recent developments on confidence in the Government's statutory inquiry.

**The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones):** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Tuesday marked one year since the publication of Baroness Casey's national audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse. The House will recall that the Government accepted all 12 recommendations of what was a landmark report, exposing more than a decade of failure and inaction on the part of the state. Scandalously, the most vulnerable in society were let down by the very institutions that should have protected them.

As the Home Secretary made clear in her written statement to the House earlier this week, this Government are determined to directly and decisively confront the failings that occurred. We have made good progress against the mandate for change set out by Baroness Casey, with action taken or ongoing in relation to all 12 of her recommendations. We have changed the law on rape to remove any ambiguity about the ability of 13 to 16-year-olds to consent to sex; established a new national police operation, Operation Beaconport, overseen by the National Crime Agency and backed by £38 million of funding this year; legislated to disregard any convictions for so-called child prostitution; and commissioned new research into the drivers of these heinous crimes, including ethnicity, religion, cultural factors, group dynamics and the role of online technologies.

Central to our response is the statutory independent inquiry into grooming gangs. Having been formally established in April, the work of the inquiry is under way and it will shortly announce the first local areas that will face investigation. The terms of reference have been shaped by the testimony, priorities and lived experience of victims and survivors. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to them, and to all who have campaigned to get us to this point.

The inquiry will have a laser focus on grooming gangs, including the role that ethnicity, religion and culture played in these terrible crimes. Our message is clear: we will do whatever it takes to secure justice for those who were so badly let down—pursuing the evidence wherever it may lead, exposing failings and taking every necessary step to protect the most vulnerable in our society. For too long, questions about what was and will forever be one of the darkest moments in this country's history have gone unanswered. That must change, which is why the Government have established a full independent inquiry to shine a light on past horrors. That is happening alongside our wider work to tackle exploitation and abuse, backed by a record £100 million in Home Office funding this year, in an unrelenting effort to keep our children safe from harm.

**Mims Davies:** I thank the Minister for her answer. It has been one year since Dame Louise Casey's stark and deeply troubling review of group-based child sexual exploitation, known rightly as the rape gangs. She exposed what we now know was a culture of institutional blindness, weak data and fragmented accountability and a reluctance to confront uncomfortable truths and ultimately to stand up for women and girls who have been systematically abused, or a culture where people simply chose not to act for the bigger fear of being labelled racist. It is disgraceful. Deep concerns remain that progress on justice has been too slow, and in some areas is simply superficial.

The Minister has rightly warned of a box-ticking culture. This Government talk a good game, but recent ministerial Home Office resignations have raised serious questions about what they are delivering in practice. How does the Minister respond to the deeply distressing but bold testimony of Fiona Goddard, who has bravely highlighted that some of the men convicted of abusing her have been released early, with others potentially due for release soon? These are Labour's choices, and we warned about them. What action is being taken to rebuild the confidence of the victims in this process? Does the Minister deeply regret opposing measures to prevent early release in such heartbreaking and horrific cases?

Finally, how are the Government ensuring that sentencing and post-release supervision reflect the severity of these crimes? I remind the House that we warned them about the consequences of their dire choices for the safety of women and girls. What are they going to do about it? Will anything change before the next election, or is this issue simply in the long grass? Survivors' voices and community concerns need to be heard. This is a matter of justice, accountability and trust. This Government need to step up and protect our women and our girls.

**Sarah Jones:** I think we can agree on some of what the hon. Lady has said. She is right that there was institutional blindness. We have seen that in other ways across the state, and not just in these horrific cases. It is something that we know we need to change. She is right to speak of the victims and the horrors that they have suffered, and she is right to keep a focus on that.

The hon. Lady said that the Opposition warned us about the prison situation; I gently say that we warned them, for very many years, about the state of our prison estate. When we came into government, we found a catastrophic situation: simply not enough prison places, and the whole system at the point of collapse. We have had to respond to that. As Policing Minister, I have a duty to ensure that our police are policing our streets and keeping everybody safe. We always ensure that we keep an eye, in the right way, on former criminals who come out of prison, and I spend a lot of my time talking to the police about how we do that.

We all greatly admire Louise Casey and are very grateful for the work that she continues to do. Of course she is right to push us to go faster, as she always will. That is why we asked her to do the job: because she demands the best from us. She has also praised the progress made by the Government in establishing the inquiry and in the work that has been done to date. She is understandably pushing us on three areas: the non-child prostitution convictions of some people who have been groomed, having the right information flows for Operation Beaconport, and Whitehall treating this issue with the urgency that it needs.

On all those issues, we are going as fast as we can and responding to the questions that Louise Casey has rightly asked. We are pushing to get all that work done as quickly as possible. She was clear that the inquiry should be relatively speedy. That was one of the challenges of the Professor Jay inquiry, which took many years, excellent though it was. The inquiry will be concluded by 2029. It has £65 million of funding. We will get to the answers.

**Dame Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Spicer review of 2018 into the handling of the widespread sexual exploitation of children and vulnerable adults in Newcastle found a culture that enabled and did not investigate the exploitation and rape of children and vulnerable adults, and a culture of victim blaming. It also praised Newcastle city council and Northumbria police's actions following the investigation.

I have repeatedly contacted Northumbria police to raise issues around child exploitation and to seek reassurances about its actions. Given the comments in the Casey review, how can I ensure that Northumbria police has the resources and support it needs to identify and support victims, believe them and encourage them to come forward, and to create a culture of investigation, openness and transparency to reassure my constituents?

**Sarah Jones:** I am happy to facilitate conversations, but it sounds like my hon. Friend is already having them. As she will know, we are working on police culture. The Hillsborough law and some of the wider work we are doing across Government aim to ensure that we have the right openness, transparency and culture of being professionally curious and seeking out solutions. That is very important. All forces across the country have had a funding increase this year, and Operation Beaconport has its own fund of £38 million. The funding should be there, but I am happy to have further conversations with her about that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): It is deeply disheartening that, a year on from Baroness Casey's audit, the Government have not made greater progress. The victims have already been failed once; they must not be failed again. Previous inquiries have produced more than 800 recommendations, most of which have not been implemented. We see this over and over again across Departments: inquiry launched, recommendations produced and accepted by the Government, and then nothing—while victims continue to suffer.

I wholeheartedly support the independent inquiry into grooming gangs, but it must not become an excuse to delay implementing the changes that we already know are needed. Will the Minister set out a clear timeline for implementing all Baroness Casey's recommendations in full, and make clear to every organisation with a duty to safeguard children that the hundreds of recommendations from previous inquiries are not "nice to haves" but must be implemented at pace and without further delay?

**Sarah Jones:** The inquiry, led by Anne Longfield, will look at previous inquiries and recommendations and bring them all into the inquiry's remit. I encourage the hon. Lady to sit down and talk to Anne Longfield, if she has not done so already, to ensure that her concerns in that space are felt.

**Marie Goldman** *indicated assent.*

**Sarah Jones:** I see that she has done so already.

The hon. Lady's point about inquiry recommendations is not unreasonable. I recently gave evidence to the Nottingham inquiry which, among other things, is considering the fact that Government inquiries happen over many years, recommendations are made, and then there is no oversight. The Cabinet Office is acting on that, bringing bodies together and ensuring that it can drive things forward, and that whatever the Department and whatever our role, we prioritise those recommendations from inquiries.

We are making progress on all of Baroness Casey's recommendations—I would say we are making good progress. The hon. Lady is right, of course, that we need to push as fast as we can.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Victims and survivors absolutely must be at the heart of this inquiry. How are they being put at the centre of this work in practice, are they being provided with access to support, and what meaningful opportunities do they have to shape the outcomes of the inquiry?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the role of victims and the need to be survivor-focused and trauma-informed throughout—that is exactly what the inquiry is focused on. The inquiry is working on a victims charter that it will publish soon, which will set out answers to all the questions she has asked about how we ensure that we are both supporting the victims and hearing their voices front and centre, when we know they were not listened to for so long.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I sat on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for 14 years. We saw the first exposé of the scandals of the grooming gangs, particularly in Rochdale and other places in the north of England. Dame Louise Casey came in front of us and made recommendations that have still not been carried out, so full power to the Minister to actually make this happen.

The sad reality, as I understand it, is that police forces are resisting the collection of ethnicity data, and indeed resisting investigations into those who turned a blind eye to what was going on with the grooming gangs. Will the Minister ensure that police forces carry out their duties properly and that those who turned a blind eye to what was going on are brought to justice and suffer the consequences of not protecting vulnerable girls?

**Sarah Jones:** I would be happy to have a conversation with the hon. Gentleman about any information he may have about police forces and what he has heard on that front. It would be very worrying if what he describes were the case. We have made it clear that ethnicity needs to be reported for the grooming-based CSE that we are dealing with here. In addition, in the police reform White Paper, which was announced in the King's Speech

*[Sarah Jones]*

and will be introduced soon, we committed ourselves to doing that across the board, so ethnicity reporting will be mandatory for the police.

**Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): The Minister mentioned institutional blindness to these horrific crimes. Will she outline how this vital inquiry's terms of reference have been designed to ensure a thorough examination of those institutional failings, which meant that action was not taken to protect children?

**Sarah Jones:** The terms of reference are very wide and very clear. They will look at culture, ethnicity, race and any kind of bias that was in the system. There is a wider question that Louise Casey has talked about many times, and which I am trying to drive through in policing, and others are trying to drive through in other areas of work, which is about professional curiosity: keeping an open mind; problem solving; looking and finding; being curious to get to the bottom of what is happening; and finding those connections. There is also a big piece of work around information sharing across different organisations, because there is a blindness that comes from all the different institutions not talking to each other in the way that they should and not picking up vulnerability where we should. We saw that with Southport and Nottingham, and we see it here. There is a big job to be done there, too.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The abuse of children is the most disgusting of crimes, and anyone who is involved in it, or who protects someone involved in it, must face justice. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), who I note is not in his place, published his report this week, and my constituents are eager to understand why the statutory inquiry will take three years—*[Interruption.]* Another two years—several years. Why is the Government-backed inquiry going to take so long?

**Sarah Jones:** The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) has done a piece of work. I welcome the work that he has done, and hope that he will pass on to the police and the inquiry any evidence, criminal or otherwise, that he has gathered. This is an independent statutory inquiry—it is a very different thing. It will be absolutely ruthless in making sure that we can outline every single part of what has gone wrong here and learn every single lesson that we have to learn, so it is a completely different thing.

Statutory inquiries have taken years and years in the past, and Louise Casey was very clear that she wanted it to be time limited, so we have said that we want it finished, which is unusual for an inquiry—some inquiries that the previous Government set up are still ongoing. It will be done by 2029, but it is a completely different piece of work. It will be enormously thorough, get to the bottom of what happened, and bring us the answers that I know victims and the whole country want to see.

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): The grooming gangs represent the most profound betrayal of some of the most vulnerable people in our society, and the victims were failed by the very institutions that should have protected them. Justice was denied, while perpetrators escaped accountability. The vile individuals who systemically groomed, abused and violated these girls must face the full force of the law. Can the Minister provide an update on Operation Beaconport and explain how its work is helping to identify offenders, secure justice for victims, and strengthen the national response to tackling these heinous crimes?

**Sarah Jones:** Operation Beaconport is being led by the National Crime Agency, which is the very best of our serious organised crime operators, and we are treating this issue as we would treat serious organised crime, which is what it is. We are treating it with the utmost seriousness. The NCA is working with local police forces around the country to review of closed cases. It made an announcement yesterday—Members can see it online—about reopening cases, and this year it has received £38 million of funding, which is a substantial amount of money and will enable the NCA to uncover, go back over and reopen cases where it feels that injustice has been done and that they need to be opened again.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): For the inquiry to secure justice for victims and survivors in Wales, it is essential that it fully understands the devolved context in Wales and the various lines of accountability that arise from it. One way to achieve that would be for Wales to receive a specific investigation as one of the inquiry's designated local areas. Will the Minister consider that?

**Sarah Jones:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, the inquiry is entirely independent, so it is not for us to say where it should lead. I know that the inquiry will shortly announce the first tranche of areas that it will go to, so he will be able to see the that soon.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): Does the Minister believe that the inquiry has the appropriate powers and flexibility to allow it to follow the evidence, wherever it leads, so that the recommendations can drive lasting improvements in safeguarding and child protection? Is she in dialogue with the Scottish Government on these matters?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend can be reassured that this inquiry has all the powers it needs to go, without fear or favour, to find the answers we all seek. This issue is too important for us not to have ensured that, so we absolutely have. I know that the Minister for Safeguarding will be in contact with her counterparts in the Scottish Government to make sure we are joined up in in our approach.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I echo the comments about how disgusting these particular crimes are. Lady Casey has identified how, in quashing convictions, the Government have failed to take account of the whole picture. Quashing convictions for under-age prostitution is laudable, but there are other convictions such as for possessing the drugs given to those who are abused by their abusers or carrying them under coercion. The Minister referred to professional curiosity. Could she encourage people around her to engage in exactly that, and to look further than just the very first or main conviction to sort this out?

**Sarah Jones:** As the hon. Lady says, we have quashed convictions for people under 18 who were tried for prostitution—a very important part of this picture—and Louise Casey is suggesting that we go further. At the moment, victims can come in and apply, and I think she wants a more proactive response, so we are working on more proactive guidance for victims.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her response, and for her reassurance that this inquiry will have the powers to go wherever and to whomever it needs to get the answers for families in Redditch and other areas affected by these heinous crimes. When the initial set of inquiries are announced, if the area I represent is not included, but I still want to persist and ensure families get the justice they require, how am I best placed to do that via the Department and the Minister?

**Sarah Jones:** As I have said, the inquiry is independent of the Government, as is right and proper. I suggest he speaks to Anne Longfield, who is leading this work, or her panel. When they make their announcement, I am sure people will say, "Well, what about other areas?" I am sure they will be working through that and dealing with the priorities as they see them, and I am sure they would welcome input from my hon. Friend.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): The Minister has referred to the grooming gangs inquiry carried out by our friend, the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), and early-day motion 380 makes a number of recommendations. Will the Minister engage with the hon. Member to ensure that his ideas and recommendations can be taken forward, because we do not want to have to wait until Baroness Casey's report in three years' time?

**Sarah Jones:** First, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are not waiting three years until the inquiry's report to act. We are already doing a lot of work, as I have outlined—such as Operation Beaconport to reopen cases—and we are using the legislative process to do what we need with data collection and ending the statutory rape definition. We are doing a whole raft of work, and we of course have our wider piece of work on violence against women and girls, with our ambition to halve it in 10 years.

I hope the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) is talking to Anne Longfield, who is chairing the independent inquiry and will take all information from all places. I hope he is feeding his information to her, and that if he has criminal evidence he is passing that to the police. I am sure he has uncovered the most grievous harm and talked to victims of it, and we want to make sure that they see the Government are acting in the most appropriate way.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): My thoughts are with the victims of the despicable grooming gangs. Does my hon. Friend agree that, despite the numerous actions that this Government have taken to protect women and girls, hon. Members sometimes use language, both inside and outside the House, that allows the spread online of tropes about my party and hon. Members on this side that—I speak from personal experience here—have real-world implications? Those online tropes affect the behaviour of people in the real world. Does she agree that it is incumbent on right hon. and hon. Members, both inside and outside the House, to use temperate language? Opposition is needed and expected, but politicising such an important issue can create real risks for hon. Members and others in the real world.

**Sarah Jones:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We all have a duty to try to use language in a way that does not incite hatred and division. Of course, there are very strong feelings around this area in particular, because the crimes are so heinous and there was so much that was wrong about the way that the state, in all its forms, responded to those crimes. I understand the anger, but I urge all hon. Members to be careful with their language. We have all seen, in real life, the impact of what we are seeing online. That can be very scary and very dangerous, so I urge everybody to treat this issue with the respect it deserves.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her encouraging answers, and put on record that no one doubts her commitment to delivering justice. We thank her for it. What urgent steps will the Government take to action the recommendations on the mandatory ethnicity recording of offenders and the deportation of all foreign national perpetrators, and those relating to the full institutional failures by the police, the social services, local authorities and the NHS? Will she follow through with a national public inquiry, with subpoena powers?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. On ethnicity, we will legislate in the police reform Bill, which will come before Parliament shortly, to ensure ethnicity is recorded in the way that I think everyone in this House wants. He will know that we have increased very substantially the number of foreign national offenders being deported. Since the previous Government, there has been a big increase. That is quite right, and we will continue with that. We will continue to do the work across all our Departments to make sure that people are acting in the way that they should. There is a whole raft of work under way across multiple Departments to make sure of that.

# Business of the House

11.2 am

**Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the upcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell):** The business for the week commencing 22 June will include:

Monday 22 June—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Bill.

Tuesday 23 June—Opposition day, first allotted day. Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

Wednesday 24 June—Debate on motions to approve ways and means resolutions relating to the taxation of energy and vehicles, followed by debate on motions to approve the draft Carbon Budget Order 2026, the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (International Aviation and Shipping) Regulations 2026 and the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (Credit Limit) Order 2026.

Thursday 25 June—General debate on Windrush day 2026, followed by general debate on the diagnosis and treatment of PANS, or paediatric acute-onset neuropsychiatric syndrome, and PANDAS—paediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 26 June—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 29 June includes:

Monday 29 June—Estimates day, first allotted day. Subject to the agreement of the House, there will be debates on estimates relating to the Cabinet Office, in so far as it relates to security and resilience; the Northern Ireland Office; and the Home Office and Ministry of Justice, in so far as it relates to criminal justice.

Tuesday 30 June—Estimates day, second allotted day. Subject to the agreement of the House, there will be debates on estimates relating to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, in so far as it relates to sport and youth services; the Department of Health and Social Care, in so far as it relates to pharmaceutical procurement; and the Department for Work and Pensions, in so far as it relates to spending priorities and performance. At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

Wednesday 1 July—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, followed by consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Taxation (Energy and Vehicles) Bill.

Thursday 2 July—Debate on a motion on commonhold and leasehold reform and the regulation of property managing agents, followed by general debate on access to further education. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 3 July—The House will not be sitting.

**Joy Morrissey:** It is a pleasure to be responding again to the Leader of the House. It is the day after England started their world cup campaign, and it is fair to say that they already have our hopes up; I am a bit cheered out.

Today, many of our colleagues are pounding the pavement for the by-elections. I am sure that the Leader of the House is waiting with bated breath to see if the self-anointed king of the north is shortly to begin his long march south to save the Labour party from the Greens. Or maybe the Leader of the House is waiting more keenly for the next intervention from the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), bemoaning the Prime Minister's "poor leadership, poor judgment and bad politics".

While the comedy of errors of this Labour Government is playing out, the serious issues facing our country go unaddressed: grooming gangs, the murder of Henry Nowak, the two-tier justice system, benefits Britain and, in particular, the irresponsible failure of the Prime Minister and this Labour Government to support our armed forces with a defence investment plan fit for the dangerous world we face.

The Prime Minister and the Labour Government are prepared to see our veterans subjected to continuing persecution and relentless lawfare. It is a failure of leadership. It is a failure to put our country before party. It is a failure to put our brave servicemen and women before personal political survival. It is a failure to protect those who have fought to keep us safe and free.

It is easy to say that the first duty of Government is to protect the country; it is much harder to make the choices needed to deliver on that duty. We know that the root cause of that failure is that Labour MPs put "Benefits Street" before anything or anyone else. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions kindly confirmed that when he told Peter Mandelson that the only question Labour MPs ask him is: who can they tax, in order to pay more benefits? The Prime Minister did not have the backbone to confront his Back Benchers and tackle the out-of-control welfare bill. There will be £333 billion of welfare spending this year—£18 billion higher than last year. As the Centre for Social Justice pointed out recently, that £18 billion could have been invested in our armed forces. It could have bought 200 fighter jets or 12 warships, or funded 250,000 extra soldiers. Labour is taking the wealth created by hard-working families, small businesses and millions of Britons, and making it clear that in Labour's Britain, working just does not pay. In Labour's Britain, "Benefits Street" comes first.

That brings me back to Andy Burnham, a twice-failed Labour leadership candidate who has shown that he has exactly the same flexibility of principle as the current Labour leader. This is a twice-failed Labour leadership candidate who thinks that governing will be as simple as out-Greening the Greens—spend more, tax more, repeat. This Labour party can never and will never change. Our armed forces, hard-working families and the small business across Britain deserve better. It is time for this Government to keep their promise, or go.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. I will get to her remarks in just a second, but before I do, may I say that I was saddened to hear this week of the passing of Roy Hattersley, former deputy Labour leader? It is an overused word, but he was a true giant of the Labour party, and he will be remembered for his role in reforming it. He gave decades of service, and I send my condolences to his friends and family.

I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending condolences to the family and colleagues of PC Jess Turnbull, a Northumbria police officer who was killed on duty. Police officers risk their lives each day to help people and make a difference. PC Turnbull was a committed and dedicated officer, and she will be sorely missed.

I congratulate the parliamentarians and those associated with Parliament who were recognised in the King's birthday honours last week. It is right and proper that people who make an exemplary contribution to public service are recognised in the way that many others across our country are recognised.

This week, we have announced that social media will be banned for under-16s. We are going further than any country in the world, and we are putting wider protections in place to give young people their childhood back. Yesterday, this House passed the National Security (State Threats) Bill. Many Members have raised the issue of national security with me in this forum, so they will be pleased to see that the Bill gave the Home Secretary new counter-terrorism-style powers to stand up to foreign state organisations and state-linked groups that threaten the UK's national security and the safety of our communities.

I join the hon. Lady in congratulating England and Scotland on winning their opening world cup matches. I particularly congratulate Scotland on their performance, which was their first win in the men's world cup for 36 years.

The hon. Lady started by referring to the king of the north. Her remarks were disappointing, because I thought for a moment that she was referring to me, but clearly not. She is right to say that leadership is a serious matter, but she is a late convert to that. As I have pointed out before, she was one of the last people in the bunker with Boris Johnson, and when that ended, she leapt to Liz Truss. I ask her just one question: how did that turn out?

On a serious point, this Prime Minister has done much more than his predecessors to make our country safe, by working hard on the diplomatic stage and on defence. I remind the House that the hon. Lady's Government "hollowed out" defence—not my words, but those of a former Defence Secretary in the Government in which she served. As for welfare, we are getting on with the job of tackling the broken welfare system that her Government left behind. We are also renewing public services, as well as keeping our country safe. It is not an either/or; we are doing both those things.

**Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): Many of my constituents rely on the 96, the 428 and the 492 bus routes, which serve Darent Valley hospital and Bluewater shopping centre. Reform-led Kent county council proposed a substantial increase to its bus tax, which Transport for London bus services pay to use the fast-track bus way at Bluewater. That is putting services at risk that many of my residents and those in neighbouring constituencies rely on to access the hospital and the shopping centre. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is vital that Kent county council reconsiders its proposal, and that Transport for London works with local MPs and the local council to ensure that these essential bus routes are safeguarded for my constituents?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring this matter to the House's attention. Buses are the most used form of public transport, and they are a lifeline for many communities. The last Conservative Government's record on bus routes is appalling. They raised fares and left communities stranded, and I am sorry that the Reform councillors appear to be following that example. I hope that they have heard my hon. Friend's remarks today and that they reconsider their decision.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to be here for business questions once again, subbing for my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean).

Last week the NHS published the first ever official figures on corridor care, which ripped off the plaster and revealed a scandal that many of us have seen at first hand. In one month, patients across the country were treated in corridors at least 69,000 times, and that is with major trusts such as Birmingham failing to share their figures. The practice has become dangerously normalised across our NHS. We on the Lib Dem Benches believe that amounts to serious and continual negligence, and Ministers should be held to account before a corridor care tribunal of patients, bereaved families and frontline NHS staff.

Behind every one of those numbers is an NHS trust or a hospital starved of resources and capital funds, and a social care system in crisis that leaves hospitals full of people who cannot leave, despite being desperate to do so, because the care package they need is not available. Meanwhile, A&E waiting rooms are heaving with patients waiting to be seen. Nowhere is the crumbling estate behind this crisis clearer than at Stepping Hill hospital in my patch, with its growing £134 million repair backlog. There have been collapsing ceilings, leaking roofs that forced the temporary closure of the intensive care unit, and times when just four of the 14 lifts were working, meaning that anyone using a wheelchair was unable to visit a higher-floor ward and that patients were carried up and down stairs in scoops.

Will the Government therefore make time for an urgent debate on the corridor care crisis and the state of the NHS estate to ensure that patients, including those in my Hazel Grove constituency, are no longer treated in corridors, or left waiting in them for hours for the treatment they deserve?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Let me be clear: no one should receive care in a corridor. The situation we inherited is unacceptable and undignified, and we are determined to end it. That is why, for the first time, we are publishing the data to show where problems are greatest and to ensure that trusts get the support they need. We are also taking action, investing £450 million to expand urgent and emergency care services. Although there is still a way to go, ambulance response times are now the fastest they have been in five years. The hon. Lady asked for a debate. The Health Bill has just gone into Committee—I think its first sitting is today—so I am sure there will be ample opportunity, both in Committee and when the Bill returns to this House, to debate the matters she raises.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): It has been quite the month for races in my constituency. A couple of weeks ago we saw the Consett cycle race from the Derwent reservoir to Consett town centre, and on 9 June we had the famous Blaydon race, with over 5,000 taking part. Both races, centred in the local community, are important parts of our local spirit. Those magnificent events highlight just how deeply residents across Blaydon and Consett value their shared identity. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on central funding for regional heritage events and projects?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to the attention of the House. She is right that ensuring that communities can come together is vital, and the Government are providing funding to help local areas breathe life back into their high streets and restore community pride—not only by giving them investment, but by allowing them to make the choices. Hers is a very beautiful part of the country, and I know that many Members will see the benefits of those community events and of commemorating both the Consett cycle race and the Blaydon race. I recommend an Adjournment debate as the best way to discuss how beautiful her constituency is and to find out how much the Government support what she aspires to.

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

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, next Thursday, in the Chamber, there will be a statement from the Work and Pensions Committee on its recent report. The Backbench Business Committee received eight high-quality bids for estimates day debates, and we had to disappoint two. As the Leader of the House announced, we have allocated three debates on each day. I make a plea to him to avoid Government statements on those two days, because the debates are well subscribed and Back Benchers will want to have their say about the estimates.

The Backbench business in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 23 June will be a debate on fly-tipping in residential areas and the associated impacts. On Thursday 25 June there will be a statement from the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government, followed by a debate on the national lung cancer screening programme, followed by a debate on ports and port connectivity. On Tuesday 30 June there will be a debate on Government support for removing unlawful storefronts from, and regenerating, local high streets. On Thursday 2 July there will be a debate on reducing premature deaths from heart disease and stroke, followed by a debate on Government plans to tackle air pollution.

Given my experience this morning, I was tempted to ask the Leader of the House for a statement on the performance of London Underground, but as that is a devolved responsibility to the failed Mayor of London, I have something much more joyous to relate: Sunday will be the International Day of Yoga, which has been celebrated across the world since 2015 and will be celebrated next week in Parliament. Personally, I do my yoga stretches first thing in the morning when I wake up. Yoga is now recognised by the national health service as extremely valuable to individual health, and I recommend it to everyone. May we have a statement next week, presumably from a Health Minister, on the benefits of yoga for personal health?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work of his Committee and for his update to the House on the business for which it is responsible. I certainly hear what he says about statements on the days of the estimates day debates. I am keen to ensure as much time as possible for those debates to go ahead and for people to take part, but there is sometimes a difficult balance to strike, as he knows, between allowing for debates and keeping the House updated on matters.

I can tell the House that I do not do yoga stretches of a morning—that will come as a surprise to many, I know—but I will certainly think about it. People get into all sorts of positions in this place, don't they? I had better stop this before it goes any further, but my understanding is that yoga has a calming effect, so maybe the Commission could consider the question of introducing it as part of what we do in the House before we start our business.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): The Ashington, Blyth and Tyne train line, which was closed during the Beeching cuts of the '60s, reopened in December 2024 and has already been used by more than 1.5 million passengers. There is a burning desire to extend the line to the coast at Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, via Woodhorn colliery. Can we have a debate in Government time on the merits and the social and economic benefits of well-supported local train lines and infrastructure to my communities in the likes of Ashington, Blyth and Bedlington and to other communities across the country?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that line in the House, and I pay tribute to him for all his hard work to secure it. I also pay tribute to the hard work of our late hon. Friend Ronnie Campbell, who worked extraordinarily hard on the project while he was a Member of this House. He was much respected and is much missed.

The Government are bringing rail services back into public ownership to ensure that our railways work for all the communities they serve. I recommend that my hon. Friend seeks an Adjournment debate to make his case not just about the remarkable success of the current line, but about its potential for expansion in the area he represents.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will recall that on 16 April I raised with the Leader of the House the failure of Capita to administer properly the civil service pension scheme. Ever courteous, he passed that information and my concerns to the Cabinet Office. The deputy director of the Government People Group responded on 30 April, saying:

"The Second Permanent Secretary at HMRC…is personally leading a specialist Pensions Recovery Taskforce to restore service levels…we are now focused on a backlog of approximately 25,000 outstanding pension quotations."

In response to my concerns about Capita, she said:

"Capita is a strategic supplier to the government"

and it has

"more than 80 contracts across the public sector."

She also said,

"we are holding Capita to rigorous account through every available commercial lever."

May I gently ask the Leader of the House whether it is not now time for the Cabinet Secretary to come to the House to make a statement and face questions on this matter?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The right hon. Gentleman is clearly frustrated on this matter, and he is right to be, because this has been raised not just by him but by other Members of the House for almost as long as I have been in this role. The response he got does reflect the fact that the Government take this seriously and that efforts are being made to improve the situation, but he is seeking an update, and I will go to the Department and see if we can get that update.

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We all know how important housing is, and I applaud the Government's ambition to build 1.5 million new homes, but we have seen Enfield, where we now have a Conservative-led council propped up by the Greens, decide to axe completely the Government's proposal for 21,000 new homes. Does the Leader of the House not think it would be good to have a debate in Government time on how we can reprofile that spending with the Mayor of London, to ensure that constituencies such as Hackney South and Shoreditch and neighbouring east London constituencies can get the housing we need? Even if it is not a new town in one big space, we could consider a revision of the Government policy to create new towns with a cluster of smaller developments in seats such as mine.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these matters, and I can hear in her voice the frustration about such decisions being taken without the recognition that we need more houses. They are needed not just for people to make a home, but as a driver of economic growth, which we all seek. I respectfully suggest that, should she seek a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate, she will find that other Members across the House will want to speak and to get an update on the Government's plan.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May we have a debate in Government time on the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's proposed changes to the way it compensates those who give their time as coastguard volunteers? The agency's current proposals are causing massive concern among volunteer coastguards in my constituency and right around the coastline. We risk seeing those volunteers being forced to walk away, leaving communities without the necessary protection as a result. Surely the Leader of the House can agree that not to take on board those concerns before making the changes demonstrates a fundamental lack of respect for those who volunteer their services in this way.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The right hon. Gentleman will know that the decision to move to a new model was the result of a Court of Appeal judgment that found that the current arrangements could not legally continue. That should not suggest any disrespect for the coastguard service, which is instrumental in keeping people safe around our communities. I represent a coastal community, as he knows, and I am acutely aware of the importance of the coastguard service and of the need to get this right. The matter was raised at Transport questions by a number of colleagues, and the Transport Minister at that point agreed to meet colleagues. If the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that such a meeting would help him to make his case—and it is a strong case—then I will help to arrange it.

**Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Cornwall has organisations like Young People Cornwall that deliver vital services in, frankly, substandard premises, and they are doing brilliant work with limited resources, but they need investment in buildings to expand their impact. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could ask the relevant Minister to outline the timeline for the next phase of the better youth spaces fund and how the criteria will be changed so that it also benefits rural and coastal areas. At the moment, the criteria are similar to the Pride in Place criteria, which excludes some of those areas.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of youth services. Our vision is to establish a much more straightforward funding system, to provide young people with opportunities where and when they need them most. We will be providing further details regarding eligibility criteria later this year, but I will ensure that the Secretary of State hears my hon. Friend's concerns and gives her an update.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I think Members on both sides of the House are deeply appreciative of the work of civil servants right across the country. To pick up the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), we have a real issue here. There are pensioners in my constituency who have dedicated their life to the civil service but are not in receipt of their pension from March. As a Member of Parliament who continuously writes to those administering the scheme to follow up these issues, I know that they do not have the courtesy to even respond and say what they are doing. Can the relevant Minister come to the House as a matter of urgency to make a statement on what is being done to support our civil servants who have retired?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says. As he says, this has already been raised; it is raised at most business questions, if I am honest. As I said in a previous answer, the Government do take this seriously. We are acting to turn around what is a very difficult situation, but I hear what he says about getting an update, and I will see what I can achieve.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Dame Jessica Morden. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"]

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): As a former history teacher, the Leader of the House will know that Newport was the site of the UK's last armed insurrection. Every year in Newport, we honour and commemorate the Chartists' sacrifice at the annual Newport Rising festival, and I am delighted to say that the torchlit march is being considered for the UNESCO inventory of living heritage in Wales. Does the Leader of the

*[Jessica Morden]*

House agree that we should take every opportunity in this House to debate and recognise the sacrifice of people's movements that helped to shape our democracy in this House, especially at a time when our democracy is under threat?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on her very well-deserved damehood, announced last week. She is right to draw attention to the story of Chartism, because it is a vital part of the story of democracy in our country, not least the Newport rising in 1839. Our democracy is absolutely central to who we are as a country, and the Chartists helped to build that. We can take pride in the evolution of democracy, and as a Government, we have a responsibility to protect and strengthen it.

I will give some thought as to how we might be able to mark the contribution of Chartists and others who have played a part in the extension of democracy, and I invite other Members to do so too. In the meantime, there is what was once a secret door between the previous Chamber in this House and the cloisters. The workmen who were repairing it in 1851 slept among the cloisters and appear on the census that year. Although I am not sure we would approve it at this time, they covered the door with Chartist graffiti.

**Mr Speaker:** Once a history teacher, always a history teacher.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Indeed. If anyone wants to see that graffiti, which is a remarkable example of the messages that Chartists leave for our history, I am sure the House can facilitate that.

**Mr Speaker:** Don't get him started on the Romans.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I want to raise the case of Hughie Stirling from Ullapool. He was on board a flotilla proceeding to Gaza with aid when the Israelis intercepted them in international waters and took them into custody. His partner tells me that he and others were shockingly mistreated—we are talking about physical abuse and even being beaten up. When his partner made appeals to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for information or assistance, the silence was utterly deafening. Hughie is a British citizen and has his rights, surely. Could we have a debate in this House on consular support and protection of UK nationals delivering aid abroad?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's constituent. It is not acceptable that a British citizen should be treated in such a way, and I am also disappointed in the disappointing response so far from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I will give some thought to what he asks about consular support. If he wishes to meet a Foreign Office Minister to express those concerns directly, I will help him to arrange that.

**Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The Labour Government's summer of savings programme—cutting VAT on visitor attractions and children's meals and providing free bus travel for under-16s this August—is welcome news for families in Derbyshire and those visiting the county, which is a much-loved holiday destination. It is also an important shot in the arm for a sector that is struggling. May I suggest to the Leader of the House that, once we have assessed how successful that scheme has been, we have a debate in Government time in the autumn to bring insights from constituencies across the country on what more we can do for the sector?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the Great British summer of savings programme. The measures will help families to enjoy a day out for less and support businesses that depend on footfall over the summer. On his more substantive point, I will ensure that he gets a response from the Treasury, not just on the policy but on learning lessons going forward.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): This week, we have been discussing civility in public life, yet almost a year ago, I formally reported Rutland Councillor Mark Chatfield to the Liberal Democrats for a year's worth of offensive social media posts, including, I am sorry to say, a racist post against my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), comparing him to different shades of toast. He has also attacked local journalists, calling for them to be named and shamed, and uses phrases such as "beet-faced Tory expletive" on his social media. What do we do when we go through the formal processes that political parties have put in place but they refuse to do anything at all when their councillors are clearly bringing their parties into such disrepute?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's experiences, particularly at a time when we are marking the 10th anniversary of the death of our friend Jo Cox. This House has marked that anniversary in a particular way and talked about civility in politics. I am very disappointed that such comments were made in the first instance, but also that that has not been followed up. I hope that the council hears the hon. Lady's words and that it acts: it has been a while and it needs to get on with it.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It was great to see so many Lionesses honoured in the recent King's birthday honours, including Jess Carter, who hails from Warwick and started her career at Warwick juniors. As we celebrate Pride Month, we do so, I fear, at a time that has dark echoes of the 1930s. Sadly in Warwickshire, the Reform UK council leader George Finch has said that libraries are promoting "contested gender ideology" and has promised "a comprehensive policy" to combat that trend. These libraries simply had Pride Month books and displays. We should be under no illusion: this is clear dog-whistle politics against the LGBTQ+ community. May we therefore have a debate on the crucial role of our councils in delivering community cohesion, not division?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I hope that my hon. Friend's council hears his remarks, because it is important that councillors reflect the whole of the communities that they serve. Once again, it sounds as if this is a Reform council that is disappointing the very people who probably voted for those councillors with so much hope, so I hope that they hear what he says and they reflect the whole of the community that they are meant to serve.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Nearly seven years ago, National Highways spent £40 million building a ghost junction on the M49 that was left entirely unconnected to the local road network. South Gloucestershire council stepped in and is on track to complete the slip road this year, but National Highways now tells me that the junction is unsafe and cannot open, with no timeline for remedy, meaning my constituents will continue to have lorries thundering through their villages, shredding the roads. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the accountability of National Highways for this farcical situation?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The lorries thundering through must be deeply frustrating for the hon. Lady's constituents, and they must be frustrated at not having the road network they thought they would get. It is an ideal topic either for an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate, so that she can hear from a Minister what could be done to take this matter through to completion.

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): To keep with the current theme of the beautiful game, the Buza youth football academy in Ilford South has been running for only six years, but, in that time, the youngsters—the under-nines—have won the Echo junior league, and the under-11s and under-13s have won cups and competed abroad. Two of its players now have contracts with West Ham United; they are aged only six and eight, but they are talented. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating this wonderful club on the quick strides it has made, its wonderful coaches and the work of the parents, in helping these children progress so quickly?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Football and sport in general provide such richness and experience to the lives of young people. That is one reason the Government are providing a £400 million package for grassroots sports facilities across the UK. I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Buza youth football academy on so many incredible achievements. I wish it and the young people who have gone on to West Ham's books all the best for a bright future.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): The landmark 250th anniversary of the declaration of independence by the United States takes place in the week commencing 29 June. I have applied for an Adjournment debate, but will the Leader of the House enable more Members to be able to participate in marking that historic event?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** That is a historic event, and I will give some thought to what the hon. Gentleman asks.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): Everybody knows that my constituency is one of the most beautiful and the No. 1 tourist destination in the United Kingdom, so the safety of those who live on and visit the stunning coastline is a priority. I heard the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) ask a question about coastguard rescue officers. Will the Leader of the House make time for an urgent debate in this House on the impact of the decision to stop paying coastguard rescue officers for emergency call-outs from September, following a recent Court of Appeal ruling? What support will be provided to the volunteer coastguard teams, including those at Rhossili, Oxwich and Mumbles in my constituency, to maintain effective emergency response capability?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is a doughty fighter for her constituency, and I share her support for and appreciation of the work of the coastguard service. She will have heard my response to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the offer I extended to him. A Transport Minister has said that they will meet concerned MPs, and I extend that offer to my hon. Friend. Should she seek a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate, I am sure it would be well attended, because this matter will affect a number of constituencies.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): May I raise the matter of repayments of overpaid corporation tax identified by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs after a company has been dissolved? Businesses in my part of Somerset have had repayments, but they are not able to cash them; it is their money, but the business no longer exists, so effectively the cheque cannot be paid in, and the account has quite rightly been closed. Will the Leader of the House encourage the Chancellor to assess the current processes, including the transfer of such funds to the bona vacantia division, so that former shareholders of solvent but dissolved companies can recover funds in a way that is successful? That is particularly the case for small businesses.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I draw to the attention of the hon. Lady the fact that it is Treasury questions next week. She might want to raise this issue then, but I will also draw her remarks to the attention of Treasury Ministers and see if one of them can provide an update.

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I was delighted this week by the Government's announcement that, among other measures, we will be banning social media for under-16s. Throughout the consultation, I met hundreds of people in Beckenham and Penge, including parents, teachers and students, but one family I met have really stuck with me. Chris and Jo Barber from Beckenham tragically lost their wonderful son Leo, who took his own life in November 2023 aged just 16. The inquest into Leo's death found that exposure to harmful content online significantly contributed to his mental health struggles. I have been working with Chris and Jo to advocate for this change, and on Saturday I am also joining them for the launch of Leo's Safe Haven, a charity they have set up to provide mental health support for other autistic children and young people. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the ban on social media as a major step forward in protecting the welfare of children and young people, and in paying tribute to the courage of bereaved parents, like Chris and Jo, who turn personal tragedy into positive change for others?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I echo my hon. Friend's sentiment about the ban on social media that was announced earlier this week, and I join him in paying tribute to the bravery of Chris, Jo, and all the campaigners who use their tragic and unimaginable experiences to bring about change for the better. We are taking action; we are going further than any other country to keep children

*[Sir Alan Campbell]*

safe online, and will set out further measures in July. In the meantime, I wish my hon. Friend and everybody concerned all the very best for their event on Saturday.

**Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Across my constituency, from Hagley to Wythall, from Cofton Hackett to Belbroughton and in the villages in between, it feels as if there is a barrage of speculative planning applications from developers who have been emboldened by this Government. There are around 1 million long-term empty homes in England alone, which would go a long way towards helping the Government alleviate the pressure on the green belt as they seek to deliver their housing target. Can we please have a statement from the Housing Minister on the Government's long-term empty homes strategy as soon as possible?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I will certainly draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of the Housing Minister and make sure he gets an update. However, as he knows—because he has raised these matters before—it is important that we have the housing that the country needs. I understand that has to be done in a sensitive way, but it is important that we get on with it. It is also important that we deal with the issue of empty homes, but that alone will not resolve the housing crisis.

**Dame Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I join the Leader of the House in paying tribute to the young Northumbria police officer who so sadly and tragically died last week while protecting and serving our region.

The A1 motorway forms the boundary of my constituency at Etal Lane. There is an open play area next to cars racing past at 60 mph or more. For a decade now, my constituents have been raising concerns about the unsightly and—more importantly—unsafe fencing there. For the past five years, led by former Labour councillor Alex Hay, they have been passed from Newcastle city council to the Highways Agency. In the meantime, the fencing has fallen into total disrepair; in some places, it no longer exists, forming a clear and present danger to a whole generation of Geordie children. The Highways Agency has finally accepted responsibility, but now says that it may or may not fix it next year—at the earliest. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can ensure a culture of taking responsibility among Government agencies, rather than passing the buck?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. I pay tribute to Alex Hay and everyone else who has campaigned on this issue—I understand how upsetting it will have been, particularly to parents in that area. I am pleased to hear that it will be resolved, but not about the timescale that is envisaged. I hope the Highways Agency has heard my hon. Friend's question and that, if possible, it will do something more timely, but I will also draw the matter to the attention of Transport Ministers to ensure that the Highways Agency is held to account.

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): In Taunton and Wellington, people recognise the need for new homes, and indeed have supported thousands of new homes. Taunton is the town that has grown most in the south-west—its population growth is 2% ahead of the national average. However, we do not accept the blinkered idea that that cannot go hand in hand with protecting our most precious green spaces, although the proposed new national planning policy framework will make that so much harder. The longest established environmental development charity in the world, the Town and Country Planning Association, has called the framework an unprecedented change. The public are debating it, and the Government are consulting on it. Can this House have a debate on the proposed new national planning policy framework, which is more far-reaching than the recent Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The hon. Gentleman raises understandable concerns, but as I have said before, the country needs houses. It is therefore a question of balance. Should he seek a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate, not only will other colleagues be able to raise their concerns about their areas, but he will hear directly from the Minister responsible.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Health and social care partnerships across Scotland face a funding gap of half a billion pounds in their budgets this year alone. That is the result of years of under-investment by the Scottish National party. That has real-life consequences, because tomorrow in Renfrewshire we face the prospect of our local disability resource centre in Paisley being closed, our Autism Connections programme being cut, and our day centres for adults with learning disabilities being merged. Does the Leader of the House agree that rather than cutting vital services that my constituents rely on, the SNP Government in Holyrood should invest in our communities using the record funding they have had from this Labour Government, and put the constituents of Paisley and Renfrewshire South first?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important matter with the House this morning. The Scottish Government have had the biggest single investment since devolution, so my hon. Friend and her constituents will rightly be scratching their heads as to why community facilities are being lost in the way that they are. I hope that the Scottish Government have heard her remarks today. She is a great champion for her constituents, and I hope that something can be done to save these community facilities, as they are so important.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Those who care for our loved ones at home are unsung heroes and reduce the financial burden on the NHS. It is therefore tragic when they are subjected to harm or crime from those they bring into their homes. Yet without a carers' register, families are left open to abuse by those who do not have Disclosure and Barring Service checks or, worse, do not have verified training in first aid, dementia and safeguarding. It is reasonable to expect that the people who provide the most personal care are safe, competent and trained. We undervalue those who work in care, so will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on professional standards in social care?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The hon. Lady is right to pay tribute to carers. They are unsung heroes, and I assure her that this Government respect the contribution that they make. She raises an important point about carers and people being cared for being able to expect safety as they live their lives. I will therefore draw what she says to the attention of the Department responsible, but she might also want to raise this issue in a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate and hear directly from the Minister.

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Last week I visited St Regis Church of England academy in my constituency of Wolverhampton West, and I was impressed to see its outdoor learning space and nature reserve. This week I met a young constituent in Parliament who is participating in an environmental leadership programme. I see young people with a growing passion for protecting and enjoying the environment. In the light of our commitment to protect our young people online, what alternative opportunities will this Government provide so that our young people can also enjoy outdoor activities, green spaces and the environment?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter. Alongside our action this week on social media, we are also giving every child greater access to a range of opportunities, including in nature, through the "Every Child Can" programme. I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a Westminster Hall debate to hear from the Minister about what more can be done.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My constituent Marika built Fortitude gym in Williton from scratch at just 27 years old after selling her own house mid-covid. It has grown into a community wellbeing hub with classes and events, offering support to members coming back from injury, illness and addiction, one of whom went from being on crutches to running a half marathon. Outfits like Marika's are doing preventive health work that takes pressure off the NHS, but business rates and overheads continue to push them towards closure. Will the Leader of the House make the case to his Treasury colleagues for fairer business rate treatment for small, independent health and fitness-focused providers, so they can keep doing the vital preventive work that the NHS relies on?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The hon. Lady will know that the Government are seeking to balance the moneys that the Government need to renew public services while ensuring that businesses are treated fairly. I will raise her concerns directly with Treasury Ministers and get her an update on what further action the Government intend to take. We want community businesses and facilities to be retained wherever possible.

**Mark Sewards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Local businesses are the backbone of our high streets, and on that basis I congratulate Souvlaki Corner on its hugely successful opening in Morley this week, following its rip-roaring success in Wortley; should you find yourself in our part of the world, Mr Speaker, you and the Leader of the House are welcome to join me there any time. Given that this Government are backing our high streets with £10 million for high street rental auctions to get empty shops filled, can we have a debate on this and the other things we can do to help genuine local businesses?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I certainly join my hon. Friend in celebrating the success of Souvlaki Corner; as I just said, small businesses are at the heart of our economy, and we are committed to supporting them. We will bring forward our high streets strategy later this year and build on our work to regenerate high streets across the country. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate so that he and other hon. Members can raise ideas about how best to further support local businesses, which has been a theme of today's deliberations.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I put on record a tribute to former councillor Jeanette Sunderland; many by-elections are taking place today, but the one in Idle and Thackley, in Bradford, is taking place as a result of her tragic passing earlier this year. She had a record of more than 30 years serving the community, and she was a true Yorkshire Liberal.

On the weekend just gone, I took part in the Great Knaresborough bed race, which is celebrating its 60th year. It was a fantastic event. The population of Knaresborough nearly doubled for the day, and that came with challenges for wi-fi and cellular network capacity, which meant that local businesses struggled to trade on the day. Can the Leader of the House arrange a meeting with the relevant Government Departments to ensure that, at next year's event, people can get the trade into their businesses, pubs, shops and more?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I pay tribute to Councillor Sunderland's work and send condolences to her friends and family. She and I may not have shared a political point of view, but we certainly respect people who serve their local communities.

It sounds as if the Great Knaresborough bed race is something to behold. I will raise the matter with a Minister, and if the hon. Gentleman wants a meeting with the relevant Minister, I will help him to get one.

**Mary Glindon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): My constituent Abdul faced three on-the-day cancellations of his asylum interview because of challenges securing an interpreter. He then had a fourth interview, in his second language, in which he is not proficient. He is now appealing his decision on the basis that he was unable to answer questions to the best of his ability. With his appeal date next month, he faces his fifth trip to London without an interpreter being present. Will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Minister to make a statement on what steps the Government are taking to tackle interpreter-related interview cancellations for people like Abdul?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend raises a distressing case. I am not surprised that she does so, because she has an outstanding record of working hard on behalf of her constituents. If she provides me with the details of the case in writing, I will ensure that the Home Office receives them and that she gets a response from the relevant Minister.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): Eight months after changes to FP69 flagging were made, GPs in Wokingham remain concerned that many patients marked for removal from lists are from ethnic minority backgrounds or other vulnerable groups. Will the Leader of the House

*[Clive Jones]*

make time so that Department of Health and Social Care Ministers can update the House on whether an equality impact assessment has been undertaken or whether one is planned?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an answer off the top of my head, but I will draw that matter to the attention of Health Ministers and get him the update he seeks.

**Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I was delighted to be able to congratulate Auchinleck Talbot football club from my constituency on their recent remarkable achievement in winning the Scottish junior cup for a record 15th time. They came from behind to defeat their Ayrshire rivals Largs Thistle, demonstrating the resilience, determination and community spirit that has made the club one of the most successful and respected names across Scottish junior football. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the team once again, as well as the volunteers, the supporters and all at the club, on this outstanding success and acknowledge the important role that local football clubs play for local communities in bringing together and inspiring our young people?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating her local team and club on an outstanding achievement. Local football clubs—indeed, local sporting clubs—play such an important part in our local communities. On this occasion, not only will they celebrate their success, but I am sure they will be watching the television, looking at the performance of their national team and maybe even dreaming that they may be part of that in the future.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Leader of the House will always be the king of the north as far as I am concerned—*[Laughter.]* I believe that many others in the House will be of the same opinion.

Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam following the arrest of Pastor Siu Yúi and church member Siu Dok in Gia Lai province on 1 June on charges of undermining national unity, including what representations the Government have made to the Vietnamese authorities on the use of national security provisions against Montagnard Christians and other religious minorities?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a serious matter. I pay tribute to his tireless work in this regard. He knows that the UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all. We have regularly raised concerns in that regard in Vietnam with the Vietnamese Government, including through the work of our special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), and we will continue to do so. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a response from the relevant Minister.

**Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): Dartmoor ponies are vital for the biodiversity of the moor and the economy of the south-west. They are so iconic that they feature as the logo of the national park. However, Natural England's policies mean that the population of ponies has fallen from over 5,000 10 years ago to under 1,000 today. The Prime Minister and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have made it clear that they do not support any pony cull, whether by design or by default. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on the role of Natural England and its responsibilities to deliver on the Fursdon review?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, which has caused some concern after the reporting on it. Dartmoor ponies are an important part of Dartmoor's heritage and are important in supporting its habitats. Natural England is not recommending a cull—I do not believe it is in its power to do anything about that anyway—and let me put it quite clearly on the record that the Government would not allow one.

**Rishi Sunak** (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): My constituents and I are deeply concerned about proposals to develop what would be one of England's largest onshore wind farms right next to the Yorkshire Dales national park. With turbines as tall as the Gherkin, it would have a huge impact on the visual landscape in one of the most beautiful parts of our country and could damage our precious peatland in the moors, which, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, is a natural resource that we are lucky to have. Will he join me in praising the work of Councillor Thompson and the Hope Moor wind farm action group for organising our community? Will he support both their and my efforts to ensure that our local voices are heard loudly during the process?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** It is good to see the right hon. Gentleman in his place; I would have thought that No. 10 was a rough place to be, but it sounds as though he has been in the wars more recently, although perhaps of a different nature. He is right to raise this matter on behalf of his constituency. I know his area well; it is a very beautiful part of the world, and I understand the concern that people there have. I offer my congratulations to Councillor Thompson and the local people on raising their concerns. Whatever the outcome, it is important that local people have their voices heard, because it is very much part of their heritage.

**Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): During the recent heatwave, bus drivers reported soaring temperatures in their cabs and steering wheels that in some cases were literally too hot to handle. Will the Leader of the House consider bringing forward a debate in Government time on maximum working temperatures? As the climate changes, this issue will be of increasing importance to workers across the country.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her diligent campaigning on this matter. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that workplaces are safe in the modern world, and we have committed to look at how to modernise health and safety guidance for extreme temperatures as part of that. The Health and Safety Executive is reviewing the approved code of practice for workplace regulations to ensure that it is fit for purpose. At the appropriate time, I am sure that the relevant Minister will want to update the House.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): Morrisons has proposed closing its shop in Highfields, which hosts the local post office. Closing it would remove a vital service from our community, which people rely on every day for banking and bill payments. For many residents—particularly older people and those without access to a car—the nearest alternative in Rising Brook is not a realistic option; it is also open for much shorter hours, which would not serve the needs of many of my constituents. I have already met Morrisons and the Post Office to raise these points. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the role of post offices in local communities—something that impacts not just my community, but communities across the country—recognising that accessibility is key? This would allow Members to discuss the impact of the loss of those services on residents who depend on them for day-to-day activities.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** We certainly recognise the impact of closures on communities and their access to essential services. I hope that even at this late stage, an alternative site is found. This week, we opened a call for evidence as part of the access to banking services review, and I urge my hon. Friend and other Members across the House to contribute to that and to make their voices heard. Should she wish to follow up on the specific local example in her constituency, I would encourage her to apply for an Adjournment debate.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): I seek the guidance of the Leader of the House. David, a constituent of mine, has raised serious concerns about the handling of a deeply distressing paternity case involving a child who was taken out of the country and was later confirmed to be his daughter. Key lines of inquiry were not pursued by West Midlands police, and evidence that was relied upon has been found to be false. Significant delays and errors have been experienced in the proceedings in Latvia, and concerns remain regarding the child's welfare and contact with the father. How would the Leader of the House suggest I support my constituent and help to reunite this father and daughter as soon as possible?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am sorry to hear of my hon. Friend's constituent's distressing situation. If he writes to me with the details, I am sure that the relevant Minister will get a response to him. If he wishes to speak to the Minister directly instead, I will help him to arrange that meeting.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): After my constituent successfully took his employer to an industrial tribunal, a financial award was made to him, but it was never paid. He knows that the current enforcement system is ineffective. I am aware that Ministers are working to provide a better system to ensure that people like my constituent receive the payments they are due. Will the Leader of the House update me and the House on progress so far, and would a debate on the issue be of use to Ministers in teasing out the many issues that are no doubt involved?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend raises a concerning matter. The law is clear that workers should receive the payments to which they are entitled. We are committed to strengthening enforcement options and, as she alludes to, the Department for Business and Trade and the Ministry of Justice have set up the dispute resolution system taskforce to provide insights and to feed back on longer-term system reform proposals. I will ensure that she receives an update on that work.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will be aware of the long-term funding challenges facing our palliative care sector due to real-terms funding cuts over many years. As a result, St Clare hospice in my constituency of Harlow is consulting on streamlining services. I welcome the fact that the Government will publish the modern services framework in the autumn, and I met the Minister for Care to discuss this yesterday, but can the Leader of the House find time for us to discuss this important issue in Government time?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this important matter, and we recognise the difficult financial situation that many hospices are facing. We have supported the hospice sector in England with a £125 million capital funding boost, but I encourage him to apply for a Westminster Hall debate to raise his concerns, which I know are shared by colleagues from across the House, and to hear from the Minister directly.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I am sure that I speak for all right hon. and hon. Members when I say that it is a privilege to serve our constituents in this place. We have a multifaceted role. There are many things that Back-Bench MPs can do in this place—some are welcome, and some are perhaps not so welcome. Sometimes Back Benchers even get above their station, such is the allure of high office. Can the Leader of the House find Government time for us to debate the role of Members of Parliament? As we know, there is no job description, no employer—save for our constituents—and perhaps not even a Government Department that could answer. But I think it is important that we debate and suggest ideas—in addition to those that we can send to the Modernisation Committee, as I have done repeatedly—about how we can improve the role of MPs. It is much misunderstood, and some might say under-resourced, and we can probably do better.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend raises a fascinating issue, and I agree that the role of MPs has evolved but is of no less importance than it was. As he says, there is no job description for MPs, and each MP will have a different interpretation of their role, both as a constituency representative and in scrutinising the Government and legislation.

My hon. Friend raises this issue in the context of metro mayors. In my experience, it often comes down to personal relationships, the way in which metro mayors regard their powers and their job, and how MPs might work more closely with them. At the end of the day, it matters not what party people come from, but what we are prepared to do collectively to serve the constituencies and regions that metro mayors and MPs represent. However, the Government are absolutely determined to shift power out of Westminster, with more local decision making, better services and a stronger voice for local people, which means that this debate will rumble on. My hon. Friend may want to find forums in which the House can debate these matters going forward.

# Regional Innovation and Growth

## SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

*Select Committee statement*

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

12.13 pm

**Dame Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this statement. On behalf of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, I put on the record our thanks to the Committee Clerks and specialists who supported this inquiry.

We are told on a daily, if not hourly, basis that the source of all our political, public service and economic woes is the lack of economic growth. The Labour Government were elected on a platform of delivering economic growth across the country through their "unashamedly place-based" modern industrial strategy. Across the UK, we have world-class scientific research institutions and universities, two of which are in my constituency: Newcastle University and Northumbria University. Indeed, the importance of the innovation ecosystem is reflected in the Government's pledge to spend £86 billion of public money on R&D by 2030, and to leverage at least £3 of private investment for every £1 of public investment.

The Committee launched its inquiry in December 2024 to assess the role of our innovation ecosystem in achieving this Government's wider economic growth mission across the UK. Our call for evidence assessed the role of structural factors in influencing the success of start-ups, spin-outs and other innovation-focused enterprises; these included the tax system, regulatory requirements and standards. Across six sessions, we heard from innovators, investors, local and regional leaders, universities, Ministers, UK Research and Innovation, and Innovate UK. I place on the record my thanks to those who gave evidence. By doing so, they helped us to shape our report, and we are very grateful.

Our report, entitled "Flying Blind: Innovation, Growth and the Regions", was published in March. Profound policy mistakes have led to a multi-decade failure to foster even economic growth geographically. From a productivity and GDP per head perspective, we are two nations: Greater London and the south-east, and everywhere else. Last year, GDP per head in the UK averaged just over £39,000. Every region in the country is below that figure, apart from the south-east, at £41,000, and London, at a whopping £69,000. My Committee's report found that if the £86 billion of public funds is accompanied by unlocking private investment across the country to commercialise innovation, it could deliver regional economic growth and therefore better living standards and quality of life for all our constituents. Although we welcome the Government's commitments, including a £500 million fund for regional innovation clusters, that is less than 1% of our public research spend.

The work of our Committee member and former Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), rightly emphasised the power of clusters. Our report found that there is still untapped potential for innovation-driven activity across the regions, with an increase in the number of innovation-led clusters. Regional inequalities continue to persist in R&D funding. The golden triangle between Oxford, Cambridge and London receives significant public R&D funding and private investment, absorbing 46% of non-business R&D despite having only 36% of the population. The Minister for Science has asserted that cutting-edge research is best carried out in centres of excellence, and we found such centres in Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Manchester, Milton Keynes and Newcastle, among many others.

Geographic clusters can drive productivity, foster concentrated networks of expertise, infrastructure and collaboration, and support regional growth. Their success relies on sustained investment, established infrastructure and skills concentration. We have said that the Government should establish a national framework for cluster development that embeds regional key performance indicators. We have said that the Government should take a data-driven approach and comprehensively monitor, map and support the growth of innovation-led clusters across the regions. We have also said that the Government should publish annual data covering the performance and impact of innovation clusters. The data should set out any gaps in infrastructure, skills, and commercialisation outcomes, and detail how public investment is being used across different parts of the country.

Throughout our inquiry, we heard of major shortfalls in gathering and sharing data relating to innovation policy, meaning that there is currently no clear way to track the pipeline from R&D research to capital investment, company growth and wider economic benefit. There is no system that brings together the data on all research and innovation spending across the public sector. The Public Accounts Committee noted in July last year that UKRI aimed to link up all such data across Government but had not given a target date, and that "significant limitations" in its data systems make it hard to manage its budget strategically.

We concluded that the UK is flying blind when it comes to public and private R&D spending, and it is unacceptable that we cannot measure and map R&D spending and private sector investment. The Secretary of State rightly told us of her desire to leverage public funds to unlock private investment in innovation-led activity across the country, but without clear and transparent measures of what is being done and its impact, it is impossible to assess existing policies or identify improvements.

I thank the Government for their response, which was published on Tuesday. There is much to welcome in it, particularly the Government's joined-up contribution from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Ministry of Housing, Communities

and Local Government, the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Education, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office.

I welcome the Government's agreement with the key thematic areas highlighted in our report, and their acceptance of the need for better data. More specifically, the promise of

"a more robust and joined-up approach to monitoring the development of innovation clusters over time"

is a step in the right direction. The Government also committed to doing more to help innovators access public funding and, crucially, to prioritise the procurement of innovation, which is the best way for the Government to support the development of sovereign UK alternatives to global technology providers. I note and welcome the Chancellor's recent directions to Ministers on this topic.

However, I am disappointed by the Government's rejection of our call to establish a framework for monitoring cluster development, and by the fact that they will not designate a Minister responsible for championing innovation in each region of the UK. That leaves us with only a Minister with responsibility for Cambridge and Oxford innovation—the Minister for Science. The Government have argued that they should not be supporting the establishment of a Midlands Mindforge or a Northern Gritstone, and they have not accepted our recommendation to establish regional branches of the British Business Bank. By failing to accept these recommendations, the Government are depending too heavily on an industrial strategy that does not have appropriate regional data.

We chose to call our report "Flying Blind" because that was the best summary of the approach of successive Governments to innovation policy. Regional growth and development can transform a region and rebalance our nation's economy, helping to address the inequalities that drive division. Greater Manchester is an example. Under Mayor Andy Burnham's leadership, we have seen 3.1% annual growth sustained over 10 years, which is faster than London and twice that in the UK as a whole. That shows the power of regional leadership and investment.

The current Government deserve credit for backing our national research and development ecosystem, but without a clearer picture of what works for different regions and a greater engagement with local leaders on what support their local innovation ecosystems need, we will continue to be flying blind.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I welcome the report and thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her diligent work on it. In Yorkshire, we receive less funding per head across the board for transport, schools and, importantly, health research. We know that Yorkshire receives a quarter of the funding per head that London receives, despite worse cancer incidence and worse cancer outcomes, which are key health aspects. Does the hon. Lady agree with me that, given that regional imbalance, tackling health inequalities means making sure that research funding is better allocated across our regions?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** First, I thank the hon. Member for his contribution to the Select Committee while he served on it. He is absolutely right to trace the link between research funding and key issues such as health inequalities, from which we also suffer in the north-east of England. He is right to identify the need to address the differences in health research funding, but without the appropriate data and information, it is hard to do so. He is also right to look for that to be addressed by the Government, and we shall be looking at the actions of both DSIT and the Department of Health and Social Care in this area.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, which is very interesting and important. I briefly draw her attention to the agreement between Rugby borough council and Frasers Group, which is setting up its global HQ in my constituency. Under the agreement, Frasers Group is providing £10 million for a much-needed training and innovation hub in Rugby town centre. Does she agree that encouraging businesses, such as Frasers Group and many others, to invest in towns and not just cities is vital? We need to remind our Government that cities are wonderful and attract lots of investment, but they have a lot going for them already, and we need to do more for our towns. What she said in her statement gives me some hope in that regard.

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I join him in paying tribute to Frasers Group. Innovation and its benefits are for everyone across our country, and that is particularly important in towns that may traditionally not have seen those benefits, or may have done so in centuries past but not recently. Having a local employer and business drive innovation and innovation-sustained jobs in his town is of particular benefit to his constituents, not just now but in the future.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Chair and the Select Committee for their report. The hon. Lady has clearly identified the regional shortcomings when it comes to innovation, growth and where we are. In the discussions she would have had with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and perhaps with the Minister as well, about identifying the shortcomings of regional funding for us in Northern Ireland, what recommendations were put forward to improve that?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** The hon. Member is always a champion of Northern Ireland, and I congratulate him on the examples of innovation and its contribution to economic growth that the Committee found in Northern Ireland. We did not have a specific discussion about that when the Minister for Science came before the Committee, but the hon. Member raises very good points, and I am very happy to take them up with the Minister.

**Mary Glindon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I thank my constituency neighbour for her statement. Does she agree with me that devolved authorities, such as the North East combined authority, have the local knowledge to inspire, support, drive and encourage innovation and growth in places such as our very own Tyneside?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I am immensely grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for her question, and she is absolutely right. As I highlighted in my concluding remarks, we have seen how in Greater Manchester, where the mayor has had over 10 years to make such a difference—we see this in Liverpool as well—having local leadership that values innovation and knows the local economy's needs, skills and strengths can really drive regional growth. I know that the mayor

*[Dame Chi Onwurah]*

f the North East combined authority, Kim McGuinness, is fully seized of the importance of innovation in driving great jobs and a sustainable economy in the north-east, particularly on Tyneside.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and the Select Committee for their report. Can she say a little more about the role of the Scottish Government in this area, and whether the Select Committee had any observations about the relationship between the Scottish Government and the UK Government in that regard? She has referred to the role of devolution in this space, so is that relationship securing the gathering and sharing of data that she might expect and that she raised in her statement, and if not, what more can be done?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** We looked at innovation in the ecosystems around Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and we found fantastic examples of world leadership in scientific research and innovation in Scotland.[1] However, we did not find the collection of regional data at a level that would have enabled us to measure effectively what works best. There were some concerns about the funding of research, particularly high-intensity research, across Scotland, but I would be willing to discuss that in more detail with my hon. Friend.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her report; I found it fascinating. A statistic I cannot get out of my head is that cities around the UK have seen growth accelerate at a rate of 10.7% in the past 10 years, but it has been 5.4% in our towns—almost half. Our towns were the hubs of innovation in the industrial revolution. Does my hon. Friend agree that any Government plan must have towns at its heart to support innovation and the good jobs that come with it?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the north-east, our great history of industrial innovation and growth was based around towns as well as cities, and that is what we must aspire to again. The focus on clusters and data would enable us—through the industrial strategy, which has so much to be welcomed and supported—to ensure we can drive innovation across a region and in particular look at hubs that are based around towns, as well as cities. We found that there is much good work done by universities. Having hubs in towns and around the region can drive innovation and therefore, with the right support, growth.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) has stolen my thunder by speaking about towns, for which I will never forgive her! *[Laughter.]* I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) for her report. I am going to bang on about towns, because the report's title perfectly describes the frustrations and the situation in Redditch. We sit at the heart of a precision and research engineering supply chain that contributes millions to the economy, yet we receive a fraction of the research and development funding from Government or from private investment. To support the excellent firms in Redditch, does she agree that we need granular regional tracking to get the metrics in place to support the clusters that exist outside towns and metro areas, so we can grow our towns and get the regional and national growth that the Government so desperately want?

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** One can never bang on too much about towns and innovation and growth. That is what all our constituents across our country deserve, because it is only by having growth in every town across the country that we will address the cost of living crisis and the economic conditions that we need to improve. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to understand, in concert with local leaders, what innovation is happening around Redditch and what works best to ensure that Redditch and the towns in his area get the innovation support they deserve and which they can put to the best use for his constituents and all our constituents.

1. *Official Report*, 06 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 2WC. (Correction).

# Courts and Tribunals Bill

## JUSTICE COMMITTEE

*Select Committee statement*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Justice Committee. Andy Slaughter will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which there will be no interventions. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement, which should be brief questions directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the Minister. Front Benchers may, of course, take part should they wish.

12.33 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this statement. The Courts and Tribunals Bill was introduced in February as a response to the Crown court crisis. There were over 80,000 outstanding cases as of December 2025, with some trials being listed into 2030. That harms victims, defendants and witnesses alike. We recognise the urgency of that crisis and acknowledge that continuing with the status quo is not an option.

In response to the crisis, the Government commissioned Sir Brian Leveson to conduct his independent review of criminal courts, which has been published in two extensive parts and makes 180 recommendations to address the crisis and reduce the backlog. The Government's Bill has been informed by Sir Brian's review, although it deviates from his recommendations in some key areas.

Last Wednesday, the Justice Committee published a report setting out our critique of the Courts and Tribunals Bill, based upon three oral evidence sessions and over 130 written submissions. I take this opportunity to thank all those who contributed to the report, in particular Committee members of all parties, many of whom are here today, and of course our secretariat. Our report makes recommendations to improve the Bill and draws attention to some of its unintended consequences, and it aims to inform further scrutiny of the Bill in both Houses. I note that we do not yet have a confirmed date for the Bill's return to this House on Report. I hope we will have that soon.

The Government introduced the Bill without publishing a formal response to part 1 of Sir Brian Leveson's review. The Government also declined to allow the Justice Committee to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny. We instead launched our inquiry a matter of days after the Bill's publication, as we felt this landmark piece of legislation required proper, in-depth parliamentary scrutiny. We know it is hard for the Government to change course once a Bill is introduced, but this is an area where the Government should have enabled more parliamentary input before pushing forward, particularly given that the Bill's provisions will not come into force until March 2028 at the earliest. Our report is analytical, but crucially it is constructive and aims to improve rather than dismiss what the Government have proposed. It covers all clauses of the Bill dealing with reform of the criminal courts, but I will focus my remarks on a few key areas.

First, let me address the impact on magistrates courts, which will significantly increase owing to the removal of the right for defendants to elect for Crown court trial and by increasing magistrates' sentencing powers. Our principal finding on this point is that we are not convinced that the magistrates courts will be able to cope. It seems unrealistic to propose that 7,000 magistrates can be recruited in three years so that there will be 21,000 magistrates by 2029. Previous recruitment campaigns have fallen far short of their targets. Retention also remains a persistent challenge and there is a chronic shortage of suitably qualified legal advisers. The Government must demonstrate, in more detail than they have done so far, that expanding capacity in the magistrates court is deliverable. As part of that, we recommend that the Government should significantly increase the number of salaried district judges. They must also ensure that the pay of legal advisers matches comparable legal roles in the public sector.

The Government seek the authority to increase magistrates' sentencing powers to 18 months or even 24 months—double what they are now. Until recently the maximum was six months, and then from October 2024, 12 months. Sir Brian said that this should be set permanently at 12 months and that the Government should not be able to vary it at will. We say at the least that any change should be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure and debated in Parliament. Otherwise, every time there is a peak in prisoner numbers, the Government will shift magistrates' sentencing powers down to six or 12 months and then back up to 18 or 24 when they stabilise again.

On appeals from the magistrates court, we recognise the Government's concern that, as more cases are retained, unmanaged growth in appeal volumes could place additional pressure on the Crown court. We also accept that the current automatic right to a full rehearing can, in some cases, place a stressful burden on victims and witnesses. However, appeals currently represent a small and declining proportion of overall Crown court receipts, with only 0.4% of magistrates court decisions appealed in 2025. They are resolved quickly and with a high success rate, suggesting that the right to a full rehearing plays an important role in correcting wrongful outcomes.

The Bill provides for the introduction of audio recording in magistrates courts for trial and sentencing. This would allow for an accurate record of proceedings to be transcribed in support of an appeal. Several submissions we received raised concerns about the scale of such an undertaking and the practicalities of equipping magistrates courts with the necessary facilities. It would benefit no one if changes were introduced before recording systems were properly functioning or if they subsequently failed. We recommend that any changes to magistrates appeals should be introduced only once recording of all magistrates court proceedings has been introduced and is proven to be operating effectively.

The main public and professional criticisms of the Bill have been around judge-only trials, and the creation of a Crown court bench division. Our report focuses more on the question of whether that will work in practice rather than the principles of the reform. We decided the proposal to introduce judge-only trials hangs on allocation to a jury trial or the bench division. That will be done by an assessment, at the first hearing in the Crown court, as to whether the defendant would receive a sentence of three years or more.

*[Andy Slaughter]*

While many cases will be straightforward, the allocation process could consume a significant amount of court time and judicial resource overall. We think the three-year threshold for deciding which sort of trial a defendant gets will need some more consideration. At present, when magistrates decide whether a case should be allocated to the Crown court, they consider the length of the potential sentence, but they also can consider the circumstances of the case. Should the Crown court not also be able to say that a case is likely to have a sentence of less than three years, but should still have a jury trial?

We conclude that the allocation process as currently designed is likely to be complex, time consuming and will lead to unintended consequences. Reliance on likely sentence length as the sole criteria will mean that defendants with previous convictions are more likely to face a jury trial than those without, and that children are less likely to face a jury than adults accused of the same offence. We recommend that children should be exempt from being tried at the bench division. We also raise concerns that the predicted 20% time saving of judge-only trials, so heavily relied on in both the Bill and Sir Brian's review, lacks sufficient evidential basis.

Finally, on equality, we share the concerns of many in the justice sector around the potential equality impacts of the Bill, particularly in relation to race. An unreformed justice system already perpetuates a range of inequalities, and we do not feel that the Government have tackled those head on through the Bill. The Bill proposes to expand the role of both the magistrates court and judge-only Crown court proceedings, while reducing the role of juries.

The Lammy review, in 2017, concluded that juries are one of the few areas of the criminal justice system where black and ethnic minority defendants do not face disproportionate outcomes. It is shocking that only 1% of Crown court judges are black, a figure that has not changed since 2015. This has serious implications for the trust that black defendants may have in the bench division, where judges will sit alone. We recommend that the Government take action to improve progression routes to the senior judiciary, and that they set a clear national target to achieve a representative judiciary and magistracy by 2035.

We recognise the need to reform our criminal justice system and commend the Government for commissioning the Leveson review and proposing comprehensive reforms. We hope, however, that they will take note of our recommendations, which we believe would improve the Bill while maintaining the core values of justice and fairness in our criminal justice system.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I put it on the record that I voted for an alternative report that I felt better reflected my concerns, but I accept that the report is a fair reflection of the Committee's view.

Given that the last recruitment drive for magistrates failed to deliver the much-needed uplift at that point, and with the expansion of magistrate-led trials adding further pressure, does the hon. Member agree that the Government should publish regular statistics on magistrate recruitment to ensure that they are on track to achieve the 21,000 by 2029?

**Andy Slaughter:** The hon. Member is right to mention that there was a dissenting report, which was not approved by the Committee. Other members may wish to raise that issue. From my point of view, it was reassuring that the analysis in both reports was very similar. I hope that I correctly reflected some of those concerns in my statement. What the outcome of those concerns should be may have been a matter of difference between different parties, but that all adds to the spice of life on Select Committees. I agree with the hon. Member on magistrates. There has been so much attention on the issue of judge-only trials, which is crucial, but the Bill will succeed or fail on recruitment and the type and nature of magistrates court proceedings. They are being asked to do a huge amount of heavy lifting, and it is only fair that the Government keep us up to date on progress.

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that there has been quite a bit of opposition to having judge-only trials. Given that only 1% of the judiciary are black, does he agree that it is now even more urgent to look at how the judiciary are appointed? Something appears to be seriously wrong with the selection procedure.

**Andy Slaughter:** My hon. Friend is an assiduous member of the Committee. In the same week that the Committee published this report, we published our report on the pre-appointment hearing for the new Judicial Appointments Commission chair. We feel strongly that the Government need to look at judicial appointments and progression, because it is clearly not working at the moment. It undermines the credibility of a judiciary that we all take huge pride in if they are not reflective of the population at large. That was true before the Bill; it is even more true after it.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I too voted for the minority report, mainly because I am particularly concerned that the Government are going much further than the Leveson report. On judge-only trials, if magistrates' sentencing powers are increased to 24 months, it is not impossible that cases with sentences of up to two and a half years could be retained by the magistrates court, which might mean that there is little work for the Crown court bench division; it will only have a narrow tranche of cases. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that there is merit in looking at other jurisdictions, and seeing whether there are other mechanisms for allocating cases that might be fairer and more efficient?

**Andy Slaughter:** The hon. Lady is also an assiduous member of the Committee, and I appreciate what she said about important respects in which the Government, without evidencing the reasons, have departed from Leveson—for example, on whether magistrates should sit with judges in the bench division. She makes a good point: because the Government have deviated from what Leveson recommended, there is a narrow window between what can happen in the magistrates court and what is left for the Crown court bench division to do. The Government will have to look at that again. Some Members may think that that is a good thing, because they are not supportive of the Crown court bench division, but we have to have a system that has credibility and works seamlessly.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his recommendations. Many are specific to England and Wales, but could be helpful for us in Northern Ireland. I always ask this question, because it is important that it be put on record: has the Committee suggested that the recommendations could be helpful to us in Northern Ireland? If we can get UK-wide improvement, then we must.

**Andy Slaughter:** I rely on the hon. Gentleman to attend these statements, so that he can make that point, as he has done during every Justice Committee statement on the Floor of the House. He is right that, even though the Bill will apply in England and Wales, the lessons can be learned elsewhere. I will undertake to go back to my officials and ensure that that work is done.

# Backbench Business

## Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

*[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 4 and 1 June, on Government compensation schemes: update, HC 88.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Clive Efford, who will speak for around 15 minutes.

12.49 pm

**Clive Efford** (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme.

At the outset, I would like to bear witness to those who have fought for justice for so long, and who have given evidence to the inquiry. I would also like to pay tribute to my predecessor as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson).

I am aware that many Members who would like to be here are in Makerfield for the by-election, so I may ask for your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I have a lot to cover, because a lot of people are missing. The Government are about to lay another set of orders before Parliament, and the community and campaigners have demanded that we make representations on their behalf before they are laid, so I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for moving us up the list and granting us this debate in such short time.

I congratulate the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office for securing the funds to get the compensation process under way. I know that he takes the matter to heart, and it would be understandable if he felt slightly harshly treated, given that he has secured £9.8 billion for the compensation process, but I am sure he understands that because the community of the infected and affected have had to fight so hard for so long, and have lost many friends and relatives along the way in the face of huge opposition, they are not ready to praise anyone—not until everyone has received justice.

In his address during the service of remembrance and reflection at St Paul's, Sir Brian Langstaff said that this catastrophe was no accident. It has been called the deadliest man-made disaster in post-war history. In the '70s and '80s, people knowingly gave infected products to unsuspecting patients. In the USA, the production of blood products farmed from volunteers and prisoners took off after the USA deregulated harvesting blood products. Pooling products from different people meant that entire supplies became infected. As early as 1975, "World in Action" exposed the dangers of these products. In 1983, Government experts knew of the risks of contaminated blood products. Costs meant that heat treatment to clean the products was not introduced.

In 1989, the then Government were advised to provide victims with compensation on humanitarian grounds. The Government rejected that advice on financial grounds. The Government continued to withhold information from the infected and their families. Had they been told, they could have sought medical help, and many would have avoided tragedy. The World Health Organisation

*[Clive Efford]*

expressed concern about the commercial supply of products from paid donors, but still the practice went on, and victims were kept in the dark.

Pupils at Treloar's school were experimented on. Between 1970 and 1987, 122 pupils with haemophilia attended the school. At the time that the evidence was given to the inquiry, only 30 remained alive. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that your constituent Gary Webster is one of those; another is my constituent Lee Moorey. I am pleased to say that he is still with us. Lee did not find out until he was 14 that he had been infected with HIV. He was in his 30s when he found out that he had been infected with hepatitis C, and he found out that he has hepatitis B only last year. There is no escaping the fact that, had people been under an obligation to tell the truth at the outset, many lives would have been saved.

We welcome the changes that the Government announced on 14 April this year, following the consultation that they held from October 2025 to January 2026. However, there remain concerns that some elements of the compensation system still require change.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for setting the scene so well, and I am sure that everyone in the House is committed to the same objectives. The hon. Gentleman is right to underline the issues. My constituents back home face significant stress over delays, and unfair deductions when compensation is passed on to the estate of the bereaved. Does he agree that we need a timescale for the moneys to be paid out, so that all those who have experienced delays will know the timeframe? Perhaps the Minister, who is always very responsive and helpful, will come to the House regularly to update us on that before the end of this year, and certainly by the conclusion of spring 2027.

**Clive Efford:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman; we do need a timescale. I will cover that later.

There are concerns that elements of the compensation system still require change, and that some of the decision making is arbitrary and not consistent with what had been promised. I will attempt to go through those concerns. Unethical testing is the most disturbing and distressing aspect of this horrible affair. People—most of them children at the time—were used as human lab rats. Former Treloar's pupils have described themselves as "cheaper than chimps" for experimenting on. The Government have increased the payment for those who attended Treloar's school from £25,000 to £60,000, which is a welcome step in the right direction, and for those who were experimented on as children elsewhere from £25,000 to £45,000.

But we should stop to consider for a moment what this compensation is for. These children, without their knowledge, were given contaminated products so that the effects could be studied by the state—the state that should have been there to protect them. Imagine being one of the victims and reflecting on what the state has done to you, knowing that your life has been altered and shortened, and that you have lost friends. I spoke to one parent who described looking at her three children and knowing that she would never see them grow up to be adults or get married, and never see her grandchildren. The top price for that is £60,000. The message was, "If you are a pharmaceutical company, come to Britain. We have set the price low enough that you can carry out experiments on anyone, and then pay the fine and still make money." What these people have lost is priceless, and £60,000 is nowhere near enough. The issue is not just the size of the compensation, but the gravity of what took place and its immorality. That has to be addressed, and these payments go nowhere near doing so. They should be withdrawn to allow a proper dialogue to take place with the infected and affected, so that an appropriate solution can be reached. We must recognise the losses that these people have endured since childhood.

Some recognition has to be given in the new regulations to the impact of interferon treatment for those infected with hepatitis. The changes are time-limited to two years for financial loss, and one year for the care award. The compensation scheme cannot continue to ignore the real-life effect on victims of long-term interferon treatment, and the associated costs, which are far higher than the time-limited uplifts that the Government propose introducing.

Treatment for interferon is not recognised when it comes to additional injury awards. Those awards must be paid to all those who underwent interferon treatment, regardless of other harms they may have suffered. Then there is the situation with hepatitis B. Why are people infected with hepatitis B not given equal treatment in the compensation packages with those infected with hepatitis C?

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend may be aware of the work that the National Audit Office has done, looking at different compensation schemes. Does he think that there are lessons that this and any future Government need to take on board when proposing a compensation scheme? Some matters are dealt with by compensation, and some through bureaucratic procedures of the civil service; other resolutions come about as a result of a campaign, like the one he led with others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson). Are there lessons from this that should be applied more widely, and has he had conversations with the Government about taking that approach?

**Clive Efford:** I have not had conversations with the Government about an approach like that, but I do agree with my hon. Friend, and I will address that later. The Government need to learn lessons, and to set up a system, so that we do not have to learn all over again all the lessons of paying compensation and implementing inquiries' recommendations every time this happens.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has set the point out very powerfully. It is distressing for any of us in this House, and particularly for those of us who cannot imagine our children being put through that in such a callous way. In addition to the questions around compensation, one of the most horrendous things is the additional burden being put on parents where they have to prove, with documented evidence, that they lived with their child 40 or 50 years ago when that was done to their baby, to the future of their family. Will the hon. Gentleman touch on how outrageous it is that that is required, and the additional heartache and burden that that puts on those families?

**Clive Efford:** I will touch on that and I will make that very point. There are areas of evidence required that are unreasonable. I thought we had agreed that that sort of evidence would not be asked for.

In his statement on 14 April, the Paymaster General announced, for all those claimants who can demonstrate to the Infected Blood Compensation Authority that they meet the criteria, that all care and financial loss claims can be backdated to 2017, when the special category mechanism was first established. The community of people I have spoken to feels strongly that compensation must cover actual costs, whenever they occurred, and that there should not be an arbitrary cut-off date of 2017.

On the issue of evidence, which the hon. Lady just referred to, the Government did not accept the inquiry's recommendation for IBCA to be less stringent on overall evidence for the psychological harm award, and instead advised that people apply to the special category mechanism award. There is concern that the evidence threshold will be too high, and the Government should allow IBCA to be more flexible and compassionate in considering claims of psychological harm through the special category mechanism.

The communities consistently pointed out that the current scheme penalises those who died before the compensation scheme came into force. The Paymaster General did not address that issue in his statement earlier this year. The compensation scheme must pay the estates of those who died young for the harm and losses suffered, and end such a clear injustice.

The current scheme has not enabled family members who gave up work to be compensated for the sacrifices they made in their lives and the opportunities that they lost as a result. The supplementary compensation scheme should enable carers to claim the actual financial and personal losses that they have suffered as a result of providing care.

My constituent Mary Grindley wrote to me on that issue:

"I understand that the Cabinet Office is considering a supplementary route to further compensation for the affected on top of the lump sum at present offered.

While considering this, please bear in mind many of us gave up our jobs and careers to look after our beloved ones often with little support. Also many had difficulty returning to work later or were too traumatised to do so. (I personally gave up work to look after my husband, giving up my teaching career. I tried to return after he died as my son was a minor and after two terms had a breakdown in the classroom in front of the children. I never worked again.)

Loss of earnings should be taken into account."

She continued:

"Other considerations that should be taken into account—being unable to have a child or more children, loss of a proper marriage (we were told that if my husband infected me he could be put in prison), harassment at home and work (we had to move twice, once with the help of the police) to living in poor housing due to not being able to get insurance for a mortgage.

Regards, Mary Grindley".

When we read testimonies such as Mary's they bring home the multitude of wrongs that must be recognised.

There is a growing concern among the community about the pace of payments. After an upturn towards the end of last year, things have slowed down. There seems to be an upturn in IBCA's demand for documentation, despite it being agreed previously that that would not be required from claimants. After so many years, some documents are impossible to find and such requests will slow down the system. In some cases, people have been asked to provide proof that they were living with their parents as children at the time of their claim. Will the Government instruct IBCA to alter its current stance on that requirement?

The people infected and affected have been campaigning for decades, and many are very elderly. Does the Minister agree that it is time that we set timelines to end the limbo that they have been left in?

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that the Government need to work with colleagues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to drive forward the final compensation scheme and address the concerns about timelines that he rightly talks about?

**Clive Efford:** Yes, where we can improve the system by working together, I think we should do it. That is absolutely right.

We welcome the introduction of an ongoing dialogue between the infected and affected community and the Government. That was lacking throughout the process, from when the Government started to set the tariffs and set up IBCA, and that led to a lot of mistrust. A two-way dialogue is needed if good relationships and trust are to be maintained and if we are to restore trust in the process.

We must learn the lessons of all inquiries and compensation bodies that the Government have had to set up. We must not keep reinventing the wheel every time an inquiry reports and makes recommendations.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for all his work as Chair of the APPG and with the contaminated blood community. On the issue he has just raised, there is growing support for a national oversight mechanism to monitor and intervene when recommendations from public inquiries are being ignored or misapplied. Does he agree that it is particularly important in the case of contaminated blood, where there have been so many false starts and delays? Although the Minister has announced a new mechanism to raise concerns about how compensation schemes function, does he agree that such monitoring must be statutory and self-resourced to ensure fair and timely compensation for victims and their families?

**Clive Efford:** I agree. We need to put this on a statutory footing—if nothing else, to give rights to the people who have been wronged in the process.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman referred to "reinventing the wheel". There is no possible way that anybody can be really compensated for the loss of a child, a husband or a wife. However, those of us who still bear the scars of the thalidomide scandal are seeing the wheel reinvented again and again. Surely there has to be a system that allows compensation and allows the Government to act as the insurer of last resort and then to make claims against those who are actually culpable. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

**Clive Efford:** Yes, I agree. We keep repeating the experience with inquiry after inquiry. The time has come for us to set up a body that retains that experience so that it can represent the people who have been wronged and ensure that the issues that have been raised by them, through whatever inquiry has taken place, can be addressed.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** There are some discussions going on about how there should be oversight of Government's acceptance of recommendations from public inquiries. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) talked about the statutory option, but there are also discussions about whether Select Committees should have a role in that space. That would bring the matter right to the heart of Parliament, in full view of the public. Sunlight shone on things means they might be followed through. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) have any thoughts on that process?

**Clive Efford:** It would be an improvement if we were to set up a system that reviewed what action is taken in response to inquiries. For instance, if we had acted on the recommendations of the inquiry into the Lakanal House fire, we might not have had the Grenfell fire. Those things are just left to gather dust on a shelf, and we need to address that. We must set up a body for compensation payments so that skills and experience are not lost and do not have to be learned time and again. We must also have a duty of candour; the Hillsborough law must be introduced in its entirety.

One person whom I know the campaigners, the infected and the affected would like to thank, overall, is Sir Brian Langstaff. I will finish with his address at the remembrance service at St Paul's. He said that the catastrophe was no accident, and quoted the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), who said on the publication of the final report in 2024:

"We must fundamentally rebalance the system so that we finally address the pattern of injustice, so familiar from other inquiries, such as Hillsborough, where innocent victims have to fight for decades just to be believed."—[*Official Report*, 20 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 666.]

In response, the then Leader of the Opposition, now Prime Minister, said that

"we must restore the sense that this is a country that can rectify injustice."—[*Official Report*, 20 May 2025; Vol. 750, c. 668.]

In the conclusion to his oration, Sir Brian said:

"Putting into practice these principles—prioritising patients' safety, embracing candour, transparency and involvement, recognising and remedying injustice, truly valuing people—is a challenge for the here and now. These principles need to be not just matters of words, but together provide a practical route map to follow."

Had we been following Sir Brian's advice, we would have got to the truth much earlier, saved lives and perhaps avoided other catastrophes. As we go forward, we must heed his words, involve people, value them, listen to them and act.

1.10 pm

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): As the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) did, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I pay tribute to him for securing it and for all his work with the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. He puts an awful lot of work into it—it is not like a normal APPG—and we are all very grateful.

This scandal is of such a scale that probably every MP has at least one constituent who has been infected or affected, but in my constituency it has a particular weight attached to it because East Hampshire is home to Treloar's school and college. Treloar's is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in which incredibly committed people provide the most remarkable level of support, care, nurture and education for children and young people with some of the most profound disabilities imaginable, but it was also the place where, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was the single biggest concentration of people who were victims of these terrible practices. The reason was that at any one time there were 40 to 50 haemophiliac patients there. It was seen as an opportunity to study the disease; the NHS haemophilia centre was established nearby, and it later moved into the school grounds.

Treloar's looms large in Sir Brian Langstaff's report: an entire section is given over to it. It describes how research objectives were put ahead of the interests of children and how those children were subjected to unethical research techniques, without them or their parents being informed or consulted about the risks attached. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, of the 122 children with haemophilia who attended the school between 1970 and 1987, only about 30 are alive now. There have been much wider effects, too: the stigma that could be attached, the interrupted education, the long-term mental scarring for the people and their families, and the trauma through families that has lasted for decades. This is a story of lost childhoods and lost futures.

It has been my privilege to meet a number of the Treloar's boys over time. There is one gentleman in particular, Adrian Goodyear, with whom I have been in contact since I was first elected in 2010; he had previously been in contact with my predecessor Michael Mates for many years. In our 2010 debate, I read out a line from one of Ade's emails to me that haunted me then and haunts me now:

"We've now lost so many of our friends from the Treloar days—in fact, we stopped counting at 40".

I pay tribute to Ade, to all the Treloar's boys and to everybody in this community who has kept up the fight, for their remarkable tenacity in seeking justice in the name and memory of their friends lost.

I thank the Paymaster General for his continued and consistent positive engagement on the subject. He always comes to these events in person, which I think the House really appreciates. I have a few questions that I hope he will address later in the debate.

First, I have been asked specifically to raise the lack of parity between bereaved parents whose child was over 18 and those whose child was younger. I hope that the Minister can comment on that point and on whether a change may be possible.

On further elements of the award, I thank the Minister for his letter in response to our exchange at Cabinet Office questions about the special category mechanism and the psychological harm payments, but I continue to receive questions from my constituents about the unethical research awards. The increase in the amount is very

welcome, but in our November 2024 debate I asked how the figures had been reached, and even with the higher number I am still being asked that question. Clearly one cannot put a value on this tragic loss or say that any amount of money could compensate it, but even if the answer is that there is no way of calculating such a number, it would be helpful to have that set out.

I think IBCA has tried to engage well with MPs, which is welcome, but clearly the administration of the scheme needs to accelerate. Inevitably with these processes, things move relatively well at first with the more straightforward cases, but it becomes harder when we get on to the more complex cases. As the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst says, we are talking about victims who are increasingly elderly and who, tragically, may die before they receive the compensation they have been promised.

**Alicia Kearns:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way and to the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) for securing this debate. It is very difficult for any of us to contain our unadulterated rage at what happened.

My constituent lost her mother to infected blood. Unfortunately, her father is now in his final days, and soon she will lose him as well. He received compensation, and of course there was no inheritance tax on it then, but as his child she knows that the Government will be putting inheritance tax on that money when it passes to her in a very short time. Will my right hon. Friend give his view, which I am sure will be heard on the Government Front Bench, on how we are to ensure that when that compensation passes down from a father who lost his wife to a daughter who lost her mother, it does not incur inheritance tax?

**Damian Hinds:** My word! My hon. Friend puts it in very striking terms. *[Interruption.]* I see the Minister indicating that he has heard her question, so I think it is right that I defer to him to say a word about the matter when he makes his speech.

As the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst and other colleagues have said, this is not the first compensation scheme that has been set up. Obviously every case is somewhat different and involves different categories of harm, but it seems that every time this happens, processes and systems have to be set up and time is thereby lost. We want lessons to be learned from this scheme, but they should also have been learned from previous schemes. I welcome the fact that the Public Accounts Committee is conducting its inquiry; I hope to hear a commitment from the Minister that lessons will be learned, particularly from that inquiry.

The last thing I want to mention is the possibility of a criminal investigation. I know that you and your constituent have been involved in discussions about that, Madam Deputy Speaker, and that you and I have both had discussions with the police and crime commissioner for Hampshire, Donna Jones. This is clearly not a question for this Minister or any Minister—not for the Cabinet Office or the Home Office; it is about the criminal justice system, the police and whether a threshold has been met. But I want to take this opportunity through the debate, without expecting the Minister to respond directly, to say that with all the passage of time, there is a premium on knowing what will happen and if we will move in this regard.

Nothing will ever or could ever make up for the multiple failings of the state in this case—from successive Governments, the civil service, the national health service and many more—but we can and must ensure that at this point, we have a compensation scheme that now does pay out in a timely way, and is as effective and humane as possible for all the victims and their families. We must face up clearly to our failings as a state and —let's be honest—as a political system over those many years, and give truth to that phrase, "Never again".

1.20 pm

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): I too thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) for his excellent and assiduous work on the APPG. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) is right that it is a very different APPG, and my hon. Friend does a fantastic job with it. I also my hon. Friend for articulating so well the asks of the community; mine is a general plea, but it is keenly felt by my constituents, and I fully support all his asks and look forward to the Minister's response.

Over the last 15 years in this Chamber, I have raised the cases of the Newport East families impacted by the contaminated blood scandal over 20 times. I really hope that we are closer to the point where I do not have to raise them again, as we now have the compensation scheme and the money, and I thank the Minister for that. We appreciate that he is doing a very difficult job—I want him to know that. I also pay tribute to all those who have brought us to this stage, especially the victims and the families who have campaigned absolutely tirelessly and provided us with the vital evidence over the years.

I pay particular tribute to Colin and Janet Smith and their family, who have lived with this nightmare since 1983 when their toddler son Colin was given infected blood sourced from a prison in Arkansas. I am going to remember Colin again in this Chamber now—he died aged just seven; it is really important that we remember today the people we are here for. The Smiths are some of the strongest and most dignified people I have ever met. It is an immense privilege to have them as my constituents—and I really mean that. For them, this fight has been about justice and has never been about the money, but the Smiths, like so many others—I understand that there are about 92 estates in Wales—have not been invited to apply for compensation yet, even though we have the scheme and the money to pay the claims. They registered their intent to claim and pre-qualified for interim payments, but are still waiting to be invited. All these families just need to know what the hold-up is. The authorities have done the checks and have the information—the system appears to be doubling up. It would be helpful to know why people cannot just apply and why they have to wait to be invited to.

We need to move much faster than we are now. The current pace of delivery is just adding to the stress that these people have already endured for decades. On behalf of the families, the Hepatitis Trust and the Haemophilia Society, I urge the Minister to look at what we can do to increase the speed of the scheme's delivery and about people waiting to be invited. These people have fought long enough. Crucially, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst said, it is important that we continue to listen to the community,

*[Jessica Morden]*

and prioritise the elderly and the terminally ill. As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire said, the community are getting older, and it has now been more than two years since Sir Brian Langstaff delivered his recommendations and around 20 months since the Chancellor set out the £11.8 billion required to settle all the claims. Those affected want the chance to move on from this painful chapter, and the many bereaved parents want the chance to live their remaining years with a sense of closure after what, for them, has been more than 40 years of struggle.

These families deserve the closure before it is too late, and we have it in our gift to make that happen. Please can we increase the pace and bring this long injustice to an end? I support all the asks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst. My final plea to the Government is: please continue to listen to the community.

1.24 pm

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Like others before me, I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford). He is the driving force behind the all-party parliamentary group, which has done so much to highlight this terrible tragedy.

I was struck by what my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said about having been alerted to this as far back as 2010. In my case, it was not quite so far back; it was 2015, but that is still more than a decade ago. I spoke in this House about the case of my constituent Lesley, which illustrated how long it often took for victims of contaminated blood to discover that they indeed had been infected. I pointed out that in 1970, she and her future husband had been involved in a serious road traffic accident, and she had to receive no fewer than 44 pints of blood. For many years, she knew nothing about the fact that she had been infected, although over those years she had many visits to GPs and hospitals, with numerous symptoms of illness, and considerable pain and suffering. It was only in 2014 that she finally discovered that she had been infected with hepatitis C by NHS contaminated blood.

Another example of a constituent who is in regular contact with me and my office is Stephen. He came to see me in August 2023. He was diagnosed as haemophiliac as an eight-year-old in the late 1960s. He thinks that he was infected with hepatitis C in 1974, which persisted for nearly 15 years before it eventually cleared from his system. He says that although it did not inhibit his professional life too badly, it had a deep impact on his personal life. He was married in 1986, and he was constantly having to have testing for fear every time that he had to have a transfusion that he might be being infected. He was told in quite firm terms not to have children, and he said that he was often too scared to have treatment. Once he had quite a bad leg injury, which led to complications, and his fear of treatment led to him being effectively disabled for a period of time.

Stephen's brother's case was far worse, because he was one of about 400 chronic hepatitis C victims of this scandal. To this day, he can only effectively live on a day-to-day basis; he cannot plan because the complications of his infection mean that whether he will be able to do something will depend on how he is on the day in question.

In Portcullis House on Tuesday, we benefited from briefings from a number of organisations that are concerned with this scandal. I will briefly touch on a couple. One was a campaign about a condition of which I was previously unaware, called thalassaemia. This rare blood disorder requires sufferers to have a transfusion every three to four weeks—a blood transfusion every month. These people are at a very high risk of having been infected, and many of them were. These regular blood transfusions deposit more iron into the major organs, which, coupled with the hepatitis C virus with which they had been infected, maximises the prospect of their developing cirrhosis and liver cancer.

The drug interferon has been mentioned a couple of times already. I am old enough to remember when interferon was first regarded as a great breakthrough in the treatment of some cancers. Sadly, like so many medical interventions, it has side effects that can be harmful. Taken in combination with what these patients are also suffering from by way of infection and, in the case of thalassaemia sufferers, the build-up of iron, the interferon used in their cases also has complicating adverse effects. That was a point impressed on me at the briefing by the representative of the Terrence Higgins Trust, who pointed to the additional negative impact of treatment with interferon, which was for a significant time the only option available for HIV-positive patients.

I am indebted to the Haemophilia Society for briefing material that I hope will simply add to the excellent statement and laying of the groundwork in the opening speech so ably delivered by the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst. The Haemophilia Society draws attention to one or two specific points that I would like to put before the House.

We all acknowledge that the infected blood community has fought valiantly for the truth for decades. We also accept that the Government are clearly committed to compensation following the inquiry. The debate now focuses on how to deliver that commitment and how to make sure that people are compensated without further delay and that the compensation is truly fair.

In this connection, I would like to make reference to a detailed opportunity I had virtually to participate in exchanges with senior people—in fact, the most senior people—at the Infected Blood Compensation Authority back in June last year. Again, that was at the initiative of the chairman of the APPG, the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst. My participation was online, but I was able, as was he, to discuss all these matters with the interim chairman at the time, Sir Robert Francis; the chief executive, David Foley; and other key officials.

In particular, we were able to talk directly with members of IBCA's cases team. I must say that I, for one, found them to be both compassionate and empathetic. I was very impressed with the calibre of people who are involved in this agency, and I am hopeful that if they are given the direction they need and the resources they require, they can succeed. I got the feeling that this is an organisation that really does want to help the people it has been set up to support, not an organisation that wants to be in any way obstructive. I hope everything can be done to encourage it. I know that it is operating in uncharted waters with a tragedy of this magnitude, but I hope it can succeed in overcoming the obstacles that have been causing the delays.

More than two years have passed since the Government accepted the need for compensation, but the majority of eligible people are still waiting to begin their claims. That includes infected people not previously on a support scheme and affected people—namely, the partners and family members of those who are sadly no longer with us. We have heard concern from the community that progress has slowed while IBCA works out how to grapple with these categories of claims in a process that it calls test and learn.

Every month of delay matters, because many infected and affected people are elderly or seriously ill. We would like to know from the Minister his latest assessment of the timescale by which IBCA will compensate each of the categories of claimant. IBCA's latest figures show that just 30 affected people have been paid compensation so far. Over 14,000 affected people are waiting to start their claim. At what point does the Minister expect IBCA to truly start making a dent in those very large numbers? In particular, we would like to know what specific steps are being taken to accelerate compensation payments over the next 12 months.

Finally, there is an issue to do with claims that relate to the estates of those who died before the scheme commenced. Those who survived until the scheme commencement are rightly entitled to financial loss compensation from the date of their infection right up to the national age of healthy life expectancy that they should have had. In contrast, those who died before the scheme started have their financial loss calculated only from the date of their infection until the date of their death, which may have been a lot earlier than the normal expectation of a term of life that would have been their lot had this catastrophe not befallen them.

There can be no doubt that this creates a stark and unjust two-tier system. Those who died earlier will often have suffered the same or worse than those who died later, and the financial loss to their estate is clear, yet the Government's position seems to be that those killed by their infections the soonest deserve less compensation and recognition than those who survived for longer. In many cases, this amounts to a very substantial reduction in compensation—potentially decades of lost earnings. Bereaved families should not receive lesser justice because their loved one died before the scheme was established. The result is that timing, not harm, is determining value, meaning that compensation depends on whether someone survived long enough to see the scheme introduced. As I said, this is about avoiding a two-tier compensation system.

In conclusion, I would like the Minister to explain how it can be in accordance with natural justice for those who died earlier due to their infection to receive less compensation than those who died later from a similar infection. Will the Government commit to reviewing their position on estate claims, to ensure families are not disadvantaged because their relative died earlier?

1.38 pm

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): We have got to boil this down very, very simply. This has been described as the biggest tragedy the NHS has ever seen. As a result, lots of people have sadly passed on, and people are still dying on a frequent basis at a time when there are still issues in paying their compensation. People are dying as a result of contaminated blood as we sit here—they are dying on a regular basis.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, who I think has done a marvellous job. But I have made the point time and again, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford)—I think I have spoken in 10 debates in the Commons on this—about the issues with this scheme. The Minister has afforded as many meetings as have been required—he is totally dedicated to the scheme—but the reality is that it is failing the people who are still awaiting compensation. That is the reality, despite everybody's best efforts and despite the fact that IBCA is doing a really good job, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said. I have been to IBCA and had a look at how it operates. Regardless of all the Sirs, the chairman and the chief executive, it is the staff who are so dedicated and compassionate. As it is in my area, I am not too surprised that that is the case.

I pay tribute to the victims, the families, the friends, the supporters and the campaigners because without their persistence and commitment I am not sure where we would be. I am saddened that the latest iteration of the Government's infected blood compensation scheme still falls short of what the victims and their families have been expecting. We have to question why might that be—why is this the case?

The Government have had the chairman of the inquiry into this scandal, Sir Brian Langstaff, intervene to provide guidance in November 2024 and they have had months of further consultations, but still the victims and their families feel that they and their representatives have not been listened to properly. They still find that they face unacceptable provisions in the scheme, as has been explained by a number of hon. Members already, regarding matters such as adequate compensation for all classes of relatives of deceased victims, for the suffering stemming from treatments and for the periods of financial losses experienced. There are still huge difficulties with this scheme. They are feeling like they might be let down by this Government. I share their frustrations, as hon. Members can hear from the tone of my contribution today. Again I thank the Paymaster General for the fact that the Labour Government allocated £11 billion to compensate the victims, but the reality is that that compensation needs to get to those who justly deserve it.

In November 2024, I said in this House:

> "The infected and contaminated blood scandal is just one of far too many injustices in the UK in recent decades, in which powerful people have treated institutional reputations, career prospects and, in a number of cases, profits as being more important than working-class lives. Hillsborough, Orgreave, the postal service Horizon scandal and Grenfell all share this shameful characteristic: each one sent out a message that ordinary working-class lives do not matter. The Minister can take this opportunity to show that this Labour Government think that the lives of ordinary people matter by ensuring that the victims of contaminated blood products receive just and meaningful compensation without any further unconscionable delay."—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 208.]

Many of the points have already been raised, but I am compelled to raise a number of the outstanding issues. The excellent work and the determination of the Paymaster General means that we are in the position that we are in today, with lots of progress made, and I thank him for his engagement with the infected blood community. There are a few points that I would like to raise. I want to talk about the changes many believe are

*[Ian Lavery]*

still needed to the compensation scheme, about the pace of compensation and about the impact the compensation scheme is having.

Fundamental injustices clearly remain in the compensation scheme that I hope can still be addressed. Interferon treatment is still not properly recognised under the latest proposals. For example, people treated with interferon are excluded from the additional injury award if they later developed more severe conditions, like cirrhosis. That is supposed to reflect the fact that they are already compensated for a higher level of injury, but the harm caused by interferon treatment is distinct and additional to the harm caused by infection of any severity. It should be acknowledged in its own right. Will the Paymaster General look again at extending the additional injury award to all those who underwent interferon treatment, regardless of other conditions?

On estate claims, we are going to see families ending up with very different amounts of compensation depending on when their loved one died. In practice, that means that those who died earlier can end up worse off, which is ludicrous and perverse. It cannot be right that families receive less just because their loved one died before the scheme was up and running.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I am going to try to make my intervention without crying. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his impassioned speech. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and this subject came before us a couple of weeks ago when we examined the impact of the infected blood scandal as part of a much wider report on Government compensation schemes. These cases are always marked by a profound injustice, but nowhere is that clearer than in relation to the infected blood scandal. Each week people die before receiving the compensation they are promised, and I know that the hon. Gentleman will agree that that is a moral stain upon our country.

**Ian Lavery:** I am sure that hon. Members from across the House would agree with the hon. Lady's sentiments.

On the estate claims, what has just been explained cannot be right, as the right hon. Member—sorry, I am promoting the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* Sorry! The right hon. Member for New Forest East set that out. Will the Minister be able to announce a change of approach for the families who have already suffered so much, so that they are not penalised because of the date when their relative died?

Carer's contributions still are not properly recognised in the way they should be. Many family members provided unpaid care for many years, putting their lives and careers on hold, as has already been mentioned. This is especially stark for children and young people who took on caring responsibilities that went far beyond what would normally be expected, often at real cost to their education, wellbeing and future prospects. The supplementary compensation route should be amended to recognise both the financial and personal losses of carers, as well as recognising the additional impact caring duties have placed on children.

To his credit, the Paymaster General has engaged with the community, parliamentarians and advocates. I know he will listen closely today, and I hope that there may be further changes before the next regulations are introduced. I hope that the latest proposals are not the last word and that we will ultimately have a scheme that is free from the clear inequities that I have already described.

The other top priority now must be for compensation to be delivered faster. We need to focus on delivery and accountability. Too many people are still waiting, and the system is not moving fast enough. Many people are wondering how long it will take for their cases to be considered if this pace remains the same. The scheme made some initial progress, but it now feels as if it has slighted stalled.

Most of the progress IBCA has made is among the most straightforward category of claims—living infected people who are already on a support scheme. We also need to see faster progress across all remaining categories of claims, including infected people who were never previously compensated, affected people and estate claims. A lot of those cases should be relatively straightforward, for example with many estate claims where probate is already in place and interim payments have been made. There is strong argument for prioritising those so families can get closure sooner. There is also a growing concern that IBCA's test-and-learn approach is not working and is not delivering speed or fairness. Would it not be in most people's best interests to deal with these straightforward cases rapidly so that thousands of people get closure and can move on with their lives?

The haemophilia centres do fantastic work, but ongoing operational problems in the regulations are causing avoidable delays and placing additional burdens on them. Clinicians and haemophilia centres are under real pressure as a result. Many are being asked for historical records that no longer exist, and the administrative burden of finding evidence and responding to IBCA is falling on already-stretched NHS teams. There are cases where centre staff, whose primary focus should be on the treatment and care of people with bleeding disorders, are working every weekend to keep on top of compensation administration.

It is important to note that haemophilia care is already facing challenges. The most recent peer review found major gaps, with 93% of haemophilia centres staffed below the target standard. Compensation claim admin should be properly resourced and funded through IBCA, rather than relying on haemophilia clinicians to pick up the slack. I hope that will be accepted by the Paymaster General.

Finally, will the Paymaster General clarify a point about regulation 12, regarding the switching of payments? Sean Cavens, a great campaigner who has suffered greatly as a result of this tragedy, thought it was possible to switch his payments. He is asking that if an individual is on yearly support payments, which were previously guaranteed for life, they can switch it to take a lump sum payment.

To clarify, Sean believed there would be an appropriate lump sum payment. However, he is 45 years of age. If he commuted his support payments to a lump sum payment, it would represent only four years of support payments. When was that changed? Surely it cannot be right that if somebody wants to transfer their support payments, basically forget about the situation and move on, they are not allowed more than four years of support payments as a lump sum.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Mims Davies.

1.52 pm

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery). Where to start? Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute on behalf of my constituents. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) on securing and opening this debate and on all his sterling work.

Like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have constituents who stick in my mind and who I want to stand up for. My constituent Robert Ellinor has given me a huge understanding of the terrible injustice in this particular area, just as the Webster family has done in your own constituency. I thank Robert, who is from East Grinstead and who I have known for some time. He has done sterling activity and parliamentary engagement on this subject, which affects him, and with the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood.

I am keen to raise points on behalf of Josie, from Turners Hill, and her father, Andrew Quin. Much of what I will say today will be her words, on behalf of her father. It reflects much of what my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) has said, and it also reflects engagement that I have had with the Cabinet Office on behalf of Josie and her father.

Josie writes:

"I am writing to you as my family is one of the first 15 families to be asked to begin our compensation claim for the estate of an infected blood victim, this being my dad, Andrew Quin who passed away in May 2020.

We are now a few weeks into the claim process and frustratingly and sadly I feel my dad is being completely failed by the core route and I'm doubtful at this point that the proposed supplementary route is going to be any different, for the following reasons:

CORE ROUTE:

My father was infected with Hepatitis C and developed cirrhosis of the liver, we believe around 2017, which puts him in the severity level 3 of the core route.

However, in 2018 my father underwent a 12 week course of Harvoni Hep C treatment… after completion of the 12 week course, it not only failed but at the very same time, my father was also told he had developed Mantle Cell Lymphoma, which could have been a side effect of the Harvoni treatment or could have simply been caused by the Hep C.

My father was told he was too ill to undergo full chemo, due to his liver cirrhosis and other ailments caused by the Hep C, and so he did not have the required 2 rounds of chemo needed to qualify for severity level 4.

My father died on 16th May 2020 from Hep C liver cirrhosis and lymphoma.

What could possibly be more severe than the above?

To summarise, my father died because he was infected with Hep C, which caused liver cirrhosis and gave him lymphoma, 'for which he was too ill to receive the required 2 rounds of chemo' and consequently he died!

Yet my father does not qualify for the highest severity level 4?"

That is the highest severity level. Josie continues:

"Ironically, had my father's health not been as severely impacted by the Hep C, he would have been well enough to have had the required 2 rounds of chemo, in order for him to qualify for severity level 4 of the compensation scheme, and may have even still been with us today!

I believe my father has been discriminated against for being 'too ill to receive 2 rounds of chemo', which I find utterly disgraceful!

SUPPLEMENTARY ROUTE:

The supplementary route, requires victims to have had at least 12 weeks' treatment of Interferon, in order for them to be considered for the next severity level, this being a level 3 or a new level between 2 and 3. I strongly object to this as some victims, including my father, had such severe side effects, such as chronic depression and a mild heart attack, etc, that they were un-able to sustain 12 weeks of Interferon. Not that this would even benefit my father's claim as he is already in severity level 3 due to him developing cirrhosis—i.e. the supplementary route is no help to my father either.

To summarise, once again, I believe victims who were too ill to sustain 12 weeks of interferon treatment are being discriminated against.

I do not believe anything could be more severe than the death of an infected blood victim—'a death which was caused by their infection!'

At present neither the core route nor the supplementary route addresses this injustice.

I would sincerely appreciate your help and support in this matter—help to identify and rectify this injustice—in order to bring about the rightful justice the infected blood victims deserve.

As the family of an infected blood victim, we desperately want to put all the hurt and pain behind us, but we cannot do that if we are still discriminated against and unfairly treated."

This week, Josie wrote to me again. She was very keen that I speak in this debate, and I am very grateful to her. She wrote:

"The letter you forwarded me from the Minister for the cabinet office stated that infected blood victims would not be discriminated against for not being well enough to receive treatment, however, IBCA will not recognise this despite my making them aware of what the Minister for the cabinet office stated in their letter.

IBCA have stated that in order for them to recognise this statement and not discriminate against victims who were not well enough to have treatment, this statement made by the Minister for the cabinet office would have to be made law."

Josie urged me to raise this issue today in Parliament, on behalf of

"all the victims who were not well enough to receive treatment, because as it stands, victims who were not well enough to receive treatment and have died as a result of their infections will receive less compensation than those victims who were well enough to receive treatment and survived. I'm sure you will agree that this is an injustice and needs to be addressed"

today. Those are Josie's words. She and families like hers must get justice and proper compensation, and must feel that the process works for them and reflects the impact on them and their loved ones. We know that all of this is so wrong; we must make it right. I hope that the Paymaster General can give Josie and many families like hers the comfort they deserve.

2 pm

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) for his excellent work, and for securing another debate on this issue—an opportunity for us to speak up for our constituents and express our continued frustration at the pace and disparities of the roll-out of the compensation scheme. I pay a huge tribute to all those who have campaigned tirelessly for so many long years, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) for her sterling work.

*[Dame Nia Griffith]*

Before I turn to concerns about the scheme, I want to take a moment to remind us of what an appalling scandal the infected blood scandal has been. It has absolutely ruined lives and destroyed families. It is appalling enough that people were infected in the first place, leaving them with lifelong health problems, and having a devastating impact on them and their families—but of course, that was compounded by the fact that they, and their families, were not told the truth; by the continued use of products after their risks had become known; by medical records going missing; by cover-ups, obfuscation and the deliberate withholding of information; by the stigma that surrounded HIV; by the limited treatments available; and by the endless delays in getting to where we are today. Hopes were raised, only to be dashed again. There was anticipation, expectation, and then disappointment. People have been waiting years and years for compensation. Many of the infected and affected have passed away before seeing any redress, but many are still waiting, wondering if they will get redress in their lifetime.

I turn to some specific issues and cases. I will mention three of my constituents, but we only get a tiny glimpse into their life; we can never know the anguish that they and their families have endured, the obstacles they have encountered, the continual battles they have had to fight just to live their life, or the injustice, anger and despair that they have felt. So often, we have felt inadequate as MPs; there was so little that we could do. Like them, we were waiting.

The mother of one of my constituents is 98 years old. She was only 52 when her son was infected; she has had to see him suffer, and she has cared for him. It has been 46 years, and she still has not received any redress or compensation. Let us remind ourselves of the trauma that mothers like her have lived through, seeing their children suffer and looking after them. I had understood that the older members of the affected community were to be prioritised, but just how old do you have to be? Is 98 not old enough to be a priority? Of course, any redress or compensation is totally inadequate in the light of what has happened, and can never make up for what the infected and their families have been through, but my constituent's mother at least deserves recognition in her lifetime. They have still had no redress and no recognition, and the worry is that they may not even live to see it. I appreciate the arguments about getting the scheme right and learning the lessons from small numbers, but now really is the time to ramp up and speed up the roll-out of the compensation.

Another of my constituents was infected very young. Again, we can never know the anguish he and his family suffered, but because of his age, there was never any proper accounting for his earning potential—any recognition of what he would have achieved if his childhood had not been dominated and ruined by the very serious consequences of his infection. He quite rightly feels that it has all been too little, too late, and that the payments do not reflect what he has been through. Again, his family—his mother, his sister and his children—are still waiting, and no one is getting any younger. His case, as the person infected, is all documented, so surely it should not be difficult to deal with the family members who have been affected as a result of his being infected.

Then there is the family of Damian Lewis, who was infected with HIV in 1983 as the result of bone marrow treatment in a London hospital, and who subsequently developed AIDS and died in 1995, when he was just 19 years old. To compound matters, this was another case in which the parents, Brian and Joan, were not told straightaway what had really happened, and only found out the truth later. The impact of Damian's infection on him and the family was devastating; his surviving twin brother tells how his parents never got over it. They had their lives destroyed by losing Damian. His mother Joan passed away in 2021—all those long years after Damian was infected—having seen only the first three years of the inquiry. She sacrificed her career as a nursing midwifery manager to look after him in his final years. Even after so many years, Damian's family have never had redress or an apology. They never saw matters resolved, and as Joan passed away in 2021, her estate will never be eligible for any compensation, because claims can be made by estates only when the affected person dies between 20 May 2024 and 30 May 2031. That just seems so unfair, unjustifiable and morally wrong, particularly as there have been so many delays. Even now, the pace at which the affected are being dealt with is glacial.

Like so many others, Damian's surviving twin is shocked at the disparity between the living infected and the infected who have passed away, who never received answers or redress. There are also disparities in the ways that the various family members are treated; there are substantial differences in the treatment of partners, parents, children and siblings, despite family members experiencing the same events and witnessing the same injury, suffering and injustice. He would like answers on these issues. Of course, while delays continue, those still waiting for payments see the worth of their entitlement eroded by inflation, and are missing out on the opportunity to earn interest on their money.

I turn to the current situation. We all appreciate that my right hon. Friend the Minister has worked hard on this issue, and has secured £11 billion in funding for the scheme. He is the latest in a long line of Ministers dealing with this, and many of the delays happened before he was appointed, but nevertheless, he is the one who now has the power to expedite matters. The cry from everyone is: can we please speed up the process of payments? Can we avoid all the duplication, going back over records, and imposing unnecessary work on clinical staff? Some of the dates set out by the Infected Blood Compensation Authority feel light years away. It is not just that those affected are missing out financially; there is the psychological trauma of yet more delays, and the fact that they still cannot get closure. The infected, too, do not want to be forever simply getting the payments under their current scheme. They want the option of a lump sum—but above all, they want closure.

The affected also want proper redress and recognition of all that they have been through. Sir Brian Langstaff repeatedly made it clear that the affected should be able to make an application themselves, and should not have to wait to be invited to do so. Many of those involved have the documentation ready, and so much time, effort and cost could be saved by allowing them to make an application. Haemophilia Wales has assessed that it would be far simpler, and would save the Cabinet Office a lot of work, if those wishing to claim could put in their forms and get the necessary evidence together with

the help of their lawyers, many of whom have been involved for many years. Instead, I understand that very well-meaning caseworkers who are new to the issues are having to ask for additional copies of documents, and are giving clinicians additional work. They are duplicating what has already been done, when many of those who have been waiting for compensation for many, many years have all that information ready. Will the Minister look seriously at this suggestion?

I understand that the legislation will include a supplementary route for those affected, which will give a 50% uplift. That recognises the unique and lasting impact on children and siblings affected while under the age of 18, bereaved parents whose infected child died under the age of 18, and bereaved partners. Can the Minister give us a timescale for that?

To conclude, what will the Minister do to speed up the roll-out of the payments to all those infected and affected? None of us should rest until every person infected or affected receives their entitlement.

2.10 pm

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I wholeheartedly congratulate the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) on the customarily forthright and direct way in which he opened the debate. I agree with all the points he made; he would expect that of me, as his loyal deputy on the all-party parliamentary group. It is great that we have heard so many solid and significant contributions today.

Once we are a couple of hours into a debate, we start to get a feeling for how it is going, the emerging themes and the sense of direction. We all acknowledge and appreciate the huge progress that has been made. When I started out on this campaign more than 20 years ago, I would never have believed that we could get to this point, at which payments are being made to those impacted and those affected.

The Minister is starting to hear that the same issues are emerging. Constituents are experiencing the same complications and difficulties, and the same representations are being made. I will not touch on those, because so many have been raised, but I might just reinforce some of the points made. The Minister is beginning to hear a chorus of things that need to be addressed—and addressed they must be. We are on the cusp of having something of which we can be proud—of this House having addressed one of the biggest scandals that we have ever experienced in parliamentary life. We took control of it; we handled it; we got a report and an inquiry; and we got billions of pounds of compensation. We have the opportunity to pay that compensation right now, and I hope that the Government grab it.

I pay tribute to IBCA for the work that it has done. It is amazing that we have put together the infrastructure and a support scheme as quickly as we have. IBCA has done remarkable work in such a short time. It is starting to deliver, and I think we are all immensely pleased and proud that this House has collectively been able to construct it, and to make sure that it is functional and works. I have visited IBCA on a couple of occasions, and I have met the staff and discussed many of these issues with them. I recognise their sheer dedication to the work that they are pursuing, in the best interests of everybody whom they serve; and their commitment, as an arm's length body.

It is amazing that we have got here, but it was not always like this. I remember what happened back in the early 2000s. I am looking at the chair of the APPG, my friend the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst, and he will remember this, too. We were fobbed off, disregarded and lied to when we took up the cases of our constituents. They presented to us at our various surgeries with these unexplained difficulties and complications. They would say, "How did I get HIV?", or "I've got hepatitis. I do not know how on earth this happened." We would write to successive Ministers in the Department of Health, making representations, and asking for assistance or acknowledgement, only to be told that they were not interested, and that there was nothing to see here. They would say, "Move along. We are not prepared to take this up. Believe me, we are doing everything in our power, and there's really nothing to acknowledge." For years, we were fobbed off and disregarded, and for years, we fought on.

Over the years, I have got to know the campaigners. They came together with a common purpose, determined to get to the heart of the issue and to support each other. We call them the community, and we could not find a better community than the campaigners who have led this, been at the forefront, and refused to accept "No". They are people with different lives from different backgrounds, but they all carry the burden of what happened to them. All of them are still here, fighting the good fight, determined to get justice for the whole community, and that whole community is the key thing today.

I was the APPG chair for all those years, and the community has some of the finest people I have ever encountered. I have seen lots of campaigns in this House, and I have seen how people approach these issues, how they take them forward, how they engage and how they access their Members of Parliament to make sure that things are done. It is the most fantastic campaign we have ever had. Unfortunately, I could not make the ceremony at St Paul's, as I was recovering from an illness, but I know from friends, colleagues and campaigners who were there the importance to them of that ceremony, where they were recognised as a community for their work.

There have been high points, and we should acknowledge that. Few of us would have expected Theresa May to have made the announcement back in 2017 that there was to be a full inquiry. A lot of us were surprised that she chose Sir Brian Langstaff to lead it, and lead it he did. Like many people in this debate, I listened to lots of the evidence in the inquiry sessions, and I cheered along with the community when the report was produced. I was in this House when the report was launched, and the Government took full responsibility and said that there would be a full repayment scheme and that people would get what they should. Those were great days, met with real enthusiasm and euphoria by those who have campaigned.

There have been good days, but we have to address the biggest issue. It has been mentioned on several occasions, so I will not labour the point, but people have been waiting decades. Even at this point, the majority of these people are still waiting just to start their claim. That is not to receive compensation—we might think that we would be at that stage now—but just to get into the system. Even at this stage, only a relatively small number have been paid. People have mentioned that

*[Pete Wishart]*

these are real people—people who are unwell and who know that time is not on their side. I do not know which Member mentioned it, but people are dying weekly because they are not having their situation attended to and their payments made.

Families still have no clarity about when their case will move forward. That is made worse by what is being asked of them. I have been surprised—I have listened carefully to colleagues who have raised this—that we see people being asked for evidence that in many cases simply does not exist. They have been asked for records from decades ago, such as proof of cohabitation between parents and children in the 1980s. Those things were probably never properly recorded in the first place, and if they had been, it may have been lost over time. That means that so many people are being delayed or sometimes shut out completely because they cannot meet requirements that are not realistic. In some cases, people run into a purely arbitrary administrative date, rather than when harm was actually suffered. Members have mentioned the bereaved families in whose cases support can stop at the point of death rather than reflecting the full impact of what has been lost.

Another theme that has developed—I think it was the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) who raised this in particular—is the growing concern about those with hepatitis C who were treated with interferon. That has to be addressed. Of all the issues that have started to emerge, that is the one that the community in general wants us to press as strongly and as directly as we can with the Minister. I hope that we get some satisfaction.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I am grateful that my hon. Friend has reiterated that point, and I will do likewise. Many of my constituents who have been affected and infected by this scandal have asked me to emphasise the point that even the updated scheme does not properly recognise the long-term consequences of interferon treatment.

**Pete Wishart:** Interferon was introduced as almost like a chemotherapy drug back in the day, and some of its impacts and consequences have been similar to the side effects and impacts of chemotherapy. Physically and mentally, the effects are often severe and long-lasting. When the Minister is on his feet, perhaps he can explain a little more about what he intends to do with this group and this community. The Government have introduced a new level 2B to recognise some of these harms, and my understanding is that it provides a temporary uplift, but it seems to apply only in certain circumstances. What it does not seem to do—I have read about it carefully—is reflect the long-term reality for many. The argument appears to be that the higher category covers just about everything else when it comes to interferon treatment for hepatitis C, and that levels 3 and 4 already take interferon into account. My colleagues in Haemophilia Scotland asked for the evidence showing how that was factored in, and none was provided, so can the Minister tell us a more about that evidence in relation to levels 3 and 4?

A similar set of concerns relate to unethical research, as we have heard. The Government have expanded eligibility and increased awards. That is welcome in principle, because it means that people are recognised without having to jump over additional evidential hurdles, but there is still a lack of clarity as to whether the level of award properly reflects what actually happened to people. The issue seems to be the arbitrary 1985 cut-off date. Perhaps the Minister can provide clarity. Officials say that there is no evidence of unethical research beyond that point, but the inquiry itself referred to evidence beyond that date, and even up to the 1990s, of children being recruited without proper information or consent. Why did the Government arrive at 1985 as a cut-off date for eligibility for unethical research awards, given that there is evidence that unethical trials and research continued well into the 1990s?

There are also ongoing concerns about estate claims, because the structure of the payments could disadvantage those who died earlier, and about unpaid care over the years. That, again, has been reflected by several hon. Members.

A few people referred to some of the different schemes around the devolved nations. I am particularly proud of what we did in the Scottish Parliament, and the Minister will be aware of the bespoke schemes across the whole United Kingdom, not just in Scotland. The one that particularly worked in Scotland—I want the Minister's response regarding what has happened to it—is the special category mechanism known as the severely affected category. This was open to people who had significant problems and issues; they could apply, and were given an increased payout and support. That has since been subsumed under the general supplementary scheme; that scheme is welcome, but this is disadvantageous compared with the superior scheme in Scotland. Those who were initially on that superior scheme have been kept on it, but those who wished to apply for it have to go through bigger hoops and hurdles to get there. We need to know that scheme will still be available and that it will be easier for people to apply to it, because we were particularly pleased about the way it operated in Scotland.

Let me turn finally to accountability. Throughout the decades, the Government repeatedly dismissed those asking questions and trying to achieve justice. The final report acknowledged that the infected and the affected were fed lies and lines, and that serious concerns were dismissed outright. We have to address this. We cannot leave it. We have to look at how we get round some of the things that were encountered. I remember the letters I got from various Government Ministers: "The Government do not accept that any wrongful practices were employed and do not consider that a public inquiry is justified." I got that for years, every time I raised these issues on behalf of a constituent.

I listened carefully to the infected blood inquiry. The evidence I found most compelling was from a certain Andy Burnham, who was Health Minister at one point during that period—I believe he is in the news today for some other reason, not particularly related to this. I remember Andy Burnham candidly telling the inquiry that he now knew that the lines he had been given by senior officials in the civil service were wrong, and that he had sent lies to me and other Members who raised these issues in Parliament. That is what he said, in effect, in evidence to the inquiry. That is simply unacceptable.

The current Ministers are probably much better than their predecessors, and will look carefully at what comes across their desks, but this must not be allowed to

happen again. That is why we need a statutory duty of candour on all public officials, including civil servants and senior civil servants. More than that, we need an independent compensation body to oversee all Government compensation schemes. Such a body would retain expertise and experience, would save time and money when schemes are set up, and would be capable of ramping up and down according to need. The Hillsborough law must be enacted without delay, introducing a duty of candour for everybody involved in public life. A national oversight mechanism should be established to monitor and scrutinise the implementation of recommendations from all public inquiries and hold the Government to account.

After all this, it is hard to believe that the first meeting I had about the issue was back in about 2004, with a lovely lady from Blairgowrie, in my old constituency. She came to see me in what could only be described as a hell of a state; she could not account for why she had HIV following a blood transfusion after a medical emergency. It was because of her that I started to get involved in all this, tried to find answers and tried to ensure that campaigners got justice. The name of that lady was Tricia Titheridge. After contracting HIV, she died in 2013, without seeing the huge progress that we have made. It is because of people like Tricia that we are all still here—still fighting to ensure that everybody is included and that there is a scheme that works for all our constituents. Looking at the Minister and knowing the qualities that he will bring to this job, I am pretty certain that he is going to be the man who delivers this for everybody, meets our concerns and looks at the difficulties we have presented today.

2.26 pm

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), my constituency neighbour, for securing the debate and speaking with such clarity, and so powerfully, in his opening address. I was contacted by my constituent Susan and her two daughters, including Louise, who I welcome to the Gallery today; they asked me to take part in this debate. I pay tribute to them for their fight and for bravely sharing their story with me. I will come to that story in a moment.

As has been said, the infected blood scandal is widely recognised as the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. More than 25,000 people were infected with hepatitis C and, particularly tragically, more than 380 children were infected with HIV. I vividly remember meeting some of those impacted at an event with the phenomenal and unrelenting Hillsborough law coalition. A Hillsborough law is an important part of this debate, because this situation went from a tragedy to a scandal because of the way that patients and families were treated.

As I have said previously, all the campaigners and campaigns supporting the Hillsborough law are distinct. I got involved in the campaign for the Hillsborough law because I am a relative of Hugh Mullan, who was one of the victims of the Ballymurphy massacre, which was one of the worst atrocities of the troubles. He was shot in the abdomen and again in the back as he lay on the ground, giving the last rites to someone. I have watched my dad's family fight for 50 years for truth and justice to be put on the record, and to be told that he was entirely innocent.

I have got to know many of the other campaigns involved: Margaret Aspinall and the Hillsborough families, the Grenfell families, those related to the Post Office Horizon campaign, and many others who are part of this coalition. Although they are distinct and come from different contexts, places and times, there are often many similarities in what happens to them. First, victims are dismissed, information is withheld from them and they are sometimes smeared. Secondly, the authorities close ranks, shutting off routes to justice—we have heard many of those stories from Members across the House. Thirdly, victims face a legal system in which the scales of justice are stacked in favour of the state. Justice for one of those campaigns requires justice for all. The Hillsborough law must be passed in full if we are to deliver that.

I echo the comments made by hon. Members across the House about learning from these injustices—we need to stop trying to recreate the wheel. We must learn from the processes around these scandals and the inquiries that take place; bringing that together with the Hillsborough law is a really important step.

I turn to my constituent Susan and her husband George. Let me tell the House what happened to George. George suffered from severe haemophilia A and type 1 diabetes, and died suddenly on 26 April 1978 at the age of just 33. It was only 41 years later, when the family were able to obtain his medical records in 2019 on hearing about the infected blood inquiry being set up, that they discovered he had been given factor VIII products for various operations at St Thomas' hospital from 1976 onwards, including a product called Hemofil in January 1978. The records also show that he was regularly tested for hepatitis B antigens and that the test results were negative until October 1976—just six months after he was first treated with factor VIII.

George died in 1978 before hepatitis C had even been identified—no tests were available. The inquiry concluded, though, that essentially any haemophiliac given blood products in the 1970s would have been infected with hepatitis C. Susan, his wife, gave evidence to the infected blood inquiry in March 2020 with assistance and contributions from her daughters. They expressed their belief that infected blood products may have contributed to George's death, in particular through his ability to respond to insulin for his diabetes.

Susan has just been informed by IBCA that it is ready to begin her claim. That is really positive, welcome news, especially as she is 80 and not in the best of health. Many hon. Members have mentioned that time is not on the side of victims and families and that an expedient process is really important. Susan has been told that she will be one of the first people to make a deceased infected person claim, and that her experience will help to improve the service for people who claim in the future.

However, Susan's daughters and doubtless thousands of others affected by the scandal would like more information on when the further claims will be processed. They fully understand that those who are elderly or ill take priority and that IBCA can bring only small numbers of affected people into the scheme for now, but they would hugely value a more detailed timeline for when affected people's claims will be addressed, even if that means distinguishing between months and years. I have also heard from other victims and victims' families

*[Liam Conlon]*

about the waiting. As Sir Brian Langstaff, the inquiry's chair, stated in his address at the recent infected blood memorial service, people need greater transparency. I would welcome the Minister's response to that.

Susan's husband George was given products that the Government knew were not safe. His family were never made aware at any time that that was happening, nor that he was being tested for hepatitis. Reading about George's experience and that of his family, and listening to the contributions made by hon. Members across the House, brings genuine anger. The state must ensure now that it does not fail victims and families again and that we make quick progress on this.

Susan had to wait over 40 years to find out the truth about her husband's death, but she and thousands of others have still not been given closure. As the Haemophilia Society has laid out, first, psychological harm must be fairly and compassionately recognised. Secondly, the scheme must ensure that compensation to estates reflects the harm and loss suffered and removes the clear injustice of penalising those who died earlier. Thirdly, compensation must begin to be paid faster. Beyond that, as George's daughter Louise, who is sat in the Gallery, said:

"A compensation payment is hugely significant not just for its monetary value, but as an acknowledgement that an injustice has been done, too".

We talk about compensation, which is one component of redress. I have just spent the past year on Philomena's law—I am proud to have brought it in—which has delivered justice for victims and survivors of Ireland's cruel mother and baby homes, 13,000 of whom live in Britain today. I have met countless survivors, and what they say is that nothing can undo the wrongs done to them, but compensation is one important component of redress. The House will not deliver closure for those families until it is paid. A swift resolution to the compensation issue would help many like Susan to find some kind of ending to a very difficult process. The importance of acknowledgement of injustice and wrongdoing is a sentiment I hear echoed across much of the Hillsborough law coalition.

Time and again, we have seen the state engaged in David versus Goliath battles in which the state, flanked by an army of lawyers, takes on families who have scraped together enough for a single barrister. The state closes ranks and opportunities for justice are snuffed out. Even when there are admissions of guilt and wrongdoing, such as with the infected blood scandal, too often we see hesitation to implement the recommendations of public inquiries. As the Haemophilia Society also says, the Hillsborough law must be enacted in full, introducing a duty of candour for public officials to ensure that such scandals can never happen again. The Hillsborough law will also introduce a national oversight mechanism so that Governments are held to account in implementing the recommendations of public inquiries like that into infected blood.

We must deliver justice for those impacted by the infected blood scandal—we know that, for many, we do not have long to do so. We must also do all that we can to ensure that no scandal like what happened to George and his family can happen again. I have faith that the Government want to do that. I thank again my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst for securing the debate. While I urge the Government as a whole to go faster, I thank the Minister personally for all the tireless work he does on this issue.

2.36 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): We find ourselves at a critical juncture in time as we approach the laying of the final amendments to the scheme in the fourth set of regulations. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) for securing the debate and all the work that he and the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood have done. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) who ably led the APPG previously for her years of tireless campaigning and to the Minister for the countless hours he has spent working on this issue and his willingness to engage with me and other hon. Members every time we speak to him.

The infected blood scandal has rightly been described by the chair of the infected blood inquiry Sir Brian Langstaff as the worst treatment disaster in the history of our national health service. Between the 1970s and the early 1990s, tens of thousands of people were knowingly exposed to unacceptable risks and infected with HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. More than 30,000 patients received contaminated blood or clotting products, many of which were sourced from high-risk paid donors in the US, including prisoners and drug addicts. The result was catastrophic, claiming at least 2,900 lives. In some particularly horrifying cases, children as young as two were used as guinea pigs in clinical trials without the knowledge or consent of their parents. Doctors, the blood services and successive Governments did not put patient safety first. Many of those affected have had to live with the consequences of those failures for decades.

One such person is my constituent John, who I know will be watching the debate. Like many hepatitis C patients, John was initially unaware of his illness. Once he became symptomatic, he spent 40 years desperately trying to figure out what was causing myriad inexplicable symptoms. The impact that that search for answers has had on every aspect of his life cannot be overstated. It was only after a chance conversation several years ago when a doctor offhandedly asked if he had ever received a blood transfusion that the truth came to light.

John's story is tragically mirrored in thousands of households across the country. The survivors and bereaved families have battled for justice for too long, but in May 2024 hope was brought to many of those homes when Sir Brian Langstaff delivered his landmark report. The previous Government committed to providing compensation to those infected and affected by this catastrophe, and this Government, on its election six weeks later, rightly set aside nearly £13 billion for compensation and rapidly launched a compensation scheme.

Yet as we stand here over two years on from that final report, that promise remains unfulfilled for the vast majority. The sense of exhaustion, anger and desperation within the community is palpable. These issues could have been mitigated if, as Sir Brian wrote,

"decisions about those who should receive compensation are not made without them."

The minimal involvement of the people affected in the development of the compensation scheme has introduced problems and injustices.

The most urgent issue is the pace of delivery, which remains glacial. Out of 18,000 registered claims, just over 3,000 people have had compensation paid. Even more are still waiting to be invited to claim compensation. This has left tens of thousands of individuals in a state of agonising limbo, often in poor health and at the end of their lives, without any guidance about when their claim will start, praying that their case will be processed before it is too late. This is a particular concern for affected survivors who are unmarried and childless. The rule that their claim dies with them if they pass away before an offer is made is a source of total despair, and we must change it so that these claims become part of their estate. We cannot forget the stigma of HIV during this period and the impact that it would have had on victims' personal lives. Will the Minister look at this, pressure the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to rapidly increase claims processing rates or provide additional resources for it to do so, and ensure that compensation payments are paid in line with the CPI measure of inflation?

I fear that there are a number of inequities in the composition of the scheme that must be addressed. Under a provision called the special category mechanism, people can claim additional compensation for the financial loss and care costs that they have occurred as a result of their infection. However, this additional compensation applied only from 2017—an arbitrary administrative date inherited from a previous support scheme. I strongly believe that people should be compensated from the day that their harm occurred. If the Minister could confirm whether his Department is looking into this matter, or provide the Government's justifications for maintaining this cut-off either today or later in writing, it would be most welcome.

Furthermore, the evidential barriers placed before victims are often cruel and unnecessary. It is heartbreaking to hear of elderly mothers being asked to find 40-year-old school reports or GP letters to prove that they lived with children who died in the 1980s. These records often simply do not exist, and families are stuck in a loop of searching for the impossible while they themselves age and fall ill. We need a common-sense approach that relaxes these requirements, particularly for proven family relationships. Again, I would welcome the Minister's assurance that the evidence requirements will be permissive and flexible to ensure that those eligible are not unduly excluded and to avoid retraumatising claimants.

In a recent report, the National Audit Office found that there is currently no dedicated team within Government that has central oversight or offers support to those setting up or administrating compensation schemes, and victims have no route for formal redress. I support the National Audit Office's call for a central oversight body for compensation schemes, and I hope that the Government will respond to its report in due course.

The need for change is clear. Ultimately, there is only one way in which we can prevent a repeat of this sorry saga. I agree with others that we desperately need a Hillsborough law with a fully-fledged duty of candour to prevent institutional scandals and cover-ups from ruining even more people's lives and to ensure that victims of the state get the justice they deserve at the time they need it.

2.43 pm

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) for his moving and powerful speech and for all the work he does with the APPG. I also want to put on the record my respect for my right hon. Friend the Minister and thank him for his and the Government's efforts, which I think have been acknowledged across the House.

I have been contacted by a constituent of mine whose identity I am going to keep anonymous, and Members will therefore hear me using the pronoun "they" quite a lot. The crux of the issue is that after an operation in 1977, my constituent contracted hepatitis C. They are struggling to locate medical records, which is making it difficult to engage with the Skipton Fund or the English infected blood support scheme. The point about evidence has been made by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss). The concern here is that the records have been lost or destroyed, and there have been significant consequences for my constituent. They registered with the infected blood compensation scheme last October, but have not had any correspondence from the scheme.

My constituent believes that they received contaminated blood during an operation at the Hospital of St Cross in Rugby in 1977 and was infected with hepatitis C. The hospital appears to have lost its notes of the operation, and both the Hospital of St Cross in Rugby and University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire have stated that any records of this operation have been destroyed. I want to put it on the record that I am not casting any aspersions whatsoever on the current staff of either hospital or the trust.

My constituent tried to claim from the Skipton Fund in the early 2000s, but was turned down for lack of evidence because of the need for hospital records. They then applied to the England infected blood support scheme, but this request for compensation was also declined due to lack of evidence. They have since tried to appeal this decision, but this appeal was, of course, rejected because of the requirement to present new evidence. My constituent is concerned that they may not be registered with the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to receive compensation through the authority.

I have written to the Department of Health and Social Care about this case, and I would like to know the status of any intervention. I think it is worth the Department checking whether there is evidence that any other people who were treated by the Hospital of St Cross in my constituency in or around October 1977 were infected in the way that my constituent appears to have been. I am also keen to know what happened to my constituent's records—how and why they were lost or destroyed.

Given that my constituent registered with the infected blood compensation scheme last October, I want to ensure that they receive the compensation they are owed. Could the Minister assure me that this case will be investigated and that my constituent will be updated on its progress, and that they will receive any compensation that they are owed? I will of course provide the Minister with details of this specific case.

*[John Slinger]*

Finally, I want to make a broader point that has been made by many other hon. Members across the House today. The duty of candour, which I am glad our Government are committed to bringing in through the Hillsborough law, cannot come into effect soon enough. Hopefully it will deter future examples of such egregious state failure as well as deterring such behaviour in the private sector, which the duty of candour will have some relevance to in certain circumstances.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We have saved the best till last. I call Dr Peter Prinsley.

2.48 pm

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) for securing this debate, and the many hon. Members who have given marvellous speeches this afternoon. I am new to this debate in Parliament, but I am not new to this issue, for I remember the very first patients we infected with AIDS. In 1988, I was an ear, nose and throat registrar at the Royal Free hospital, right here in London. The Royal Free has a large haemophilia unit for the treatment of patients with bleeding disorders, which are caused by a lack of clotting factors in the blood, as we have heard. Factor VIII was derived from pooled blood donations from donors in the United States—incidentally, people are paid to donate blood in the US, unlike here in the United Kingdom.

I wrote my very first scientific paper on the management of tonsillectomy in haemophilia patients. Who would believe that we would be brave enough to take out the tonsils of a patient with haemophilia? Well, we were able to do so. The patients we saw started dying, not of bleeding disorders but of the HIV with which we had unknowingly infected them. I met such patients over several years and then I stopped meeting them, because they had mostly died. Then we had hepatitis and deaths from cirrhosis and liver cancer, and still we have deaths and many bereaved families.

We doctors did not realise what we were doing to our patients until it was far too late. We cannot change history, however much we regret our actions, but there is surely something we can do, and do it we must. Our Government have committed billions of pounds to this scheme, and that is exactly right, but we must go faster. That is why we are having today's debate. We are informed that thousands have yet to start a claim, and people are dying each week, so it is our duty to sort this out.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Dr Prinsley, you have done yourself proud with that contribution. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.50 pm

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): The infected blood scandal, and the 30,000 or so people who were infected with HIV, hepatitis or both, have been discussed in this House many times, but the numbers—the sheer scale of the scandal—are still hard to comprehend. The hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) laid out the background compellingly at the start of this debate, and I congratulate him on securing it.

Other Members have spoken of perhaps the most horrifying element of the scandal: children were subjected to unsafe and unethical clinical testing in the 1970s and '80s. This testing—this experimentation—continued for more than 15 years. It involved hundreds of people and infected most with hepatitis B, hepatitis C or HIV. The trials involved children with blood clotting disorders, when families had often not consented to their taking part, and the majority of the children who were experimented on are now dead. It is not just about those who were infected, of course; the number of those affected by the scandal is far higher. Although we welcome the steps that the Government have taken in progressing the compensation scheme, it is clear that the job is not yet done.

The changes that the Government have brought in will mean more compensation for those who have been impacted by the infected blood scandal. Payments will be sent out to victims as part of the wider £11 billion-plus allocated by the Government in the 2024 Budget to compensate victims, but in the last two months to June, just 217 people have received compensation payments. At that rate, far too many victims will not receive their compensation by the 2029 deadline. The pace must increase—a point that has been well made in this debate by the hon. Members for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden), as well as others.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the improvements to the scheme that the Government set out earlier this year. These changes will hopefully deliver some of the justice that victims have been calling for, but there is clearly a strength of feeling that the scheme still does not go far enough, and the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst laid out some of the well-founded concerns in opening the debate.

The failure to deliver the Hillsborough law has been raised by many Members from across the House, and they are right to do so. It would extend the duty of candour to all public officials, and it was a manifesto commitment from this Government. It is also a promise that has been repeated by the Prime Minister and several other Ministers since. Despite repeated talk of an "unwavering commitment", this vital reform has still not been delivered, and we do not know when it will be. I would welcome any update that the Paymaster General could give on the progress that we might expect and when we might expect it.

With this scandal, as with too many others, the inability to deliver both timely compensation and complementary legislation extends people's fears of a culture of cover-up. In so many instances we see the breakdown of trust between the people we represent and our politics, so delivering compensation at pace, and delivering the Hillsborough law, would be a statement of intent to change our political culture. It is one of the vital building blocks that can start to repair this House's fractured relationship with the public—an essential step to recover trust. That is more vital today than at any other point in my lifetime.

Many Members have spoken of their constituents who have been impacted by this scandal. My constituent Catherine from Marple Bridge is one of so many who provided testimony to the compensation authority. She is a daughter handling the estate of her father, who was infected, and she is affected. Catherine's thorough, detailed

testimony was calm, thoughtful and delivered with remarkable clarity. It was testament to her strength of character. Last year's damning report on compensation showed that not enough lessons had been learned, and survivors such as Catherine continue to be left out in the cold.

The impact of course extends to those who have lost family members to contaminated blood, such as Angus Lacey-Stewart, who contacted my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller). Angus's dad and granddad both died due to health conditions caused by infected blood. Angus lost his dad prematurely, but he also told my hon. Friend how his dad's infection at the age of 14 changed his dad's life and robbed Angus of the relationship he might have wanted with his father, who suffered from poor mental and physical health. Angus understands that there are many claims and supports the prioritisation of infected claimants, but he cannot understand why he has been told not to expect payment until 2030. Angus told my hon. Friend that he

"feels let down and ignored by the Government",

and he will not be alone.

The Liberal Democrats have been consistent in urging the Government to end the record of failure of successive Governments, and finally answer the needs of victims. We committed, along with others, in our 2019 manifesto to act on the inquiry's recommendations,

"ensuring a just settlement for victims and their families",

and we have voted in favour of legislation when it has been brought to this House. We encourage the Government to be as effective and visible as possible in the way they deliver the promised compensation scheme for the all-too-many victims. After so many years of secrecy, deceit and delay, the Government must deliver on the start they have made to ensure full transparency on the progress of the scheme and open, ongoing and effective communication with all those affected.

I close my remarks by paying tribute to the victims and their families, and particularly the doughty campaigners who have worked for decades for the compensation and justice they deserve.

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

2.56 pm

**Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for their thoughtful, measured and often heartbreaking contributions. I would particularly mention the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) for securing and leading this debate, and my right hon. Friends the Members for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), who spoke movingly about cases involving their constituents and the heartbreaking effects this scandal has had on them.

The infected blood scandal remains the most devastating treatment disaster in the history of our national health service. The scale of the tragedy—the lives cut short, the families shattered, the trust destroyed—is something this House and indeed the entire country must never forget. The victims of this scandal, those infected and those affected, have spent decades fighting the establishment for truth and justice. Now that the truth has been laid bare by Sir Brian Langstaff's inquiry, it is the duty of the state—and that means all of us in this House—to deliver that justice without further delay.

It is entirely right that we begin by recognising the significant progress that has been made, because the establishment of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, with the commencement of actual payments, represents a monumental milestone in this decades-long journey. In doing so, I again place on record my profound gratitude for the foundational work done by my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) when he was the Paymaster General. It was under his determined stewardship that the Government accepted the moral case for compensation and passed the legislation needed to establish the delivery body to administer this scheme. He faced an incredibly complex technical challenge, but his deep personal commitment to the infected and the affected communities ensured that the crucial groundwork, including the initial framework for multibillion-pound interim payments, was laid. I know that the Paymaster General and the dedicated civil servants at IBCA are building on that foundation and working intensely to stand up a complex compensation scheme from scratch. We welcome the fact that more than £2.1 billion has been paid out to more than 3,200 victims. For those living infected victims who are already registered with existing support schemes, these payments offer a long-overdue measure of financial security and tangible recognition of the horrific wrongs that they have endured. Getting billions of pounds out of the door to those who need it is no small administrative feat, and we support the progress that the Minister and the Government have made on that front.

However, it is exactly because we share the Government's desire to see the scheme succeed that we must urgently raise the profound frustration being voiced by those who are still waiting. Progress for living infected victims on existing schemes has accelerated, but the reality for the thousands of affected victims and the estates of infected victims who have tragically passed away is still one of agonising delay.

Since the registration of intent opened, more than 18,500 registrations have been made, yet we know from IBCA's own figures that the number of payments made to affected individuals—the widows, the widowers, the parents and the children of those who died—remains painfully low. The same is true for the number of payments to those claiming on behalf of deceased infected individuals. There have been thousands of registrations, but only a tiny fraction of claims from estates and affected people have been fully processed and paid. We hear from families across the country who feel that they are stuck in an unbearable limbo. They have watched the inquiry conclude; they have heard the apologies from the Dispatch Box; and they have seen the compensation scheme launched, yet they still wake up every day wondering when their claim will even be assessed.

For the families who have lost loved ones, time is a cruel companion. Of course, many of those waiting are now very elderly. Tragically, victims and affected family members are dying before they receive the compensation that they are owed. We must ask ourselves: what comfort is a compensation scheme if it arrives too late? IBCA

*[Mike Wood]*

has stated that it expects to bring in all currently registered claims from living infected people and estates by March 2027. We must push to see if that timeline can be safely accelerated, because for some, even next year is simply too far away. Of course, as more time passes, the real value of the offers reduces. Will the Minister look again at uprating payments in line with the consumer prices index, so that victims and their families are not financially disadvantaged because their claims take longer to process?

That brings me to a specific, acute concern that has been raised repeatedly by victims and their families, as well as by hon. Members today. It is one that I urge the Minister to address. It is the issue of the burden of proof, and the requirement to provide evidence that is, in many cases, practically impossible to access. Let me give the House a harrowing example. There are parents who suffered the unimaginable trauma of watching their children die as a result of infected blood products decades ago. Under the current requirements, some of those mothers and fathers are being told that for the claim to be processed, they must provide documentary evidence that they lived with their child at the time. Think about what is being asked here. We are asking grieving parents to source official paperwork from 40 or 50 years ago to prove that their own child lived under their roof. How many of us in this House could easily produce a four-decade-old document proving our living arrangements with our own families? It is not just an administrative burden; it is deeply distressing and re-traumatising. It makes victims feel as though they are not believed.

We see similar issues for estates; they are trying to track down decades-old medical records, or navigating complex probate rules relating to relatives who died in the 1980s or 1990s. We understand that the authority has a duty to protect public funds and to ensure that claims are valid. However, we cannot allow the pursuit of administrative perfection to become the enemy of compassion. When the state has been responsible for the systemic cover-up and destruction of medical records, as the inquiry so damningly revealed, it cannot turn around and demand that victims produce those same missing records.

The burden of proof must be relaxed. We must always be mindful that we are talking about huge sums of taxpayers' money, but we need a system that operates on the balance of probabilities, applying flexibility, common sense, and, above all, humanity. We must allow caseworkers at IBCA to display the compassion that Members have spoken about this afternoon. I urge the Government to work with IBCA to review the evidence requirements immediately. We must empower caseworkers to make compassionate judgments, rather than forcing them to stick to rigid bureaucratic checklists that punish the victims of state failures.

I know that the Minister shares my desire to see this issue resolved, and the tone of our debate reflects the shared resolve of this House, but good intentions must translate into urgent operational improvements. We need to rapidly scale up the processing of claims for the affected and the estates. We need to ensure that the legal and administrative support that is provided to claimants is truly adequate to help them navigate the hurdles without adding to their distress. The Opposition stand ready to support the Government on any measures needed to expedite the process. We will vote for the necessary resources, support the necessary regulations, and work collaboratively to remove any legislative hurdles.

For more than 50 years, the victims of the infected blood scandal were ignored, gaslit and denied justice. This Parliament promised to do everything that we could to right that wrong. Significant progress has been made; we praise those who have worked hard to deliver it and, above all, the incredible work of the many victims and their families over many years, but our promise is not kept until the final payments are made, until the grieving mother is recognised, and until the families who lost everything finally see the tangible justice that they have fought their entire lives to achieve.

Let us work together, across the political divide, to tear down the remaining bureaucratic barriers. Let us push IBCA to move faster, to act with maximum compassion, and to finally close this darkest of chapters with the dignity and urgency that the victims so deeply deserve.

3.7 pm

**The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds):** It is a solemn privilege to close this debate, which has been extraordinarily moving. I start by paying tribute to the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford). Whenever I see him, he says that he is the person to ask me the awkward questions—quite rightly. He always does so with great courtesy, and he speaks with great passion on behalf of the infected blood community. As has been recognised across the House, he does remarkable work as chair of the APPG. He has an able and loyal deputy in the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), who supports that work and puts a great deal of time into it.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), for the tone of his remarks. I echo what he said about the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who I worked with and faced across the Dispatch Box when I was the shadow; he has continued that work since. I also thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for the constructive tone that she took.

I thank the right hon. Members for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), and my hon. Friends the Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon), for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery), for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), and for Rugby (John Slinger). They all made significant contributions and spoke powerfully on behalf of their constituents.

At the outset, I make the general point that many moving individual cases have been raised in this debate, as well as some specific points. My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington raised the case of Sean Cavens, on whose behalf he has spoken many times. To be clear, the change that I made in the third set of regulations allows someone to switch from receiving support scheme or periodic payments to a lump sum.

I am concerned to hear what he has said is happening to Sean. I say to my hon. Friend and others that they should follow up this debate with details, so that I can come back to them. I would say exactly the same thing to the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield. I was very moved, listening to her talk about her constituent Josie. I remember writing to the hon. Lady about that case, so I would very much like the details of what has happened in that claim process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East spoke movingly about the Smith family. Their dignity in the face of extraordinary grief after the loss of Colin has been nothing short of inspirational over the years, and my hon. Friend speaks very powerfully for them. I note that some constituents, including those of my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby, would prefer not to be named, and I completely understand that, but I would be very grateful for the details of their cases.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge, who spoke about his constituent Susan and her two daughters, one of whom, Louise, is in the Public Gallery. He spoke powerfully in memory of George. I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does for them. It is very meaningful that the family have come along to the debate; I am grateful for their time this afternoon.

More broadly, I want to mark all the progress that has been made. As so many right hon. and hon. Members have said, this scandal was decades in the making, and many decades passed before any form of acknowledgement or justice started to be delivered. As has been pointed out, over £2.7 billion of compensation offers have been made, and more than £2.1 billion has been paid in compensation.

Members have quite rightly sought to hold me to account today on speed of delivery, and I will come back to that in a moment, but we should acknowledge in this debate those who waited so long, especially those who are no longer with us. We owe it to them to take the time to recognise the hardships that they suffered. We must also recognise the extraordinary resolve of the infected blood community.

The topic has been debated many times in this House, and I hope that Members will have seen that I always try to make every effort to be here for the debates. I think it is important that I personally hear what right hon. and hon. Members are saying. Indeed, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) brought forward her amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill in 2023, I supported it, while in opposition.

Driving forward this work has been a key priority for the Government. Since I became the Minister responsible for this issue, I have brought three sets of regulations before the House. Most recently, we held a public consultation that asked for feedback on proposed changes to the compensation scheme, and I updated the House in April with the changes that the Government will be putting in place. I will shortly bring before the House a fourth set of regulations to make those legislative changes, and I am very grateful to the shadow Minister for saying that his party will support those regulations.

The compensation scheme is rightly the largest that any Government have ever launched. Alongside the £1.4 billion of interim payments, over £2.1 billion has now been paid out, but I totally recognise and hear that there is still a great deal of work to be done. Let me pick up the issue of IBCA's approach to payments. IBCA is operationally independent, and it is very important that it is, given Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations. That said, IBCA uses a test-and-learn approach to delivery. That means that at the start of a process, the numbers are small, but then there will be an exponential increase. That is what happened with the number of infected people who were paid towards the end of 2025.

As the House has rightly observed, the target of paying the first affected person before the end of 2025 was met, but the affected numbers are relatively small at the moment because they will go into that exponential phase. As I have said to the House before on many occasions, yes, we have what I call the backstops, which are the bulk of infected people being paid by the end of 2027 and the bulk of affected people being paid by the end of 2029, but those are not targets. I stand ready to assist IBCA to ensure that we can drive forward with delivery as quickly as possible. The reason the numbers of affected people are small is precisely because of the test-and-learn approach, and I will hold IBCA to account on the moment at which the speed of those payments increases.

I have been on more than one occasion to IBCA's office in Newcastle. As a number of right hon. and hon. Members have reflected today, the claims managers and the staff are dedicated and diligent, and are certainly building a system that, I believe, is sympathetic. I will be frank with the House: I am troubled by some of the contributions that have mentioned the level of evidence being required, and I say that for two reasons. First, there is often an ask for evidence of things that happened a long time ago, and secondly, we know from Sir Brian Langstaff's inquiry that there was deliberate document destruction. For those two reasons, I have repeatedly said from the Dispatch Box that I expect not just a sympathetic approach to evidence but some assistance and pointers as to where evidence, if required, might be obtained. I hope that when Members write to me about individual cases, they give me specific examples of where there have been issues regarding the level of evidence. I am more than happy to take up that issue.

I have set up a new feedback mechanism for the scheme. That was one of the things that I was expected to do, and Sir Brian Langstaff was clear that he expected that to be done. I was not prepared to just create some sort of correspondence-sifting mechanism; I wanted to create a system whereby the concerns raised went to the appropriate level. In some cases that will be IBCA's board, but in others it will be things that have to be elevated back to the Cabinet Office and to me. I expect to publish the first quarterly summary of issues raised through the mechanism in early July, but I will continue to push forward to ensure that it is working in the way it should and that victims have a voice going forward.

I will try and go through the different themes.

**Clive Efford:** I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend to move things forward. When he receives representations from the infected and affected community, how does he intend to put those into effect and change the compensation process? That is what they approach us about and we are all raising a number of those representations, asking for changes in the regulations he is about to lay before the House.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** It depends on the nature of the change. For example, on the issue being described as burden of proof, I have already repeatedly mentioned from the Dispatch Box the sympathetic approach that I expect. It depends on the specific issue being raised. In some cases, they will be things that I expect IBCA's board, rather than me as a Minister, to deal with. The point is that I want the issue raised to go to the appropriate level to ensure that it has an appropriate response. We will see how the mechanism works, and I am sure that my hon. Friend, through the all-party parliamentary group, will start to see people having experience of it. I will be interested to hear that feedback.

Unethical research has been raised across the House today. I do not think that any amount of money could ever make up for the experimentation on children that happened as a consequence of this scandal. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire, who represents Treloar's, will be aware from his constituents of how frankly heinous the situation was.

When I became the responsible Minister, I accepted a recommendation—it was one of the first things across my desk—from Sir Robert Francis, who had conducted a review of the scheme. He recommended that there should be an amount of money that does not in any sense reflect the totality of the harm done, but that is there, as an amount within a much larger amount, as a marker of what was particularly heinous in the experimentation. That is the context behind the unethical research awards; they were lower sums than those before the House today, but I accepted the recommendation because I thought it important to have that in the scheme. The amounts that we see are not the totality of the settlement.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East asked about the differences between the compensation awarded to living and deceased infected people. I recognise that financial loss awards may be lower for awards to estates—I think that was his point—but that is because the future financial losses for estate claims are paid to the infected person's dependants rather than the estate.

A point was made about psychiatric disorders. The Government have certainly been looking at how to make the severe health condition award for psychiatric disorders more accessible, with a less intrusive ask for evidence. We examined using types of evidence—these are such difficult issues—such as suicide to qualify for the award, but in my view imposing a retraumatising requirement would place an unconscionable burden on families who have already been through decades of mental suffering. When designing any compensation scheme, the Government have to ensure that no mechanism or award criterion inadvertently creates a risk to potentially vulnerable people. Instead, the new special category mechanism of a severe health condition award allows applicants to access more compensation for mental health problems that they have experienced, in excess of the core route—without, I repeat, an unreasonable ask for evidence.

A really important point was raised about the recognition of carers. The care award is provided to a person making a claim as an infected person or as the representative of a deceased infected person's estate. A living infected person claiming compensation can, however, instruct IBCA to pay all or some of the award to an eligible affected person who provided them with care.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire asked about criminal prosecutions. The House will realise that it is not for me as a Minister, or indeed for any other Minister, to make prosecutorial decisions—that is rightly independent of Government and is a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service—but I thought that the House would welcome an update.

Given the nationwide scope of the independent infected blood inquiry, and in the absence of a clear lead police force, the National Police Chiefs' Council has engaged experienced senior investigators to conduct a review of the available evidence. They have been assessing extensive information provided by the inquiry, which has been supporting the investigation fully, and legal advice to look at next steps.

In March, I wrote to the National Police Chiefs' Council to reaffirm my and the Government's commitment to make any and all relevant information around the infected blood inquiry available to the prosecuting authorities, where requested, so that an informed decision could be based on the evidence. In May, as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire may already be aware, the National Police Chiefs' Council published a statement that its initial review, which focused on events at Treloar's, did not provide sufficient information for a viable criminal investigation. However, terms of reference are now being developed for a further review of the remaining chapters. Decisions on that investigation and the timeframe are obviously for the NPCC, but the House should be assured that I stand ready to assist in providing evidence in any way possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli asked about the eligibility of affected estates. It is right that following the inquiry's additional report, we have amended the scheme so that the estate of a deceased affected person is now eligible to claim compensation where an affected person passed away between 21 May 2024 and 31 March 2031. The recommendation from Sir Brian Langstaff was a cut-off of 31 December 2029, but we have actually extended that a couple of years further.

The issue of interferon was raised by a number of Members. The Government have accepted the inquiry's recommendation to introduce a new higher level award for infected people who were treated with interferon. The new level 2b core compensation award will provide more financial loss and care compensation for the full two years after treatment and will be available to anyone treated with interferon who would otherwise be receiving a level 2 award. I did not recognise the point made by the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield about a 12-week minimum, but when I look at the detail of the case, I can look into that.

The point being made to me was twofold. The first point about evidence and transparency was made by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire. A technical expert group gives advice to Government. One of the things I have said is that we need transparency on its members, its minutes and its evidence, and my attitude is that we should publish it so that it is out there and people can see it. The second point about the long-term impact was raised by a couple of Members. If someone has experienced long-term impacts following interferon treatment that have impacted on their ability to work or their need for care, they may be eligible for additional compensation through the special category mechanism

severe health condition award. That ensures that those with long-term side effects receive additional financial support.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), who is no longer in her place, raised a point about inheritance tax and secondary transfers. That is a matter that I hope I have rectified and that was announced in the Budget last year, but I will certainly follow up with her on the specific case that she raised.

A number of Members mentioned the duty of candour. The House should be in no doubt about my commitment to the Hillsborough law and the duty of candour. I believe that we are well over 90% of the way there. As the House has been told in previous updates, the outstanding issue on the Hillsborough law is how exactly we strike that balance between a duty of candour and the work of the security and intelligence services, but I am very confident that we can resolve that satisfactorily. I look forward to driving forward the work on the Hillsborough law, which will be a landmark moment in terms of the legal duty that we are talking about in this House.

When we think of so many of the scandals that have come before us, even in my 11 years as a Member of Parliament, they all have a similarity. Sir Brian Langstaff said in his inquiry that it was not really about specific people who were involved in a conspiracy—if that was the case, we could identify them and they could be prosecuted. He said it was about a culture of institutional defensiveness—that, actually, what people do when terrible things happen is to protect either their own reputation or the reputation of the institution in which they serve. We will have a landmark moment when that law goes on the statute book, but beyond that there will be a need to drive cultural change to ensure that terrible scandals such as this do not happen in the future.

This compensation scheme exists because it is absolutely the right thing to do, but it exists because of the way that campaigners over many, many years continued in the face of state denial to drive this forward because of their suffering and that of their families. We cannot in this House change the past, but we certainly can mark it and remember it. It was a solemn privilege for me to attend the service of remembrance organised by the Infected Blood Memorial Committee in St Paul's cathedral last month. It was designed by the community, for the community, and it was a profoundly moving moment, and I was privileged to speak to the members of the committee, very ably chaired by Clive Smith. They are continuing their important work towards a national memorial, and I know they take a very open approach to seeking the community's views at every opportunity.

For me, that service of remembrance underscored the importance of getting this right. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge pointed out, it is absolutely crucial to get the compensation scheme right, but it is one of a number of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations. We owe it collectively as a House to get that right for future generations, to ensure that nothing like this can happen again. I believe that is the very least we can do.

3.30 pm

**Clive Efford:** I will not detain the House for long. I just want to thank everyone who contributed to the debate, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his thoughtful consideration of all the points raised. I just have one request: could I meet with him before he lays the regulations, so that we can discuss some of the issues raised today?

I thank again everyone who contributed to the debate. I hope we have done justice to the people who are concerned about this issue, and to the infected and the affected who are watching the proceedings today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you could assist the House. The Department for Transport has this afternoon published the Heathrow expansion national policy statement, the HENPS, alongside supporting documents in a major consultation. Given the significance of this decision, with implications for communities across a wide area, for the Government's own climate commitments and for connectivity across the whole of the United Kingdom, could you confirm whether the Secretary of State for Transport has given any indication to Mr Speaker that she intends to come to this House to make an oral statement? If not, do you agree that this House ought to expect the Government to come here first, rather than learning of major consultations through a written ministerial statement?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. I have received no notice from Ministers that they intend to make a statement on this matter. The House knows that I have no power to compel a Minister to make a statement, but Mr Speaker has repeatedly stated how important it is that significant announcements are made here in this House first. Ministers on the Front Bench will have heard the hon. Member and I, and no doubt they will respond in due course.

The hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) has also informed Mr Speaker that she will not proceed today with her debate on the potential merits of a full ban on fracking.

## PETITION

### Warehouse development in Pilning

3.33 pm

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The lives of people in and around Pilning are blighted by giant warehouses being built under outdated 1950s planning consents, which lack modern safeguards. The Severnside Warehouse Action group has already presented a petition with over 2,500 signatures to South Gloucestershire council, and it now has over 3,500 signatures online. However, primary legislation is needed to resolve the problem. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the planning authorities to revoke the 1957 planning consent for warehouse developments in Pilning, or to amend it as soon as possible to include appropriate conditions and restrictions to protect local communities.

*[Claire Young]*

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

*Declares that the ongoing warehouse development in Pilning is having a major and lasting detrimental impact on local communities, including through loss of countryside, increasing noise levels, light pollution, a real risk of flooding, a big increase in traffic, and the devaluation of property prices; further declares that the development is taking place without any meaningful conditions or restrictions and without consultation with residents, as developers are relying on a planning consent dating from 1957; and further declares that this is a unique situation with a planning consent that was given nearly seventy years ago no longer fit for purpose in 2026.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage the planning authorities to revoke the 1957 planning consent for warehouse developments in Pilning or to amend it as soon as possible to include appropriate conditions and restrictions to protect local communities.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P003210]

## River Otter: Sewage Pollution

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

3.34 pm

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of sewage pollution in the River Otter, a river that flows through many of the Devon communities that I represent.

I should say at the outset that, this morning, I declined an offer of hospitality from the new chief executive of South West Water and its parent company Pennon Group. They offered breakfast in Parliament, but I did not accept as I was here, in the Chamber, trying to catch Mr Speaker's eye to talk about the Jurassic coast UNESCO world heritage site, and it is helpful that I will get to talk a little bit about that now. My office has written back to South West Water to request a separate meeting with the chief executive to talk through some of the issues that I will raise in the debate. In fairness, the debate is also about issues that apply across the water industry, not just with Pennon Group.

I pay tribute to the more than 75 water testers, campaigners and citizen scientists of the Otter River Catchment Action group—ORCA. The ORCA group developed out of the Otter Valley Association, and it has devoted almost as many hours to understanding and protecting the cherished River Otter as there have been hours of sewage spills into that river, which is saying something. The work of ORCA has provided much of the evidence in my contribution. The dedication of the ORCA volunteers represents the very best of self-organised civic community action and public service.

In particular, I would like to pay tribute to Bruce McGlashan, who passed away suddenly in April this year, just days after ORCA hosted a public meeting at The Institute in Ottery St Mary. Bruce brought to ORCA his experience of having been a manager at the Environment Agency for 30 years. He was also secretary of the River Otter Fisheries Association. Bruce was central to ORCA, and helped us to correspond with South West Water and the Environment Agency. It is hard to believe that he, Peter Williams and I stood on the shingle outside the Otter Inn at Honiton, after a meeting with the Environment Agency, just days before Bruce died. He should have lived to see the River Otter returned to full ecological health.

The Otter should be one of England's ecological success stories. It runs through a beautiful valley in Devon that supports agriculture, tourism and recreation, and ought to be a rich and diverse habitat. Yet today, most sections of the Otter and its key tributary, the Wolf, are classified by the Environment Agency as having poor ecological status. That places the rivers within the 20% of water bodies with the poorest ecological status in the country. This issue does not just concern the local environment: it also concerns public health and infrastructure, and it is increasingly a question of public trust in the Government's ability to regulate companies that provide utilities properly.

The facts on the ground are damning. Data obtained from South West Water through freedom of information and environmental information regulation requests reveal an alarming picture of bacterial contamination in the River Otter. Between November 2024 and May 2025,

average daily levels of E. coli measured in the river were five times higher than the acceptable level for safe swimming. After periods of rainfall, those levels spiked up to 100 times the safe limit, remaining at increased levels for days or weeks at a time. During the period analysed, E. coli levels exceeded the safe swimming limit on more than 90% of days.

Budleigh Salterton, where the river meets the sea, lost its blue flag status this year because of a deterioration in water quality. Following the loss of that blue flag status, South West Water stated publicly that the E. coli levels at Budleigh's beach

"could be caused by birdlife in the new Otter Nature Reserve".

However, ORCA samples from the mouth of the River Otter show E. coli surges correlate with surges upstream of the nature reserve.

We should be honest about the scale of the sewage problem. This challenge is made more difficult by the fact that regular monitoring has been limited. Until recently, nobody was routinely measuring E. coli levels along the River Otter. ORCA volunteers are collecting samples every two weeks. They do so at three locations along the river, building a much-needed evidence base to understand pollution levels, rainfall impacts and likely sources of contamination.

In 2024, South West Water released untreated sewage into the River Otter for more than 9,500 hours. In terms of duration, that is three times more untreated sewage hours spilled into the River Otter than into Exmouth bay. In 2025, more than 8,000 hours of untreated sewage were discharged into the river and its tributaries, following hundreds of monitored sewage overflow events. Untreated sewage is entering the river on a routine basis, and at a scale that cannot be dismissed as a consequence of exceptional weather.

Phosphate pollution further damages the river's ecology. High concentrations of phosphate cause algal bloom and eutrophication and reduce oxygen levels in the water, causing significant harm to aquatic plants, fish and wildlife. The evidence gathered by ORCA is striking; its monitoring suggests that the presence of a single sewage treatment works on the river can increase harmful phosphate concentrations in the river by around 80% during the summer months. Its testing indicates that around 70% of phosphate found in the middle and lower River Otter can be attributed not to agricultural pollution, but to treated sewage effluent.

One of the most frustrating aspects of this situation is the gap between the pledges we have received from South West Water and the delivery we have seen on them. In August and October 2025, South West Water's then CEO, Susan Davy, publicly committed to three critical objectives for the River Otter by the end of 2029, which I will quote. The first objective is that

"any storm overflow that is persistently releasing more than 20 times a year will be tackled following investigation of the cause".

The second objective is that

"where our assets are not performing as they should, or where they are causing environmental harm, we will act".

The third objective states:

"As part of our 2025–2030 investment programme, we're targeting improvements across the Otter catchment—including at Ottery St Mary—to reduce storm overflow use, and lower phosphate in our treated discharges".

At the time, those commitments were welcome, but residents are entitled to ask what progress has been made in the last year. First, at the 11 worst discharge points along the river, there was still an average of 67 untreated discharges in 2025. That is not fewer than the 20 that we were pledged. Secondly, South West Water has published only a limited programme of what it describes as "tactical improvements". That is hardly action.

Thirdly, despite repeated engagement from local campaigners and community groups, South West Water currently has no scheme to remove phosphate from treated effluent by 2030 and no published plan to meet the commitments made by the former chief exec. There was a time when South West Water talked about a phosphate reduction scheme for Honiton sewage treatment works, which would have removed 35% of all South West Water-sourced phosphate before 2030. According to South West Water more recently, the scheme

"had been removed from the 2025-2030 plan."

Another consequence of sewage pollution is its impact on housing developments. East Devon district council commissioned a water cycle study as part of its local plan. Honiton sewage treatment works—the largest treatment works on the river—is already operating at 40% above capacity. That is projected to rise to 73% above capacity when future building plans are taken into account.

The council's report identified many serious failings in South West Water's sewage infrastructure in the River Otter catchment. That includes failings at three major sewage works that are already operating in excess of their capacity. Their excess untreated sewage is being discharged regularly into the River Otter. Effectively, South West Water has been using the River Otter as a conveyor—a free, open, half-pipe sewer—resulting in significant environmental harm. The council's report was plain that new housing approvals will require that South West Water delivers suitable additional treatment capacity.

The costs of inaction are mounting: we have environmental degradation, risks to public health, constraints on housing, additional pressure being added by new housing, and growing public frustration.

Residents ask a simple question: why must local communities accept continuing environmental damage, rising bills, and insufficient investment in the infrastructure required to clean up this mess?

According to Ofwat's most recent water company performance report from 2024-25, South West Water had 108 pollution incidents per 10,000 km of sewer, based on self-reported data—more than double the average for the sector. In fact, South West Water failed to meet its own performance targets for pollution incidents for each of the five years of the 2020-25 period. ORCA's trained citizen scientists have logged over 2,800 individual tests and observations, whereas the Environment Agency carried out 24 location tests on the River Otter over that period. The public should not have to rely on volunteers to provide the evidence base for environmental protection. The volunteer action we have seen is invaluable, but safeguarding rivers must be the responsibility of water companies, regulators and, ultimately, the Government.

Are we going to have to wait years for the Otter to be coaxed back to health? What specific measures to address these local issues might we see in the Government's upcoming clean water Bill? Residents of towns and

*[Richard Foord]*

villages across this corner of Devon would love to know. Over 50,000 people have signed a petition that was initiated in February by Marc Astley. Marc lives in Ottery St Mary, and he and his family put together a petition stating that

"if environmental standards aren't being met, executives shouldn't be receiving bonuses. The government has introduced new powers intended to block payouts when environmental performance fails…But loopholes remain—rewards can still be restructured as retention payments or routed through parent companies. To the public, that looks like bonuses by another name…The end goal is clear: close the loopholes and link executive rewards directly to measurable environmental outcomes—cleaner rivers, healthier seas and fewer sewage discharges."

I know that the Minister also wants to see cleaner rivers and seas, and that she is committed to her brief. Can she confirm to the more than 50,000 people who signed that petition that those loopholes will be closed by new legislation?

The River Otter is not a cost-free extension of the sewerage infrastructure network that enables bill hikes and increased shareholder returns. It is supposed to offer a living ecosystem, a valued recreational resource, and an integral part of the lives of the people who live in east Devon. The people who live along the banks of the Otter are not asking for miracles; they are asking for honest monitoring, adequate infrastructure and accountability, with pledged commitments being met. The River Otter can recover—we have seen elsewhere that targeted investment in treatment infrastructure and phosphate removal can make a real difference—but recovery will require urgency, transparency, and a willingness to move beyond promises and towards delivery. Bruce McGlashan's legacy will live on if the polluters, the regulators and we Members listen to, and act on, the citizen science carried out by the volunteers I represent today.

3.48 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):** It is a pleasure to respond to this afternoon's debate on behalf of my colleague the Water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), who is sadly unable to be with us because she is attending an international conference on the marine environment. I thank the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) for raising this important issue.

This Government are absolutely determined to fix our broken water system. As the hon. Gentleman has rightly set out, the situation we inherited was one where pollution warnings and sewage discharges were commonplace; where regulation was stripped back; where water companies were allowed to mark their own homework; and where there were simply no penalties for failure, with incompetence and pollution rewarded. That stopped with this Labour Government. Not only have we taken action over the past two years; we have seen action this week, with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs sending a letter to the regulator about the investment plans for Thames Water. That action is ongoing.

The River Otter reflects the previous failure. It is poor in the upper reaches, has moderate water quality in the middle and is poor again downstream, with excessive nutrient levels across the catchment. South West Water has not met the standards that people rightly expect. At Honiton, the sewage treatment works has exceeded its permitted flow limits and its performance has fallen short. That is not acceptable, because rivers like the Otter are not lines on maps; they are places where families walk, children explore, and where our nature and wildlife thrive. They are part of our shared national inheritance, and they deserve better.

We recognise that nutrient levels in the River Otter are too high. That leads to excessive algal growth that harms local wildlife, and the Environment Agency has, under this Government, stepped in, challenging South West Water, increasing oversight and requiring improvements. South West Water has had to fix failures in how it monitors and manages its network. Spill levels, as the hon. Member has set out, have been unacceptably high at some sites. Regulators have made it clear that that must improve. We are seeing early improvements, but there is still much more to be done, and we will hold South West Water to account until it delivers.

The Environment Agency is expanding monitoring of the river, and it welcomes the support of local groups, including the Otter Valley Association and Otter River Catchment Action, ORCA. I echo the hon. Member's tributes to Bruce McGlashan. After 32 years working for the Environment Agency, he retired and had to carry on doing what he was doing as an Environment Agency officer. I send my condolences to his family. I pay tribute to Peter Williams, too—I thank them both for their incredible efforts. I watched the "Dirty Business" documentary about the water industry, and was absolutely furious, seeing the scale of deregulation under the previous Government. Of course, the water companies could do their data dumps, but without a PhD in mathematics, no one could reverse-engineer the maths to see what was really happening.

There are arguments about the data and the sources, which I will come to, but I first put on record my thanks to those people for their work collecting data, raising concerns and building the evidence needed to drive positive change. I pay tribute to similar groups up and down the country who are helping us to hold polluters to account. We will secure a fair deal for customers, we will rebuild public trust, and we will protect the environment to support health, nature and our economy.

The Environment Agency has identified agriculture as the largest source of pollution in the Otter, and we are taking action to tackle it. We are creating a single, clear set of rules for farmers. We are doubling farm inspections, enabling at least 6,000 inspections a year by 2029, while working with farmers to raise their standards. That is an increase from around 700 inspections in 2021. We are increasing funding for environmental land management schemes from £800 million in 2023-24 to £2 billion by 2028-29. That funding targets crucial issues, such as improving water quality.

We are also taking decisive action on sewage pollution, strengthening enforcement and holding water companies to account. We have £104 billion of private investment from water companies to upgrade our ageing, creaking, leaking water infrastructure. That includes more than £10 billion to improve around 2,500 storm overflows in England by 2030 and £4.5 billion to reduce nutrient pollution over the same period, including upgrades to nutrient removal at Feniton treatment works. We have set a target in our environmental improvement plan to

reduce phosphorus from waste water by 55% by 2030, putting us on track for an 80% reduction by 2038. We are well on our way to delivering that, and phosphorus removal improvements were completed at Churchinford treatment works in 2024.

We are requiring water companies to ringfence investment so that it is spent on infrastructure upgrades and not diverted elsewhere, and we have, as the hon. Member notes, introduced the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 to raise standards and enforce accountability. As of 1 April 2026, water companies must publish annual pollution incident reduction plans. Under the previous Government, reduction plans were voluntary. Now they are mandatory and public, so that everyone can see what the water companies have set out to do.

The Act introduced a requirement for spill monitoring at all emergency overflows, matching the pre-existing requirement to monitor discharges from storm overflows—those are two separate things. It has also given regulators powers to ban bonuses for executives at failing water companies and pursue criminal charges against bosses where needed. We have already stopped more than £4 million in bonuses for the bosses of polluting water companies. This month, we fined South West Water more than £1.8 million after the Brixham water supply incident, which involved cryptosporidium from agricultural run-off. That is a record penalty for a drinking water offence, reflecting the seriousness of the company's failure. Where water companies fail, this Government act.

I am concerned to learn that South West Water has made statements to local communities that did not accurately reflect the full position. In relation to Honiton, the company told a local group that it had sought a tighter permit limit. That was incorrect. The Environment Agency challenged that directly. The company has since acknowledged that its statement was not a true reflection of events, apologised and committed to issuing a formal retraction. This is what accountability looks like, and we will continue to enforce it. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can reassure Marc Astley and the 50,000 petitioners that we are taking action to tackle bonuses given through back-door retention payments. Companies must comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the law.

I am also concerned to hear from the hon. Gentleman that the gorgeous beach at Budleigh Salterton has lost its blue flag status, given that it is a designated bathing water site. We have designated more sites in order to force water companies to up their game, but this is not how it is supposed to happen; beaches are not supposed to lose their blue flags. We will look into that issue.

Unlike the previous Government, we are committed to stopping pollution before it starts. If we take rainwater out of our sewers, we reduce pressure on the system and cut storm overflow spills. Capturing rainwater where it falls reduces the amount of water entering the network. It is estimated that the average household roof collects 85,000 litres of rainwater each year—equivalent to around 4 trillion litres, or 1.6 million Olympic-sized swimming pools, annually across the UK. Of course, that all runs off and is lost, and then we enter summer, there are heatwaves and drought ensues. Managing that water better can reduce discharges into rivers, like the Otter.

In the clean water Bill, which will be introduced in this Session, we will commit to ensuring that regulatory mechanisms and funding support the delivery of solutions. We want to maximise the opportunities offered by better managing rain where it lands. That approach will benefit communities and the environment, prevent flooding and help with urban development, ensuring that policies and services work better to deliver.

We recognise that the water sector does need reform. The clean water Bill will deliver on commitments in the White Paper, driving reforms to transform the water system for good and secure a sustainable system for future generations. It will establish an enhanced regional planning function to help identify lower cost, higher impact solutions across whole catchment areas—looking at the entire river from source to sea, instead of at individual works—and considering opportunities across sectors. That will improve water quality and supply. It will also enable a greater uptake in preventive interventions and nature-based solutions to reduce long-term costs and improve resilience. The Government are committed to improving the regulation of private sewerage to reduce pollution from those systems, which I am sure the hon. Member is aware of. We recognise that the current sewer adoption arrangements need review and will consider how to enact that change.

On the Otter, the Environment Agency's team carried out over 900 inspections in Devon and Cornwall in 2025-26, including unannounced visits, prioritising the most environmentally sensitive sites, some of which will have been in the Otter catchment. The Environment Agency is currently investigating potential offences at Ottery St Mary's sewage attenuation tank. It is in the process of agreeing an enforcement undertaking with South West Water and investigating event duration monitoring data from the site. I am sure that will be of interest to the hon. Member, to the campaigners and to everybody who cares about this precious river.

Our water system has not worked as it should, but the Government are taking strong, robust action to fix it. We are acting to clean up rivers and to hold the water companies to account for their pollution, their neglect and their negligence, and we are stopping them from marking their own homework. We are securing record investment to rebuild infrastructure, tackling pollution at its source and restoring trust in this damaged industry. We are delivering a cleaner, healthier River Otter for future generations to enjoy.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 18 June 2026*

[Peter Dowd *in the Chair*]

**BACKBENCH BUSINESS**

## Human Rights: Supply Chains

*[Relevant documents: Sixth Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights of Session 2024-25, Forced Labour in UK Supply Chains, HC 633, and the Government response, HC 1404.]*

1.43 pm

**Bambos Charalambous** (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of safeguarding human rights in supply chains.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd, particularly as you had such short notice. Globalisation and technological advances over the last few years have given us the ability to better connect across the world and improved our ability to trade globally. With increased connectivity comes increased awareness of issues and events around the world, and one issue that that increased awareness has brought into sharp focus is human rights in our country's supply chains. From the Boohoo scandal, involving the exploitation of workers paid £3.50 an hour in a factory in Leicester, to the Bangladesh sweatshops making our clothes, to state-imposed forced labour for the Uyghur community in China, we have never been more aware of the need to ensure that our supply chains do not involve human rights violations and the exploitation of workers at home and abroad.

Supply chains run our daily lives, but the uncertainty over where many of our daily products originate and whether they have been produced through forced labour and in inhumane conditions has wide-ranging ethical and national security implications. Here is an example to illustrate the point. This morning, a nurse in the UK woke up to prepare for her NHS shift. She wears a cotton uniform, the fibres of which were produced with Uyghur forced labour. For breakfast, she eats a banana grown by workers facing union-busting in Costa Rica. She checks her smartphone, built with cobalt mined by children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She makes her journey to work in a car fuelled by petrol from companies linked to threats against environmental defenders and indigenous communities in Nigeria. At hospital, she puts on gloves made in a union-busting factory in Sri Lanka, under lights powered by solar panels made with Uyghur forced labour in China, and uses surgical tools linked to child labour in Pakistan. On her break, she gets a cup of tea with a biscuit containing palm oil from Indonesia, where communities and forests have been swept away to be replaced with palm oil plantations.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, Mr Dowd, I commend you for taking the Chair and saving the debate. It is said that you never go home, so perhaps that is why you were able to get here.

I thank the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this incredibly important debate. He has outlined a number of countries where the problems are acute, but does he agree that China is the worst of all? Its abuses—of human rights in particular—are on an industrial scale. Some 70 million Christians are abused in terms of their human rights, including their right to believe, as are millions of Uyghur Muslims and between 7 million and 20 million Falun Gong. China must be taken to task. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in summing up the debate, the Minister needs to outline a number of methods to take China on? It has done some 13.75 million forced-labour transactions, and it is time for those to stop.

**Bambos Charalambous:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I am sure many colleagues in the Chamber will focus on the Uyghurs in their contributions, but he is right to highlight the abuse in China and the need to address it.

That is the reality in UK supply chains: these products, which we use every day, are integrated into our lives. We need legislation to fix that, to prevent the abuse of human rights and the degradation of the environment.

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. As a long-time trade unionist, I am proud of the work this Government have done to secure employment rights in our country, but last year the International Trade Union Confederation global rights index found that more than 80% of countries restricted the right to collective bargaining, and 75% denied the right to establish or join a trade union. Does my hon. Friend agree that our duty is to promote human and labour rights wherever we can and to regulate our global supply chains so that workers across the world can enjoy the protections we have?

**Bambos Charalambous:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The lack of trade union rights globally is seriously worrying. I am a proud trade unionist, and we need to ensure that trade union rights are respected in our UK supply chains. I will come on to that shortly in my speech.

Our country is the birthplace of the trade union movement. We pride ourselves on championing workers' rights, human rights and our democratic values. Our Labour Government recently passed the Employment Rights Act 2025, the biggest reform of workers' rights in a generation, bringing more security to millions of workers and making work pay. Our freedoms of association and collective bargaining—some of the most important rights we have—allow workers to have representation in the face of unfair treatment and to advocate for fair pay and protections against dismissal, discrimination and other unfair and inhumane conditions.

The same cannot be said for workers around the world. Workers in 75% of countries are denied the right to freedom of association. In many countries, it is illegal to be a trade unionist. Coupled with attacks on freedom of speech, we have countless reports of human rights activists and environmental defenders being threatened, or even killed, when challenging or opposing abuses by large corporations. With 50 million people trapped in modern slavery globally—a number that is

*[Bambos Charalambous]*

growing every year—and labour rights under threat almost everywhere, it has never been more critical to tackle this issue head on.

Without those freedoms, workers have no power to challenge inhumane conditions that exacerbate inequality and poverty, particularly for women and children. The UK was once a leader on safeguarding human rights and supply chains, but we are now falling behind. Currently, we have a patchwork of narrow legislation and guidelines on businesses and human rights that are not enforcing our moral duty to ensure that our supply chains are free from human rights abuses.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that I am a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which recently published a report called "Forced Labour in the UK's Supply Chains". One of our recommendations was that the Government need to strengthen section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and specifically the reporting duty, in a way that reflects the size and capacity of the business in question. Does my hon. Friend agree with that recommendation? Would he like to see more done to strengthen the Modern Slavery Act?

**Bambos Charalambous:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I will come to in just a moment. I strongly support the strengthening of section 54 and its application.

With the UK importing £20 billion-worth of high-risk goods every year, our current framework is not effective enough in preventing goods made with forced labour from entering the UK market, despite the Government's stated position that no company operating in the UK should have forced labour in its supply chains. The Modern Slavery Act was considered world-leading legislation, as the UK was the first country in the world to introduce such legislation. However, the current transparency and supply chain reporting, as set out in section 54 of the Act, is wholly inadequate, applying only to organisations with a turnover of more than £36 million, and excluding public bodies, meaning many businesses and organisations fall through the cracks.

The exclusion of public bodies from the duty to report on transparency in their supply chains can leave our country's most important agencies vulnerable to being complicit in horrific human rights abuses, which affect not only the welfare of workers globally, but the stability and growth of our economy. In addition, the transparency reporting duty can be met by an organisation simply declaring that it has taken no steps to address forced labour in its supply chains; that is simply not good enough. Corporate giants with big money are given a free pass to escape their moral responsibilities by not even looking for any abuses present in their supply chains.

At present, businesses are able to voluntarily identify, mitigate or prevent any forced labour risks found in their supply chains. Many responsible businesses in the UK want to do the right thing, but are being undercut by corporate giants and less responsible companies. Clear and enforceable rules are needed in order to provide the right guidance for businesses and level the playing field for all. We can address that by introducing mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence legislation to hold all businesses, across all sectors, including financial institutions and the public sector, legally accountable for preventing human rights abuses and environmental harm in their supply chains. Mandatory due diligence would compel corporations to undertake proactive processes to minimise and manage the risk of violations within their operations by, for example, conducting risk assessments, requiring their suppliers to fulfil certain conditions or carrying out unannounced audits.

Internationally, we are far behind our allies and partners. All other G7 nations have introduced or plan to introduce mandatory due diligence laws or import bans on goods made by forced labour. The EU is doing both. With the UK seeking a closer relationship and alignment with the EU, we must catch up.

Businesses themselves have also spoken up. In the last few years, more than 150 businesses and investors, representing more than £4.5 trillion in UK assets, have publicly demanded mandatory standards. The Trades Union Congress, the Ethical Trading Initiative, the British Retail Consortium and the Corporate Justice Coalition, which collectively represent more than 350 high street brands with £800 billion in turnover, have called on the Government to introduce mandatory due diligence laws.

Public support shows that people value companies that responsibly source and produce products we use every day, with four in five adults supporting new laws. By failing to update the current patchwork of legislation and guidelines, and delaying the introduction of human rights and environmental due diligence laws, we are failing workers, communities and environments integrated into our supply chains, failing UK businesses that want to do the right thing and ultimately risking the complicity of the UK economy, as well as our national security.

The Government have already made it clear that supply chain resilience is critical to the UK's economic security. In June last year, the trade strategy committed to a new supply chain centre within the Department for Business and Trade, which will play a role in supporting businesses to address the risks of forced labour in supply chains. The strategy also launched the responsible business conduct review—the UK's implementation of the UN guiding principles on business and human rights. A year later, Parliament is still waiting for the review to be published and scrutinised, although I very much welcome yesterday's publication of the action plan for the supply chain centre.

The trade strategy rightly recognised that strengthening responsible business conduct

"is not only a moral imperative",

but

"a positive part of the Government's mission to grow the economy."

Supply chains and the need to ensure that they are free of abuses and harm are embedded in our growth mission. With modern slavery costing the UK economy £60 billion every year, we urgently need to ensure that we do not lose out on more growth, and we can do that by simply introducing new legislation.

The resilience of our economy goes hand in hand with our energy security. The conflict in the middle east and the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war, which have significantly contributed to the cost of living crisis for our constituents, have shown more clearly than ever that the UK must become energy independent and continue focusing on renewable sources of energy.

However, the security of home-grown energy is exposed when we look further into its supply chain. An estimated 98% of solar panels in the UK are produced in China, predominantly in the Xinjiang region, with forced labour from the Uyghur community. Therefore, the UK is at risk of being a dumping ground for slave labour-produced solar panels. We must ensure that, with new legislation on Great British Energy, home-grown energy is produced through ethical means, so that in producing energy to heat our homes, we do not contribute to the inhumane treatment of workers and communities around the world.

In addressing those challenges, we cannot overlook the unbreakable link between safeguarding human rights and protecting the environment in supply chains; when there is a failure to protect one, the other suffers. UK imports of beef, soya, cocoa, rubber and palm oil—also known as forest risk commodities—have wiped out forests the size of our major cities. The UK's deforestation footprint linked to those imports has increased to 39,000 hectares in the last few years and is likely to be higher. The biggest culprit is corned beef from Brazilian companies such as JBS, which have been linked to the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, the lungs of the earth. When communities lose vital access to clean water because of corporate contamination, when indigenous communities lose access to ancestral lands or when environmental defenders are threatened or killed for speaking out against mega-projects that destroy our environment, it becomes a human rights issue.

New legislation must address all human rights and environmental harms in a way that provides clarity to businesses in ensuring that they are conducting themselves responsibly. The legislation needed to address those issues would protect the workers, communities and vital environments involved in producing our everyday goods. Consumers in the UK could be sure that they were shopping responsibly and not contributing to abuses around the world, and businesses could have the clarity they need in order to do the right thing.

I have a few asks of the Government. Parliament continues to await the publication of two reviews set out in the trade strategy last year. Can the Minister confirm when the responsible business conduct review and the national baseline assessment will be published, the key outcomes that should be expected from those reviews, and a timeline for moving from review to action on the recommendations of each report? Given the interconnectedness of human rights, labour rights and environmental harm, can she confirm that the Government will engage in meaningful action to address this issue by adopting a thorough and holistic, rather than narrow, approach to responsible business conduct?

Do the Government agree that we need cross-cutting and holistic legislation to provide clarity and certainty to UK businesses, rather than a patchwork approach that burdens businesses that act responsibly while enabling irresponsible businesses to undercut them? Failure to act on human rights abuses and environmental harm will damage the resilience of our supply chains and our economy. Introducing the human rights and environmental safeguards to UK supply chains set out in my speech is not just the right thing to do economically; it is our ethical and moral duty to ensure that the protections that we enjoy in the UK are shared across the world.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I remind Members that we have about five or six minutes, give or take, per person. Just bear that in mind. I also remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called.

2 pm

**Dr Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I am sure I speak for us all in extending warm thanks to you for stepping into the breach at the last minute to enable us to have this timely and important debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing it.

It is clear that UK business has global environmental and human rights impacts. UK business has impacts on climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, waste management, deforestation, and of course on human rights and labour rights, as we have already discussed. The Government have acknowledged those concerns.

This debate comes at a particularly timely moment because, as the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green pointed out, we await with bated breath the Government release of announcements. I note that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) tabled a question to the Secretary of State in January asking when the responsible business conduct review would be published. The Minister for Trade responded with one word: "Soon." It is now five months later, so perhaps today's Minister could assure us in her wind-up that soon really will mean soon. We would very much appreciate seeing that review.

Although we have some parts of an existing legal framework—for example, the Modern Slavery Act and the Environment Act 2021—they are too narrow to meet internationally accepted standards. Single-issue measures such as robust legislation to prevent and address modern slavery, including through import and export restrictions of goods and services that involve forced labour, are useful but not in themselves sufficient to address the full range of human rights and environmental risks and harms. In particular, if they require companies only to report, rather than to take action, they do not have the force that we need.

The UK risks falling behind its international partners. The UK was once a frontrunner on environmental and human rights legislation, but progress has stalled. The EU's corporate sustainability due diligence directive will apply, of course, to UK companies that generate significant turnover in EU markets, meaning that UK businesses will face mandatory due diligence obligations abroad without equivalent domestic standards at home. That does not make sense. The UK would be better able to produce and sell goods and services in the EU single market, as well as continue to position itself strongly as a global leader on human rights, if we had our own mandatory environmental and human rights due diligence legislation.

It is not just campaigners who are calling for that; business is calling for a new law. A clear majority of businesses surveyed by the British Institute of International and Comparative Law believe that current UK laws do not provide clarity or sufficient legal certainty on human rights obligations. Nearly three quarters of UK businesses believe that additional regulation would provide benefits, including greater legal certainty and a level playing field. Indeed, I met with people from a large business in

*[Dr Ellie Chowns]*

my own constituency just a couple of weeks ago who made exactly that point. A level playing field is needed. Business is calling for it.

As has already been reflected, major businesses including the British Retail Consortium, John Lewis Partnership, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Twinings are all calling for new mandatory due diligence laws on human rights and the environment. As we have also heard, over 160 businesses and investors representing trillions of pounds of investment are calling for the failure to prevent liability model. That failure to prevent model is what underpins the Bribery Act 2010. We already have the legal model in UK legislation that we can adopt in the same way. We do not have to reinvent the wheel; it is simply about applying the wheel more consistently. Three parliamentary Committees have already recommended this. Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights has specifically recommended legislation modelled on the failure to prevent framework of the Bribery Act 2010.

We have business calling for that legislation. We have parliamentary Committees and parliamentarians calling for it. The Good Business Matters pledge has secured cross-party support from over 80 MPs and peers from eight different political parties. We also have public support: 145,000 citizens have signed a petition calling for such legislation, and a YouGov survey indicates that three quarters of the British population support stronger legislation in this area.

In summary, introducing mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence legislation is not only the right thing to do to protect the environment and human rights around the world and to be consistent; it is good for our economy. We miss out on opportunities by not adopting such legislation. It is called for urgently by major businesses that want the Government to support them in showing leadership in this area. It is strongly called for by British citizens, who care—people in this country really care about the standards under which our goods and services are produced. We see that in the strong outcry about the continued import of goods and services from stolen land in Israeli settlements in the west bank; in the outcry over the import of goods that are produced under slave labour conditions by Uyghurs in China; and in the outcry over the import of goods and services that result in deforestation, environmental devastation and climate damage. It is time for the Government to act, and I very much hope that the Minister will assure us that they will do so soon.

2.6 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing the debate, which is much needed. Also, it is not often that I thank an Everton supporter for anything, but thank you very much, Mr Dowd, for stepping into the breach.

A number of organisations have been working incredibly hard with me and other Members on a number of fronts relating to this issue for some time. I thank the Corporate Justice Coalition, which is a large coalition of organisations. I thank the TUC and my own union, Unison, for circulating briefings. I also thank Anti-Slavery International; ActionAid; Sarah Benn Gordon, who put together a range of information for me; and the wonderful House of Commons Library.

The report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights is an excellent piece of work, not surprisingly. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) has gone, but he is a specialist in Aristotle, and we can see the logic in the report. I have read the Government's response and want to make sure that I have it clear; the Minister can clarify later in the debate. First, the response says that the Government share the Committee's concerns and accept that there are real worries about global supply chains and that we have to ensure that, as a country, we are not complicit. Secondly, it states that

"the Government is actively exploring options to strengthen protections."

Thirdly, it states—as hon. Members have noted—that their response will be based on the trade strategy review that was launched some time ago, which aims to ensure that we have responsible business conduct in supply chains and companies operating in the UK.

I found it interesting that the Government's response listed exactly the same concerns, about

"human rights, labour rights, the environment, and anti-corruption"

and said that there has to be due regard to the costs of implementation. It then listed the Departments engaged in the review as

"the Home Office, the Department for Business and Trade (DBT), the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Cabinet Office".

There was no reference to the Treasury whatsoever—nor, seemingly, to the Financial Conduct Authority or the Bank of England.

The small point I want to make is that the finance sector seems to have been excluded from the whole debate. It is certainly not covered in any of the reports so far. We need to be concerned. It is not just about goods in; our concern is about finance out and the scale of investment by the City and by our finance sector, unfortunately, in abusive business practices around the globe. That investment is sometimes funded by money that has been laundered into the City and then laundered out. I remind people that only a few years ago the City of London was described as the "Russian laundromat" due to the Russian oligarchs' money that was coming in and then invested in a whole range of schemes that abused human rights and brought about environmental degradation.

That is why I want to know whether the finance sector will be included in the overall review. At the moment, we largely rely on the EU's corporate sustainability due diligence directive to cover the finance sector. The problem is that the omnibus proposed in 2025 watered down the role that would play and the requirements within it. There is also a finance exemption. A large section of the finance sector is completely exempt, so investment and lending are largely exempt in terms of the requirements on due diligence. It also excludes downstream partners—the companies they invest in.

Additionally, there is no reference to shadow banking at all. Shadow banking is going on at the moment virtually unregulated. There is other legislation, such as the EU sustainable finance disclosure regulation, but there are various interpretations of how asset managers could comply with that. In addition, we have a situation where compliance is virtually voluntary. Certainly, it is unclear and unmonitored.

We then rely on treaties and memoranda of understanding, but the standards that relate to human rights abuse and labour rights abuse are not consistently applied in treaties. A report from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which I served on at the time, found that treaties and memoranda of understanding are virtually devoid of parliamentary scrutiny. We never debate treaties on the Floor of the House. There is no central register of memoranda of understanding from which we could get some comprehension of what they cover and so on.

As a result of that, there are numerous examples of the implications of the unregulated nature of our finance sector with regard to human rights abuse and environmental degradation. My questions are: will any new supply chain regulation cover the finance sector; if it does, what consultations will take place to ensure the sector is included; who will be involved in those consultations; and as my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green asked, what will the timescale be? We are waiting—the "soon" we heard is becoming a long soon.

I do not want to take up too much of the debate so I will shut up at this point, but there is always this argument that finance regulation somehow restrains the animal spirits and as a result undermines growth. Actually, in the finance sector, my word is my bond, and nothing is more important that trust and confidence. As a result, proper regulation is required to maintain that trust.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I am pleased that the right hon. Member referred to my generosity, which extends even to Liverpool supporters.

2.12 pm

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is always a blessing to have you chairing a meeting, Mr Dowd. It is particularly a blessing today, as we would not have this debate were you not here, so thank you.

I have been active on this subject for some time. I have been sanctioned by China because of the issues that we raised over modern-day slavery. I remind Members that it was the Centre for Social Justice, which I set up, that first published the paper "It Happens Here". We were then able to get the Government to initiate the Modern Slavery Act—the first legislation of its kind in the world. We were all very proud of that Act, but sadly it really has no enforcement. Government and suppliers have no obligation to check. They are supposed to make a declaration, but we know that many of those declarations are in fact deliberately false—they know they will not be checked, and therefore they do not have to worry about it—so while the Act is great, it is rather toothless.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) on securing this debate and making such a good opening speech. I will not repeat all he said, although I agree with so much of it. In the limited time I have, I want to focus on certain issues.

First, the reality is that slave labour is not only a massive punishment and a human rights abuse on a scale, like genocide, wider than anything else; it is also commercial. Countries such as China use slave labour as a way to undercut markets, compete unfairly and drive businesses out of business—particularly here in the UK, as we have experienced. One of the big issues is the net zero determination and what we wish to do to clean up the environment because the biggest providers of solar arrays, wind farms and the technology are, in fact, based in China.

The big problem is that the Government have two conflicting requirements. Quite rightly, they want to get on with cleaning up the environment; but they also know that if they cannot buy from China without a clear set of supply chains that are without slave labour, that will cost more money. That impacts the pace and the way in which they can provide a cleaner atmosphere.

We have to say that one thing is more important than the other, and that is the human rights of those people being abused in places such as China. At the end of the day, we cannot go to bed at night with any grace if we say that we put up more solar arrays and wind farms but those were supplied by factories where people may have died, been abused, or had their lives and families destroyed.

We know that China, in the case of Xinjiang, is committing a well-established genocide on such a scale that children are now in forced education camps. Millions of adult males are in forced labour, many producing the polysilicon that goes into arrays made in and around Xinjiang. The women, unbelievably, are being forcibly sterilised. The birth rate in Xinjiang has gone off the edge of a cliff. China is going to eradicate an ethnic group; it is very much the policy of the Chinese Communist party to have Han Chinese in charge of China, and nobody else. It also makes money from the fact that people in slave labour, as I said earlier, are producing goods much more cheaply than anyone else can.

Look at what we are not doing: we are not checking supply chains. On this issue, I have been in opposition to whatever Government have been in power—neither the last Government nor this one have made a big effort to check those company declarations. I have had responses from this and the previous Government saying that they were doing their best and trying hard. It is not good enough to do one's best or try hard; the question is: what is the best?

Look at what is happening in other places. I point to the USA's Act, which basically outlawed all use of slave labour anywhere in supply chains and put the means in place to check that. The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in the United States creates a rebuttable presumption that goods produced wholly or partly in Xinjiang, and other places using slave labour, are made with forced labour unless importers can prove otherwise.

That is how it is done—we tell importers, "You must now prove to us that you have avoided any slave labour in your products. Failure to do that has you banned and fined." It is immediate. They do not simply sit there saying, "Well, other bits of Government are helping us", because to be honest, the Government do not have the ability to check themselves. They do not have what it takes, but there are companies out there that do this regularly.

I have met the representatives of one such company. Forensic companies such as Oritain, based in New Zealand, specialise in using forensic science to check where goods were made. From that, it knows the footprint and the likelihood of slave labour. It will immediately investigate a company's declaration and can challenge it. If it challenges it, the US Government will ban and fine the company. That has led to a whole rerouting of

*[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]*

supply chains across China for the US market. Sadly, it has also meant efforts have been redoubled to put slave labour products into markets such as the UK, because it is known that the UK is a soft option.

When we look around the countryside of the east of England and elsewhere, we see a load of arrays. I would bet that the vast majority were made with slave labour because no checks were carried out. The reality is that we have to do more. The Modern Slavery Act 2015, which I greatly supported, has now become toothless. Section 54 needs to be upgraded. There needs to be a punishment. Government need the ability to prosecute immediately, and supply-chain checks must take place.

I end with this. The reality is that the legislation is a mess. With colleagues on both sides of the House, I successfully tabled an amendment to the Great British Energy Act 2025, to ban the use of products made with slave labour. It was a classic rebellion, and we got it done. Yet when I checked, I saw that next to nothing had resulted from it. There is that offence in the legislation, but the Government have done nothing to call out any of the companies still selling those products. We put a similar obligation into the Health and Care Act 2022, but next to nothing has been done on that—no declarations and no speeches to Parliament about what the Government have done.

We cannot go on addressing this issue in a piecemeal way: it has to be done across the board. That is why I support the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green in his call for the Modern Slavery Act to have teeth and for section 54 to be implemented. Any business that, having been checked properly, is found to have misdeclared itself and its supply chain should be punished—it should be banished from importing to the UK and face financial and even criminal penalties. That way, we will stop this practice.

2.20 pm

**Apsana Begum** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) on securing this important debate, which has implications for human rights everywhere—whether here at home or in Malaysia, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo or elsewhere.

I will focus my remarks first on Bangladesh. In May, the all-party parliamentary group on Bangladesh, which I chair, held a meeting on workers' rights and labour conditions in Bangladesh following the 13th anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse; we were joined by the Rana Plaza Solidarity Collective, the International Centre for Trade Union Rights and human rights lawyers. On 24 April 2013, 1,134 garment workers lost their lives in what trade unions at the time described as a "mass industrial homicide".

The incident exposed the brutality of the global production system, in which labour rights are constantly under attack. I want to be clear: those Bangladeshi lives would not have been taken if workers' rights, which are human rights, were respected in global supply chains. Before the Rana Plaza collapse, workers' safety concerns were unheard by managers and their attempts to organise unions to address their unsafe working conditions were suppressed.

A global outrage followed the collapse of Rana Plaza, and it is true that there have been welcome advances in workers' rights in Bangladesh since then, but the truth is that the gains have been slow and partial, and unevenly distributed across industries. That is in part due to a failure to implement universal mandatory responsibilities for human rights and labour rights. Instead, we have seen the spread of voluntary mechanisms for safeguarding rights. Brands in the global north that want to avoid reputational risk are the ones that implement safeguards themselves.

Many garment industry workers supplying the likes of Zara or Walmart do benefit from some of the measures introduced on labour rights, but that is not universal. For those in sectors less exposed to reputational damage, it is a different story. For example, in Chittagong's deadly shipbreaking industry, workers, including child labourers, still face highly dangerous conditions without safety equipment or compensation on death. Shipping being what it is, that affects nearly every supply chain in the world.

We cannot pretend that Bangladesh's garment or exporting factories are now all safe. As Labour Behind the Label has pointed out, fires at two separate factories last autumn, in which 17 people were killed, have shown the glaring gaps in protections between firms that have adopted the international accord and those that have not. In the years since Rana Plaza, Bangladesh has seen another 7,160 deaths in the workplace—a figure that is likely a gross undercount. That figure alone should tell us that we have long moved past the point where voluntary corporate responsibilities alone can be considered sufficient.

As we explored in the APPG on Bangladesh, in response to the Rana Plaza collapse France introduced its duty of vigilance law, requiring companies to establish, publish and effectively implement measures to prevent severe abuses of human rights in their supply chains. We have also seen the EU move to bring in a due diligence directive; Members have already pointed out how that has been watered down. None the less, I think its existence has created a legal pathway, absent in the UK, to provide victims of corporate abuse with a path to actually seek justice.

As I have mentioned, in the UK we still rely mostly on voluntary measures that offer little protection to billions of workers globally who work for unscrupulous employers or sectors. In that context, market forces will continue to drive down labour rights in a race to the bottom that rewards bad business practices and exploits or even kills workers. As civil society organisations, including those here today, have pointed out, mandatory due diligence laws are already in force in many European nations and are being advanced in Asia. If the UK fails to keep pace, we risk becoming a dumping ground for tainted goods, with our market enabling abhorrent rights violations.

In the same vein, it cannot be said that it is anywhere near sufficient for the Government to offer new business risk guidance to firms undertaking business with settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That does not meet the demands of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the occupation, and offers tacit permission, dressed in strong wording, for firms to continue to do business with illegal settlements. That settlement trade serves to entrench the settlements' unlawful presence, while the importing of goods and produce justifies their continued expansion.

I want to be clear that that expansion is a violent process of ethnic cleansing undertaken by means of horrific settler attacks, hand in hand with a military occupation that stifles Palestinian people's livelihoods and demolishes their homes. UK trade policy enables those rights abuses. I note the words of ActionAid, which states that the business guidance

"is effectively outsourcing the UK's compliance with international law to private actors."

All this shows how all-encompassing the issue of human rights in supply chains is. There is no doubt that if the UK Government are serious about protecting people's human rights, including labour rights, in supply chains, strong legislation must be brought in. I note that at present a model is being advanced in the other place. I hope that all Members will support the calls from trade unions, lawyers and civil society organisations in the Corporate Justice Coalition to bring forward a new business, human rights and environmental Bill.

To be meaningful, protections for human rights, including workers' rights, must be enshrined in law. We can say that we take human rights seriously only when we take seriously accountability for the abuses committed to bring goods to our markets. That is important because every worker deserves dignity and equality, and upholding those rights is a collective responsibility. We fail in those duties if the rights that we enjoy are denied to those in other parts of the world.

2.27 pm

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd; thank you for stepping in to chair the debate. I congratulate my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) on securing this debate. He has a long-standing commitment to human rights. He is right to emphasise the international nature of trade and the risks of human rights abuses, for example, from China, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) has said.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) has said, south-east Asia, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are areas where we do a lot of trade but we often do not know enough about what is going on.

I want to add some brief remarks about the UK fashion and textiles industry and human rights here in the UK. I know that the Minister has a background in understanding the potential for human rights abuses. She also understands manufacturing and the scope within the UK to augment that particular sector and produce more jobs for local people. There is the potential for international trade, best practice and home-grown industries to sit side by side. I note that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) was reflecting on defence spending a couple of weeks ago, he said there should be more defence money spent locally, certainly when it comes to uniforms.

When I led a previous debate in Westminster Hall, I detailed the potential that exists to enhance supply chain understanding here in the UK. In parts of the UK like Leicester, much more could be done to support the many women who want high-quality jobs in that area. Local authorities and universities are ready to work on that, and it seems a pity not to be enhancing that by being more organised when it comes to how our supply chains work.

Very briefly, I welcome the supply chain centre's announcement of the 14-point action plan yesterday. I have not yet had time to digest it, but I am sure the Minister will refer to it in her remarks. We know that onshoring in the fashion and textiles industry could unlock £3.1 billion in GDP, 64,000 new jobs and £1.2 billion in tax receipts. That is not throwing away the whole system of international trade; it is just saying that, with some political will, we could be making more with jobs here in the UK. We know that the 2025 Budget included new measures to stop overseas online firms undercutting UK bricks-and-mortar businesses by ensuring that customs duties apply to parcels of any value. I would be interested in the preparation for introducing those measures, which I believe are coming into force in 2028-29. Will the Minister briefly reflect on that in her remarks?

There are costs to producing in the UK, but what about the benefits? It could mean more flexibility and agility from local suppliers, faster turnaround times that global competitors cannot match due to distance, and more transparency, as customers will know exactly where their clothes are made. "Made in the UK" is a point of pride, so why not have, "Made in the UK, under fair conditions"?

2.31 pm

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd, and thank you again for joining us to allow this important debate to take place. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) on introducing this debate so emphatically and wonderfully—I could not have done it better myself.

I am a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and as we have already heard, last year the Committee published its report, "Forced Labour in the UK's Supply Chains". Our inquiry found that, despite Ministers' repeated assurances that no company operating in the UK should have any forced labour whatsoever in its supply chain, that simply is not happening in practice. Goods made, or at least partly made, with forced labour are still reaching our shelves here in the UK. In fact, we report billions of pounds of goods a year from sectors where forced labour is rife, yet companies are still not required to map their supply chains or prove that their goods are clean.

Nowhere was the gap between rhetoric and reality more clearly seen than in the Government's China audit. That was a genuine opportunity to set out, transparently in public, exactly how Britain intends to tackle state-imposed forced labour against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and other minority groups across China. Instead, the Foreign Secretary offered us "shining a spotlight" and described the audit as an "ongoing exercise". When our Committee pressed for concrete measures behind that language, the answers amounted to export controls and sanctions that already existed. This is not a strategy; it is a missed opportunity.

Over 95% of the world's solar panels rely on polysilicon, and over half the world's polysilicon comes from Xinjiang, so it was unsurprising that the Government's own evidence to our Committee accepted that there is credible evidence

*[Tom Gordon]*

that companies in solar supply chains may be linked to forced labour against people in China. Thanks to the great work of my Liberal Democrat colleagues in Parliament in holding the Government to account, GB Energy's sourcing rules were strengthened. However, well over a year later, we still will not see panels guaranteed to be free of forced labour, and the issue will only be tackled "as far as possible". Our Committee found that the industry's own solar stewardship initiative offers thin reassurance. Certification applies to individual sites, not whole companies, so a firm with mostly uncertified factories can still wear the badge of membership. If we do not get a proper grip on this, it will be the new Achilles heel of the green transition.

This is not only about solar; our inquiry also heard evidence about North Korean workers on Chinese fishing vessels. Last year, I visited the Falkland Islands as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. When we met Members of the Legislative Assembly there, we heard about how the Chinese fishing fleet in the south Atlantic was causing problems, and some of the horrific instances where the regime of the Chinese Communist party was selling and buying labour from North Korea.

We have also heard today about tomatoes being processed in China that now sit on British supermarket shelves, which have been documented by the BBC as recently as last year, as well as critical minerals like cobalt from the DRC. We know that the International Labour Organisation estimates that 27.6 million people are trapped in forced labour globally, two thirds of which is linked to commercial supply chains. This is a systemic, cross-sector and growing issue.

What have the Government done with the JCHR report recommendations? In October, Ministers published their response and launched a responsible business conduct review. To be fair, that is a start, but they have deferred almost everything to the review. Will the UK introduce mandatory human rights due diligence? "We are waiting on the review." Will the UK introduce an import ban on goods linked to forced labour? "We are waiting on the review." Will there be a stronger use of the powers in the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, which Border Force and the National Crime Agency are deploying far too rarely? Well, the Government told us that they

"cannot direct how the POCA powers are used".

Although that may technically be correct, Governments can resource enforcement, set priorities and fund agencies to act. Choosing not to do so is a policy choice.

Earlier in the debate, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) talked about section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act. It requires large companies to publish supply chain transparency statements, yet we know that a significant number of companies are not complying, and those that do can satisfy their legal obligations simply by reporting that they have taken no action whatever. That is not an obligation to ensure transparency in any meaningful sense of the word. Our Committee recommended strengthening section 54, and the Government's response is under consideration as part of the review.

Next week, I will be holding the inaugural general meeting of the APPG for coffee, tea and spices, if anyone is interested—I hope to see Members there. The APPG will look at how supply chains impact women and girls working in those sectors. We heard earlier in the debate from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) about the actions that other countries have taken on slavery in supply chains. He pointed particularly to the United States and its Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act, which established a rebuttable presumption that anything from Xinjiang was made with forced labour, unless a company can prove otherwise. We also heard about the European Union and its forced labour regulations; we simply have a review.

Our Committee recommended that the Government introduce new legislation within one year of the publication of our report. That deadline is in July 2026, just next month. Will the Government meet that deadline? I ask the Minister to take three other things from that report. First, I ask that the Government introduce mandatory human rights due diligence for UK companies. Voluntary reporting is not creating a level playing field, and businesses told our Committee as much. Secondly, will the Minister follow the United States and the European Union and introduce a proper import ban on goods linked to forced labour, rather than relying on the occasional under-used application of Proceeds of Crime Act powers? Thirdly, will the Government use the China audit for what it should have been—a public account of exactly what the UK will do to keep state-imposed forced labour out of our supply chains, starting with solar power?

2.37 pm

**Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and I join other Members in thanking you for chairing this debate. Also, if your Wikipedia page is correct, may I be the first to wish you a very happy birthday for Saturday?

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this debate and to Members from across the House for the thoughtful and serious way they have approached it. The hon. Gentleman really brought to life the way that globally sourced products are infiltrating every part of our daily lives, and I thank him for that. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for sharing the benefit of his many years working on this issue. I thank the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns), the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West); they all brought different perspectives, for which I am grateful.

There have been differences in opinion this afternoon about the causes of the problem, the strength of the enforcement required and the precise tools the Government should use, but there should be no disagreement on one central point: goods produced through forced labour, modern slavery or serious human rights abuses have no place in UK supply chains. The question is whether the Government are prepared to deliver serious enforcement, potentially with the support of new technologies and businesses such as Oritain; or whether they will simply pile fresh cost and complexity on to responsible British businesses while the worst offenders continue to evade accountability.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights was right to highlight the fact that goods produced wholly or partly through forced labour are being sold in this country. It is also correct that the current framework has not been enforced strongly or consistently enough to stop that happening.

The overwhelming majority of firms—responsible retailers, manufacturers, importers and investors—want to do the right thing. They invest time, money and effort into understanding their supply chains and meeting their responsibilities. They should not find themselves being undercut and placed at a competitive disadvantage by organisations willing to look the other way, nor should they be buried under layers of poorly designed and duplicative new obligations, which create cost and complexity without improving outcomes or catching the individuals who break the law.

The Modern Slavery Act, which was introduced by Baroness May of Maidenhead when she was Home Secretary, was a landmark piece of legislation and placed the issue of modern slavery firmly on the national agenda. It was also Conservative Governments that imposed sanctions on those responsible for the persecution of Uyghurs, strengthened export controls, and introduced tougher penalties for businesses that fail to meet their obligations.

Those achievements should not be diminished, but equally we should not pretend that enforcement cannot be strengthened. We support enforcing the laws that we already have. The first test for the Minister is whether she is prepared to make the existing framework bite on the bad actors. The task for the Government is to strike the right balance between being strong where enforcement is needed, being clear where expectations must be met, being proportionate where businesses are already acting responsibly, and being practical enough to work in the real world.

Public procurement—I include in that Great British Energy, which was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green—has an important role to play in this effort. Government must lead the way. Taxpayers rightly expect that public money is not rewarding forced labour, serious exploitation or suppliers whose conduct falls far below the legally prescribed standards. The challenge is making that principle work in practice, with rules that are clear, usable and targeted at those who break them.

The risks exist across apparel, food and manufacturing, and they exist in sectors that are becoming increasingly important to our future economic and national security. Global supply chains were once viewed mainly through the lens of cost and efficiency; the assumption was that they would deliver cheaper goods and greater prosperity. We now understand that they can also create strategic vulnerabilities when too much control is concentrated in too few hands.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has been particularly persistent in drawing attention to concerns around Xinjiang, polysilicon and critical minerals. He is right to do so. Growth and trade must never come at the price of our values, and pursuit of warmer relations with Beijing must not mean going soft on human rights or turning a blind eye to slave-made goods entering our market.

If our standards apply only when the politics are convenient for them to apply, then they are not really standards at all. The framework must address risk wherever it appears, it must apply consistently, it must be based on evidence, and it must be enforced fairly.

The Minister has heard the points raised in this debate and no doubt she will address them directly. After the Government's jobs tax, the Employment Rights Act and a surge of new regulation, businesses are entitled to ask whether labour supply chain plans will be properly thought through and will address their actual needs.

I have some straightforward questions for the Minister. When will the Government's review of responsible business conduct conclude? What steps does she intend to take to strengthen enforcement? How will she improve traceability in high-risk and newly emerging sectors? How will she protect legitimate businesses from unnecessary burdens while ensuring that bad actors and the worst offenders face meaningful consequences? What lessons has she drawn from allies, including the United States, the European Union and others, about what works in practice? How will she ensure that the United Kingdom remains a leader, rather than a follower, in confronting modern slavery and forced labour?

Warm words, statements and reviews on their own will not solve this problem. The Modern Slavery Act was a significant Conservative achievement, and we are rightly proud of it. The challenge now is to ensure it is enforced as seriously, practically and effectively as possible. That is the standard that Parliament should expect, and it is the standard against which we will judge the Government's response.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Thank you reminding me that I am almost a year older.

2.46 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden):** It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I join hon. Members in thanking you for chairing today's debate at short notice.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing a debate on this deeply important subject. He made some excellent points, particularly about how fundamental supply chain resilience is to our economic security, and the importance of the public sector procurement regime to ensuring that public bodies do not inadvertently support international labour and humanitarian abuses. He and the other Members here today continue to be excellent and thoughtful advocates on these matters, and I thank all colleagues for their important contributions.

Human rights are just that: they are fundamental, and they exist to protect us all. Infractions cannot be ignored or dismissed simply because they occurred far enough back in a supply chain for us to feel insulated and not responsible for supporting exploitative practices. Never has this issue been more important now that more than 70% of global trade runs through complex global supply chains. Although globalisation has driven productivity, innovation and technological advances that have lifted billions out of poverty and created the life that we depend on, it has also made supply chains more complex and opaque and has reduced the transparency and accountability that consumers, retailers and the Government need to protect workers and the natural world from exploitation.

*[Kate Dearden]*

Members have rightly drawn attention to the egregious human rights abuses that come with forced labour. In 2026, more than 27 million people remain in the shackles of modern slavery across all six inhabited continents, often enduring imprisonment, abuse and coercion, and being exploited for profit. As we approach the 200th anniversary of the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, which abolished slavery in much of the British empire, it is right that I reaffirm this Government's commitment to tackling this vile practice, which continues to generate nearly £176 billion in illegal profits each year, in all its forms, including non-payment or underpayment of wages, excessive working hours and unsafe working conditions. There is also clear evidence of severe environmental harm in our global supply chains, as we lose the equivalent of 11 football pitches of tropical rainforest every minute, and threaten nearly 1 million animal and plant species with extinction.

As we have heard, the UK has a proud record of pioneering global advances to support human and workers' rights. We put this issue on the international stage with the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) spoke about. That legislation was world leading and crucial in solidifying our place as a global leader on this issue. For the first time, businesses were made to report how they tackled the modern slavery that might be present in their supply chains. However, as Members have rightly said, although the Modern Slavery Act was world leading at the time, it is now more than a decade old and in need of review if we are to tackle the many violations that still occur globally.

Although many UK businesses respect human rights and the environment throughout their supply chains, unethical international violations undercut the vast majority of UK businesses that support fair international supply chains. That will only increase as geopolitical, industrial and technological shocks continue to transform how and where goods are produced and extracted. That is why we must take a more strategic approach by working with our global allies and trading partners to secure forced labour provisions in our free trade agreements, and by using the developing countries trading scheme to suspend preferential trading arrangements on the ground of serious violation of labour rights.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green noted, I travelled last week to the 114th International Labour Conference in Geneva, where I met trade union delegations and labour and employment Ministers from across the world, alongside some of the most significant manufacturers, extractors and business hubs. This issue is close to my heart, and I worked closely on it before I was elected to this place. Last week, we talked a lot about the work we are proudly doing in Government on the Employment Rights Act and the domestic agenda, and I thank Members for raising that today. We are clear that a collaborative, holistic and cross-border approach is the only way to drive the change that exploited workers and environments need, alongside our recognition of other international transitions from voluntary to mandatory measures, such as human rights and environmental due diligence laws.

In the trade strategy, the Government underlined how responsible business conduct is a positive part of our mission to grow the economy, and we launched a review of our approach to responsible business, focusing on the global supply chains of businesses operating in the UK. It is an evidence-based review of our policy framework and alternative measures to enhance it, including mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence measures and forced labour bans. It naturally also considers the approaches of our international trading partners and the best way to promote a co-ordinated approach that minimises costs, consistent with the Government's commitment to reduce the administrative costs of complying with regulation by 25% over the course of this Parliament.

So far, we have engaged with more than 200 organisations through the review, including businesses, investors, civil society, trade unions and academic institutions. We have learnt from international partners and met communities affected by supply chain harms. I heard many hon. Members stress the need for urgency today, and I reassure them that we will update Parliament on the review in due course. I thank Members for raising that pressing issue, and we will of course work closely with all those at the debate today.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** Could we get a commitment today that the Government will look carefully at what countries that are well in advance of us, such as the United States and some European countries, are doing, to make sure that we urgently get on to resolving this issue, rather than delaying with another review and more debates? We know what needs to be done, and surely we can get on with it pretty quickly.

**Kate Dearden:** I thank the right hon. Member for that and his contributions today. I reassure him that we are working closely with the US on the review, updating the Americans on all the work we are doing and understanding their practices too. I will turn soon to the other important points he raised throughout the debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) highlighted our work with the Treasury as part of this review, and I thank him for that. We are doing the review economy-wide, and as well as working with the Treasury, we have engaged with investors. We will of course keep him updated, as I know he is interested in—indeed, passionate about—this subject.

We took another key step in the trade strategy by launching the Office for Responsible Business Conduct to provide UK businesses, trade unions and charities with a simpler route to compliance, supporting the integration of responsible business practices and helping victims of corporate malpractice by providing a non-judicial grievance mechanism. Alongside the broader RBC review, we are considering how to strengthen the section 54 transparency regime, which lots of Members mentioned today—I thank them for it—including mandatory reporting requirements that extend to the public sector and penalties for non-compliance. We published updated statutory guidance on transparency in supply chains in March 2025, calling on businesses to go further and faster.

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon), for his contribution today, his work in the Joint Committee on Human Rights and his engagement in and focus on this vital issue. I mentioned our work and relationship with the US. I hope that he is reassured by those comments and by our continued and regular engagement with the US Administration as part of our negotiations.

As a proudly internationalist and pro-worker Government, we have a responsibility to remain a world leader in tackling modern slavery, clearances and human rights abuses wherever they rear their ugly head. The Government stand firm on human rights, including in Xinjiang, where China continues to persecute and arbitrarily detain Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities. Lots of Members raised that, and I thank them for it. I hope they know that we raise these concerns with China at the highest levels. That was done recently by the Prime Minister himself and the former Foreign Secretary. We continue to co-ordinate efforts with our international partners to hold China to account—for example, by joining a UN statement in October 2024 and co-signing a joint statement with the US and others in November 2025.

I respect the work done by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and thank him for his consistency in raising this issue today and outside the House. He also spoke about GB Energy, as did the shadow Minister. As a publicly owned energy company, GB Energy is of course expected to demonstrate leading practice in complying with the UK modern slavery legislation and aligning with the UN guiding principles on business and human rights. We have established an ethical supply chain advisory group to review and inform GBE's approach to ethical supply chains in its investments and operations; its chair is Baroness O'Grady. Representatives of my Department will serve on that group, and it meets for the first time next week, which I am sure the right hon. Member will welcome.

We must continue working with our international counterparts, and key stakeholders across the international trade union movement and business community to take action against those who illegally destroy families, communities and our natural world for profit. As Members have outlined, this action cannot be singular or a patchwork of separate policy decisions. Only co-ordinated, root-and-branch decisions will enable our constituents to know that they can trust that the T-shirt they are wearing, the bag they are carrying and the food they are eating did not arrive in our country at the expense of exploited people and areas thousands of miles away. Delivering that confidence for British people is good for business and good for growth, and re-cements our position as a world leader on these matters.

I again thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. We look forward to working closely with them on the review and more widely to ensure that we continue to focus on this issue, which is a priority for our Government. I will end, Mr Dowd, by wishing you a very happy birthday for Saturday and thanking you again for chairing the debate.

2.57 pm

**Bambos Charalambous:** We have had a great debate. There has been lots of agreement in the room, and I am sure the Minister heard the strength of feeling about what needs to be done. We would very much welcome the responsible business conduct review happening as quickly as possible. I know that it is not in the Minister's direct brief and I know that she is a champion of international labour rights, but we need it to happen as quickly as possible. We also need to ensure that section 54 is strengthened. That has cross-party support and I am sure that we will get there eventually, but it needs to happen quickly. I look forward to having a more detailed response from the Department in due course.

Mr Dowd, thank you again for stepping into the breach at the last minute and allowing this debate to proceed. We could not have done it without you. I hope you have a very happy birthday as well.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of safeguarding human rights in supply chains.

2.59 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

# Stoma: Public Toilet Provision

3.1 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public toilet provision for people with stoma.

Thank you for standing in, Mr Dowd. It is much appreciated by us all. It is always good to have you in the Chair, no matter what, but today is a special occasion. This is not what I would call a particularly fashionable debate, but it is one that affects many people and it needs to be aired in Westminster Hall so we have the opportunity to put forward a case.

Throughout my life, I have had occasion to engage with people who have stomas. I never quite understood what they were, other than that there was something wrong with their bowel system and a stoma as a method to give them a normal life, if that is the right way to put it. In some cases, the stoma was there for only a short time because the person recuperated. Sometimes their body needed a bit of rest, and perhaps that was one way of doing it.

I am pleased to have secured this debate, and I am grateful to the colleagues who have come along to participate. I also place on the record my thanks to Colostomy UK for its support in preparing for the debate and, more importantly, for the work it does every day to support people living with stomas across the United Kingdom. I recently had the opportunity to meet representatives from Colostomy UK to learn more about the challenges it faces, and the challenges faced by patients living with stomas. The discussions highlighted an issue that many of us rarely think about, but it affects thousands of people every single day. This debate is not just about public toilets for those with stomas. At its heart, it is about dignity, independence and inclusion. Those are the three themes that I wish to put on the record.

I apologise for not saying at the beginning that it is lovely to see the Minister in her place. I understand that this is her first debate, and I wish her well in her new role. We will not be hard on her—that is not in my nature—but we will collectively put forward a case, and she will respond in a positive way to encourage us on what we are asking for. I have four asks for her to look at.

For most of us, access to a toilet is something we take completely for granted. We leave home to go to work, visit friends, attend events, go shopping and go travelling without giving it so much as a second thought, because there will always be a toilet. That reminds me of a story. When I was in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, John Spellar, who used to be a Member, told me that he had two pieces of advice when we went on a course—he always gave good advice. He said, "If you see a toilet, go, and if you see food, eat." Those were the two things he told me to do whenever I went anywhere, and I have always remembered his words of wisdom. The fact of the matter is that I did not have a stoma, so I could go to the toilet anywhere, but it becomes a great problem for those who have a stoma.

We assume that if we need a toilet, one will be available, but the many people living with a stoma do not have that certainty. That is the key theme of this debate. For the benefit of those following, a stoma is a surgically created opening in the abdomen that allows waste to leave the body into an external pouch. People may require a stoma following bowel cancer, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, diverticulitis, trauma or other serious health conditions. I have had a couple of friends over the years with Crohn's disease and one with colitis. For a short period of their life they had a stoma, which helped them to heal and eventually they were able to do without it.

For many people, a stoma is lifesaving surgery that allows them to have a comparatively normal life. It enables them to regain their health, maintain their independence and continue living active and fulfilling lives. Having a stoma should not mean they cannot do that; it just means they have to deal with the toilet issue.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate and raising awareness of this issue. Anyone who was at Prime Minister's questions last week will have seen me talk about living with ulcerative colitis. I am grateful that the Prime Minister has arranged for the Minister to meet me to talk about the issues that people with inflammatory bowel disease face. If the hon. Gentleman or anyone else is interested in trying to join that meeting, should the Minister allow it, I would be more than happy to include them in that conversation.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I will take advantage of that opportunity if it comes.

More than 200,000 people across the United Kingdom live with a stoma. For some, it may be a short-term issue, their body may heal and they will recover—that is to be welcomed. However, there is a lot of anxiety for those who have to live with a stoma even for a short time. Many find that something as simple as leaving home can require careful planning and considerable anxiety. One of the strongest messages I took away from my discussions with Colostomy UK is that many people living with a stoma plan their life around toilet access. It is a fact of life, and if they are going to a restaurant or a shopping centre, or if they are going on a journey, they have to make sure there is toilet provision.

**Tom Gordon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous with his time. He listed restaurants, businesses and other places where one might find a toilet. In recent years, we have seen the hollowing out of local government and the loss of publicly accessible toilets provided by town councils, unitary authorities or whatever it might be. Does he agree that when local authorities look either to close or to charge for those facilities, they need to consider the impact on people with stomas and other IBD conditions?

**Jim Shannon:** The very poor provision of toilets is an issue I will address shortly. Fortunately, we have been proactive in my constituency, which may be something that others wish to follow.

The availability of a suitable toilet can determine whether a person feels confident enough to attend a family gathering. When all the family is there and the kids are running about, they wonder, "Is the toilet handy?" or "Are there two toilets, if somebody is in one, because I need to make sure I get there fairly quickly?" It determines whether they can enjoy a day out, travel for work, visit a town centre or simply spend time with friends. It is not a situation any of us would wish to see.

Evidence gathered by Colostomy UK highlights the significant scale of the issue. Its Stoma Aware survey found that 62% of people living with a stoma avoid activities that many of us take for granted because suitable toilet facilities are not available. One in four had been challenged for using an accessible toilet, despite having a genuine need to do so. Most concerningly, 4% said they left home only for emergencies. Those figures are striking. It seems that they are almost a captive in their own house.

The figures tell us that this is not an issue of convenience, but of social participation, confidence and, for many people, isolation—isolation is the key issue. In this House, we spend a great deal of time discussing loneliness and social isolation, to which the Government rightly respond positively by trying to make the situation better. We talk about encouraging people to remain active in their communities and ensuring that those living with long-term health conditions are not left behind, yet, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) said, inadequate toilet provision can be a significant barrier to those ambitions, affecting the way a person plans their day, their journey or their outing.

If someone cannot be confident that they will find a suitable toilet when they need to, they may begin to avoid situations that others take for granted. They may stop attending social events, going to family occasions, travelling or visiting friends and family, or they may avoid shopping centres, cultural events or community activities. "If I go there and am caught short, where do I go? Is there provision? How far can I travel?" It is not that they lack the desire to participate, but that they are concerned about the predicament they might find themselves in because they lack confidence that the facilities they need will be available.

People living with stomas can also experience complications that require immediate access to a toilet, such as leakage, pancaking or ballooning. Those can happen without warning and often require urgent attention. I remember when one of my friends was caught short unexpectedly and went to the toilet. The problem was that his stoma had overflowed. Apart from the embarrassment, the people around him did not quite understand what was going on. For my friend, especially, it was incredibly worrying. Such situations can happen without warning and often require urgent attention, so when they occur, having access to a suitable toilet is not a luxury but essential—"We must get there right now."

I have heard some of the comments made by people who responded to the Colostomy UK survey. One respondent said:

"I plan every journey around toilets. Sometimes I cancel plans because I can't face the stress".

That is the stress of not knowing whether a location has a toilet, whether they will have access to it or whether there will be a problem.

Another respondent said:

"I once had a woman yell at me for using the accessible toilet because I looked fine",

and she could not understand what was going on. The respondent did not go out again for weeks because of the fear of having to deal with somebody else who might shout at her, maybe saying worse things.

Those comments are a reminder that many conditions are invisible. People should not have to justify their need to use an accessible toilet, nor should they be challenged at any time when doing so. The impact extends far beyond physical inconvenience; it affects confidence, wellbeing and quality of life.

It strikes me that the solutions to this issue are neither complicated nor expensive, so I have some thoughts to put to the Minister on how to move forward. We are not talking about major infrastructure projects or significant new financial burdens. In many cases, we are talking about practical measures that can make a substantial difference to people's lives. The challenge is not a lack of solutions, but ensuring that those solutions are consistently available and embedded in policy and practice.

That brings me to the two key issues I wish to raise with the Minister. The first concerns public toilet provision. Across the United Kingdom, public toilets have disappeared from town centres and public spaces. Communities that once had facilities on which people could rely have seen those facilities close, often without any indication that they will be replaced. That issue is well known. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough referred to it in his intervention, and it will be commented on by others.

**Tom Gordon:** I commend the hon. Gentleman on being one of the most generous Members I have encountered. On the provision of public toilets, the issue is not only the toilet closures, but the lack of maintenance and spending to make them a toilet that someone wants to use. Does he agree that we need to make sure that, where we have those facilities, they are up to the standard that anyone, let alone someone with one of these conditions, should expect?

**Jim Shannon:** That is, again, an incredibly powerful intervention from the hon. Gentleman, who is very focused on the issue. The toilet should be of the right level of cleanliness, and with the relevant attendance, so that it can be used by everyone.

The wider decline has been highlighted by the Royal Society for Public Health, which has warned of the emergence of public toilet deserts in the UK. Recent research found that there is now one public toilet for every 15,500 people in England and that public toilet provision has fallen by 14% since 2016. That is incredibly worrying, and highlights the importance of this debate. It is also why my requests to the Minister will be fairly specific.

For many people, the lack of provision may simply be frustrating; for somebody living with a stoma, it can be life-limiting. It can influence where they go, how long they stay and whether they feel able to leave home at all. Public toilets are not simply a convenience for many people: they are essential infrastructure and an essential part of everyday life. The Royal Society for Public Health has warned that, for some people, access to a public toilet can be the difference between whether they leave the house or not. That is the reality that Colostomy UK hears from people living with stomas.

I do not set aside the financial pressures facing local authorities, and I appreciate that there are difficult decisions to be made, but I hope the Minister agrees that nobody should be excluded from public life because they cannot access a suitable toilet when they need one. I therefore hope the Government will consider how local authorities can be supported to ensure that people living with stomas and other long-term health conditions are not disadvantaged by a lack of public toilet provision.

*[Jim Shannon]*

I also hope the Minister will consider whether the current discretionary approach to public toilet provision is sufficient for those who rely on these facilities to participate in everyday life.

The second issue I wish to raise is separate but equally important. The first issue is whether people can find a toilet at all; the second is whether, when they do find one, it is suitable for their needs. That is key. Even where accessible toilets exist, they do not always meet the needs of people living with stomas. A toilet may be accessible from a mobility perspective, but may still lack the practical features needed by somebody managing a stoma, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough outlined in his three key interventions.

As I mentioned earlier, I am fortunate to be the hon. Member for Strangford, but I also represent the largest part of the Ards and North Down borough council area. What the council has done, which I have supported over the years, is so important and is perhaps a blueprint for other councils to follow. It has worked with Colostomy UK on a strategy and a process to upgrade all accessible toilets in council-owned facilities and make them become stoma-friendly. In doing so, it became the first council in Northern Ireland to make all accessible toilets within its facilities stoma-friendly, demonstrating real leadership on this issue. Ards and North Down borough council—the council I served on for some 26 years—has led the way, and I hope others will take forward its policy.

The improvements include practical additions such as shelves, mirrors, hooks and appropriate disposal facilities. As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough referred to in his intervention, that is one way forward. Those may sound like small changes, but they make a significant difference to people managing a stoma. I commend the council for recognising the needs of people living with stomas and for taking practical action to improve accessibility across its estate.

The fact that the first council in Northern Ireland has already implemented changes demonstrates that they are achievable and can be delivered within existing public sector budgets. The council delivered those special features in the toilet facilities it has in my constituency. That is particularly encouraging, because it demonstrates that the solutions being proposed are practical and achievable and can be delivered. The council recognised the need, worked with people who understand the issue and implemented changes to make public facilities more accessible. The question we should ask ourselves is this: if we recognise that these features are necessary, why should their provision depend on the goodwill of individual councils, businesses and organisations? Should they not become the standard that people can expect?

As things stand, provision is inconsistent. Some facilities include those features, while others do not. As a result, people living with stomas cannot be certain that an accessible toilet will meet their needs. That is why Colostomy UK is calling for stoma-friendly features to be incorporated in part M of the building regulations and in future accessibility standards. These are constructive policies, put forward so that people with stoma bags are able to have a better quality of life.

The success of Changing Places toilets shows what can be achieved when the Government identify a genuine accessibility need and respond positively. The features required to make a toilet stoma-friendly are modest, yet they can have a profound impact on people's daily lives. I therefore believe that there is a strong case for examining whether stoma-friendly features should become a standard requirement for accessible toilets in any new developments.

The Minister has already seen them, but before I conclude I have four specific questions for her. First, will she agree to meet Colostomy UK to hear directly from people living with stomas and discuss their issues further? I understand and appreciate that she has only just taken over, but if she could make the time, we would appreciate the opportunity to act on this issue.

Secondly, on public toilet provision, will the Minister engage with her ministerial colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to explore how local authorities can be supported to maintain adequate public toilet provision for people with stomas and other long-term health conditions? There are many pertinent long-term conditions, which the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough referred to in one of his interventions.

Thirdly, on building standards, will the Minister ask officials to examine whether part M of the building regulations could and should be updated so that stoma-friendly features become standard for accessible toilets in new developments? Fourthly, will she work with Colostomy UK and other stakeholders to ensure that people living with stomas are able to participate fully in work, education, travel, culture, community life and, indeed, normal life?

Let us be quite clear: this is not a party political issue. In the debates that I bring forward, I try to never make it about that, because it is not; it is about the people. It is a practical issue, an accessibility issue and, above all, a human issue. No one should feel excluded from society because they cannot access a suitable toilet when they need one.

I look forward to hearing other Members' contributions, and I thank the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough for his interventions. I look forward to the contributions of the shadow spokespeople, the hon. Members for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) and for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), and I really do wish the Minister well in her role. Today we have the opportunity to work collectively to do better for our people.

3.23 pm

**Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd, especially on what I think is your birthday—thank you for choosing to spend your special day talking about public toilets with us. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for calling this important debate. Not only is he the most industrious contributor to debates and question times across this House, but he champions matters that really cut to the heart of why we are here and that really matter to people in their everyday lives.

Anyone who has supported a loved one, family member or friend who has gone through the process of requiring a stoma will realise that you often do two things together: laugh and cry. If you do not do the laughing, you will just spend all your time crying. As hon. Members can probably already tell, this is quite a personal subject for me. A little irreverence and humour is a good way of

dealing with the issue of stoma care and inflammatory bowel disease. In fact, I would say it is essential. It also helps to break down the barriers and the embarrassment of talking about the subject in the first place.

We have had a good explanation of what a stoma is, namely a surgical opening to allow waste to leave the body. It usually comes at the cost of having significant amounts of intestine, or in many cases the entire colon, removed, which is as painful, damaging and difficult to recover from as you would imagine. However, the conditions that often lead to someone requiring a stoma involve—let us be honest—talking about poo, and the British public are not particularly comfortable talking about. So although the hon. Member for Strangford has outlined what a stoma is, most people are embarrassed about them. As I said, one way people get around that is by having a sense of humour. I have met many people with stomas; a very close loved one has a stoma, and I have met many of the friends she has made over the years during her many hospital stays.

Among the things I have picked up on is what you call a stoma once you have one. The names are quite creative, and the naming process is, first, quite humorous and, secondly, about a degree of taking ownership of it. I will run hon. Members through some of the names that people come up with for stomas, so that we get beyond just a "surgical opening". Some are ones that I have seen in research, and some are from people I know who have a stoma. Most of the names are a play on words, such as a rhyme with stoma, or references to poo or pumping—apologies to Members in advance, but hopefully there will find something in this for one of you.

As an opening gambit, there is Paloma Faith, which is a good name for a stoma. Winnie the Poo is another one. Another favourite of mine is Vladimir Poopin, just because it takes the mick out of a dictator. To take something straightforward and simple, there is Windbag, which is pretty much what we are talking about. Captain Craptastic is another good one. Others include Donald Trumps and Bilbo Baggins. Finally, my favourite is Louis Shitton, which I think is excellent—I am delighted to have got that into *Hansard*. I hope that that gives a bit of insight. People who have had to have a stoma because of their suffering have been through difficult times, but they are remarkably resilient people, many of them with a great sense of humour.

Every Member in this House will have a constituent who has inflammatory bowel disease, colonic cancer or another of the conditions that leads to a stoma, and we will all have constituents with stomas—that is beyond doubt. Many conditions can lead to people requiring a stoma, although that will depend on how controllable a condition is in any individual person—whether they get Crohn's or colitis flare-ups or whether the cancer is caught and treated early enough. Given all those things with a similarity of issues, Members will have hundreds, if not thousands, of constituents who have a stoma or who know someone directly affected.

The conditions themselves are embarrassing. It is not just about having a stoma, when you have got to that point; by the time you get to having one, you have usually been through years of having to deal with a condition and having to suffer it in silence, because you do not want to talk about it. There is also a lot of misunderstanding; a lot of people think that Crohn's and colitis, for example, are some form of irritable bowel syndrome. Even well-meaning people suggest eating less spicy food or not eating brown bread, because they do not realise that the condition generates internal ulcers in the most painful place they could possibly be, and that those bleed internally, creating internal blood clots that need to pass through your system urgently, in an incredibly painful way—whether you had a Madras on Friday night makes absolutely no difference to that condition.

Toilet provision is so important for people with stomas as well as those with the conditions mentioned. That is important to remember, because we can look at the number of people with stomas—Colostomy UK has provided a helpful briefing ahead of this debate—but that would give you a very distorted view about the total number who require access to toilets due to health conditions.

As other hon. Members pointed out, when someone who has a stoma goes to the toilet, they are either going to empty it or change it. Changing it is not a quick thing and if there is a leak, which is something anybody with a stoma lives in absolute fear of, that needs to be urgently dealt with. Visualise where that would be on your body. Even if just emptying it, the proximity to the toilet means also getting very close to the floor and the toilet itself. People suddenly become experts in the cleanliness of toilets and which companies keep clean toilets and which do not. It goes back to remembering the human in all of this, and not just taking it from a purely clinical and public health perspective.

Imagine going through years of dealing with a health condition that leads to needing major surgery that is life changing and life threatening in its own right and results in a stoma. Regardless of your age, but especially for younger people in this hyper body conscious world, that is not something that you want—it is not something that you are proud of—and it is something that you are often embarrassed about and will try and conceal and hide. Imagine having been through all of that and having recovered and just about psychologically coming to terms with having a stoma—and you want to go out. You want to pick up the courage to go out. You find some clothes that for the first time you think cover it so you do not feel self-conscious about it. You go out, you feel sexy, you feel confident. It is a big boost. Then you either need to empty the bag or have the dreaded leak, and there is nowhere to do anything about it.

As one of my friends—I apologise in advance, Chair, but I am quoting—said:

> "Imagine getting dressed up for date night and then having to go and crawl around on a piss covered floor simply to change your bag."

Would that do anything other than knock your confidence, dignity and self-respect? It is not fair.

There seems to be a general consensus among forums and things I have read that we men need to have a little more care and attention in toilets than women do and that the standard in male toilets is often significantly lower. However, it is a point none the less. That is what I want to get across in this debate; I do not want to talk about the stats, figures and percentages. Every one of those numbers has a human being behind it who is trying to get on and rebuild their life under immense physical, psychological and emotional damage. That is what makes this so important.

*[Mr Andrew Snowden]*

There are also other issues including access to private toilets. All of this cannot fall to local councils. I have been working and campaigning on this since I was elected as a county councillor in 2017. I moved a motion in full council—those were the days—around access and the card that people can carry that says they need access to the private toilets in a commercial facility.

We have our own experiences of that in our family. These are pre-stoma but they highlight the conditions as well. When shopping you suddenly feel the urge to go, and, as we have already established, you are not having a poo or a pump but are passing blood clots in an incredibly painful way and your body is trying to get them out of your system and you cannot contain it, and poo will come out with them. You are shopping and have decided to go out—even though, as hon. Members have already highlighted, a lot of people plan their journeys around that—you show your card to a member of staff and they point-blank refuse to let you use the private toilets. You soil yourself in the middle of the shop, and then you do not go out for a long time afterwards because of the embarrassment.

I do not want to name or shame any individual companies that may have been involved in that example, but if I say that their slogan is "You can do it if you…it", Members can draw their own conclusions. That chain was horrific. From my lobbying, I believe it has got an awful lot better of late. It is about raising understanding in organisations of what the cards are and why people carry them. That goes back to stigma and the "Not every disability is visible" campaign, which I pushed to be rolled out across Lancashire all those years ago. These conditions are not visible. Someone may look physically well but experience that urgency. We must make sure that people with stomas, advanced Crohn's, colitis and so on know that they can get a RADAR key.

People need to know where the toilets are. Lots of different people have tried this in lots of different ways. We already accept that councils cannot be responsible for providing a toilet in all places at all times. If someone is going to go out and they are dependent on toilets being nearby, they need to know that there is a network of companies and commercial organisations that will let them use their toilets, even if there are not a lot. It is just about pubs and hotels knowing that sometimes, someone may need to come in. I know it is really annoying when non-paying customers come in and use the toilets, but having those apps is important so that people can plan their days out and their journeys with confidence.

There are knock-on benefits to the NHS and public health of helping people to have and maintain normal lives post traumatic bowel surgery and helping them with the psychological recovery. If they had to quit work, that could help them to get back into work. Stomas can be noisy. They rumble and pump. They are bowels, just on the outside of the body, or moving to the outside of the body. Dealing with that is hard enough. Therefore, people may not wish to empty or change a bag at work. They may wish to go somewhere near work to do it. They may work on the tools, in an outdoors job where they do not have routine access to toilets.

There are knock-on benefits to the Government and to the Treasury of helping people back into work, stopping people becoming ill with mental health issues from lack of confidence and emotional damage, and helping people to manage their condition better so that they are not continuously spiralling and going back into the NHS. It is not just about doing the right thing and the moral obligation to those people.

The hon. Member for Strangford has already outlined Colostomy UK's requests for things that could be advanced through building regulations to make toilets more stoma-friendly and the general need for more public toilet provision. I am sure it will continue to lobby effectively on that. A lot of the time, this is about the role the Government can play in creating awareness among public bodies and organisations about why this is important—the human element that I have tried to outline. This is about people's lives and the quality of life of some of people who deserve our support the most. It is about simple things, such as making sure that councils have nice, clean toilets, that toilets are open and that people can access information about where public and IBD-friendly toilets are.

I am about to start repeating myself, so I shall end my speech, which is probably a personal best for inappropriate *Hansard* contributions—I look forward to reading them back. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing this debate. This really is an important topic, and I know the debate will mean a lot to people. As I said, a lot of people with these conditions do not want to talk about it. They want to hide it. They suffer in silence. Their voice will not be heard. They will not contact their MP to ask if they can have better public toilets as they have a stoma or IBD, because they do not want people to know. It is therefore really important that we, as their elected representatives, are their voice. I hope that we can be their voice today, and I look forward to what the Minister and shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), have to say.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.40 pm

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate.

It is great to follow the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), who did better than I did in my maiden speech, when I managed to mention Shitterton and Happy Bottom—and I have now done so in *Hansard* for a second time. By the way, they are both places in my constituency. When I first stood for Parliament in 2015, the closure of public toilets was one of the key issues raised with me by local people. In fact, we pretty much had a whole hustings on it at Canford school.

Since arriving in this place I have repeatedly sought opportunities to improve provision, whether through debates or legislation. I am therefore delighted to speak today in a debate focused on people living with stomas, although many of the issues we are discussing apply equally to people with other conditions or disabilities or, indeed, other sections of our community. For many people, the worry about whether a public toilet exists,

is open, clean and has the facilities they need is lifechanging. It is the difference between participating in public life or staying at home.

This issue is close to home for me, as one of my close family members needed a stoma last year. It stopped them travelling into London to watch me speak in Parliament and it will even stop them travelling to see their grandchild perform in the west end in a few weeks' time. I know they desperately want to enjoy those experiences, along with the rest of the family, but they feel trapped close to home and close to the facilities they know they can rely on.

Following the hon. Member for Fylde, I will have to ask my family member what they call their stoma. Given the prevalence of bad jokes that emanate from their home on a daily basis, I am sure they will come up with something. I may need to catch the hon. Member in the Tea Room and let you know what they come up with. Simple changes, such as shelves, mirrors, disposal bins, hooks and space to manage the stoma with dignity, can cost such a small amount but make such an enormous difference.

That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to support further research into the adjustments that could promote the dignity, comfort and independence of people living with stomas. I would be interested to hear the Minister's views about potential changes to part M building regulations, as suggested by the hon. Member for Strangford. Too often, these small facilities are absent or even removed for fear that they might be misused for other purposes.

It is shocking that more than a third of stoma users report being challenged or criticised for using accessible toilets because their condition is invisible. Two thirds of all disabled toilet users have experienced disapproving looks and almost half have been verbally challenged. Imagine how distressing it must be, particularly for someone recently diagnosed with a life-changing condition who might already be worried about getting to a toilet on time, to face the judgment of strangers.

For people with stomas, older people, those managing disabilities or continence conditions, pregnant women and parents caring for young children, access to an appropriate toilet is not just a convenience; it is essential. With the new EHRC guidance, those who are transgender, non-binary or do not conform to gender stereotypes—for whom the disabled loo is not their preferred choice, and nor should it be—now find that the disabled toilets may be the only way to protect their dignity and stay safe. Public toilets are becoming even more of an issue for more people.

There is also a widespread assumption that men's toilets do not need sanitary bins, but they are essential for many men living with stomas. I was also delighted to join Matt Forde in Parliament last year as part of the prostate cancer "Boys Need Bins" campaign. For people with continence issues, the absence of bins can have a completely unnecessary effect on their confidence, dignity and independence. This includes people with stomas or bladder, bowel or digestive conditions.

Liberal Democrats are therefore calling on the Government to ensure that all public toilets are equipped with sanitary bins and to update workplace guidance to reflect the needs of men as well as women. There has been progress thanks to organisations such as Colostomy UK, as well as retailers such as Morrisons and B&Q, both of which made their toilets stoma-friendly, possibly after the experience the hon. Member for Fylde shared earlier. We want the Government to work with national retailers to ensure that accessible toilets are routinely made stoma-friendly. As some businesses have shown that it can be done, the challenge should be to make good practice the norm.

On access to toilets more widely, the British Toilet Association estimates that the number of public toilets has fallen by around 40% since the turn of the century. Its estimates suggest that only 4,000 public toilets remain in England—one public loo for every 14,000 people. We call them public conveniences, but they are in fact a public necessity. Their decline is happening as our population is ageing and more people need the confidence that facilities are available when they go out. If we want thriving high streets, vibrant parks and successful tourist destinations, we need decent public toilets.

The needs of other groups, including homeless people, refuse collectors, postal workers, delivery drivers, community nurses, social care staff, taxi drivers and highway maintenance crews, are also forgotten. I know that from personal experience, because about 10 years ago, I worked a full eight-hour shift alongside refuse collectors, starting at 5 am. When I climbed into the cab with my bottle of water and my can of Coke, they said, "You can't drink; you can't eat. There's nowhere we can go." I thought it was ridiculous that those people, who worked for us, had absolutely nowhere on their route where they could go. There was no way that we could go into a supermarket or a petrol station; we absolutely stank. It would not have been reasonable for us to go into a private business and expect to use its toilets. Thankfully, the local council addressed the issue with changes to its workplace facilities, but that sort of thing should concern us all.

The Government rightly speak about healthy ageing, thriving town centres and reducing inequalities, yet all those things become harder to achieve if people are not confident about finding a toilet. If the problem is so obvious, why has it continued to get worse? Part of the answer lies in the law. Currently, councils have a power to provide public toilets, but not a duty to do so. When budgets are stretched, discretionary services are often among the first things to disappear. I do not blame councils; I used to lead one, and I know that the system is so stretched and that few options are available when budgets are getting smaller and smaller.

I propose a change in approach, and I hope that the Minister and her colleagues will give it serious consideration. Councils should have a statutory duty to ensure sufficient public toilet provision within their area. That does not mean that every council must directly own or operate those facilities—community toilet schemes and partnerships with businesses, libraries, leisure centres, churches and town councils can all play an important role—but there should be a duty to assess local need, identify gaps in provision, and ensure that facilities are available when people need them and reflect a local population's health profile. I am sure that the Minister will refer to the Pride in Place scheme, which is great for the areas that have it, but thousands of communities around the country will not have access to that capital. There needs to be a way for those areas to ensure that their residents are also protected.

*[Vikki Slade]*

The Liberal Democrats also believe that Governments must support local authorities to reverse the decline in public toilet provision. Councils cannot be expected to deliver improved services if they are being continually asked to do more with less. Alongside the duty should come expectations for accessibility, maintenance and cleanliness. A toilet that does not lock, or is filthy or unusable, is not really a toilet. Where facilities are built or refurbished, they should be genuinely inclusive, including by being stoma-friendly. We should also think carefully about signage. Not every disability is visible, and the current image of a wheelchair may itself drive the perception that someone is "not disabled enough." The adjustments required are small, simple things: shelves, mirrors, hooks, disposal bins and signage.

This is a public health issue because people who choose not to go out will become more isolated, and that will affect their mental health. Those who restrict fluids to reduce the risk of getting caught short can develop other conditions. Those who are forced to change their stomas on filthy floors, or change their disabled child behind a bush, will not only face distress but risk serious infection.

**Mr Snowden:** The hon. Member touches on a point that I started but never finished in my walkthrough of life with a stoma, and it relates to children. I have a four-year-old. I have read the stories of parents trying to deal with children who are months old, not years old, and require stomas. As parents, we know what it is like managing a day out, but imagine trying to manage it for a child with a stoma. Imagine trying to give that child as normal an upbringing as possible. Unfortunately, the reality for that child is that they could face bullying and self-confidence issues from everything that goes with having a stoma. Those parents should be able to plan normal days out and provide normal lives for their children, so ensuring that schools and councils manage public toilets in a way that is friendly to people with stomas is important. I cannot feel anything other than real heartache for families who have to deal with that as they try to do their best by their child.

**Vikki Slade:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I worked for Diverse Abilities, which looks after disabled children and adults in Dorset. The number of times that we could not ensure that the children in our care had suitable facilities was really frightening. I spoke at the Backbench Business Committee earlier this week, where the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), put in a pitch for a debate on a new strategy for Changing Places toilets. That is hugely important, and I would absolutely support it.

**Jim Shannon:** Let me read out an example. I do not know this young lady, but you know her incredibly well, Mr Dowd. She is a young constituent called Jessica, who has had a stoma since she was four years old and has campaigned for 16 years. She fundraises to provide special teddy bears with their own stoma bags to children preparing for surgery. They are called Buttony bears. She works with Colostomy UK's "Step Up for Stomas" campaign to promote an active and positive lifestyle. You are right to say that she is a heroine, Mr Dowd; she is a very brave young girl. She has her own Facebook page to raise awareness. We now know her story because you have shared it. We think of her, too.

**Vikki Slade:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention on behalf of the Chair, and I pay tribute to Jessica—what a fantastic young lady! Her story, having gone through her childhood and teenage years with this condition, is incredibly heartwarming.

Wales already has the statutory requirement for a local toilet strategy. Surely England can do the same—it is not a flashy proposal. As we said earlier, it is about very basic needs. It does not require a new quango or a major reorganisation; it is simply about recognising that public toilets are part of the essential infrastructure of a modern and civilised society.

Whether someone is living with a stoma, raising a young family, managing a disability, working outdoors all day or simply getting older, access to a toilet should not determine whether they can take part in public life. The British Toilet Association's "Legalise Loos" campaign talks about the "loo leash", and states that

"14 million people have incontinence issues; 15 million people menstruate, and 16 million people have a disability."

We are failing all those people if we do not have decent toilets.

My message is simple: support research into stoma-friendly facilities, work with retailers to make accessible toilets fit for purpose, ensure sanitary bins are available wherever they are needed, support councils to reverse the decades of decline in public toilet provision and make it a statutory responsibility to have a strategy. Alongside those measures, move from powers to duties by requiring councils to assess need, ensure sufficient provision and provide clean, accessible and dignified facilities. Public toilets are not an optional extra or a convenience; they are part of essential infrastructure. Until we recognise that fact, too many people will remain excluded from public life simply because they cannot be sure where they will go when nature calls.

3.54 pm

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd—I wish you a happy birthday. I welcome the Minister to her place. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate on the provision of public toilets for people living with stomas, which is too often overlooked and too rarely spoken about. He began by saying that although this is not a fashionable debate, the issue needs to be aired, and he was absolutely right about that. He was also right to say that this issue is about dignity and independence, as Members from across the House have said.

This debate is important for many people throughout the UK—that is evident from the personal stories that have been shared by hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden) described the importance of humour to deal emotionally with this difficult and embarrassing condition, including by naming stomas, which is new to me—I did not know that was a thing; every day is a school day. I have to say that my favourite from his catalogue was also Vladimir Poopin, but maybe that reflects our politics more than anything else.

I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions throughout the debate, particularly in highlighting the human reality of living with a stoma. Around 200,000 people in the UK live with a stoma following surgery for bowel cancer, Crohn's disease,

ulcerative colitis, diverticulitis and many other conditions. I do hope that I have pronounced those correctly—there is a reason I am not a medic. On average, in a constituency such as Mid Bedfordshire, around 200 to 250 people are likely to be living with a stoma. With an ageing population and increasing diagnoses of bowel conditions, this need will grow, not diminish, over time.

For those people, a toilet is not a convenience but a necessity, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), said. A stoma bag must be emptied or changed at the moment it is needed. There is quite literally no waiting when it is required. Yet the facilities that most people with a stoma rely on—standard accessible toilets—are frequently not fit for purpose, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde eloquently described. Too often, there is no shelf on which to lay out medical supplies, no hook for clothing or a bag, no mirror to help someone change safely, no basin within reach and nowhere hygienic to dispose of used products. I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for highlighting the "Boys Need Bins" campaign, which is an absolutely fantastic campaign that we should all get behind.

At present, provision depends on good will rather than on standards, which leaves a postcode lottery for something as basic as using a toilet. The result is people changing stoma bags balanced on their knees or on dirty floors. Someone with a stoma often must plan their entire day around whether a usable toilet exists. I come from a rural constituency and acknowledge what a challenge that must be on days out in the countryside.

There is a second barrier, which is one of attitude. A stoma is, in the main, an invisible disability, as hon. Members have said. Many people with a stoma or inflammatory bowel disease report being challenged or even abused for using an accessible toilet, or accused of being "not disabled enough" because they do not use a wheelchair. Simple signage and staff awareness can prevent the confrontations that many people with invisible conditions face. Those attitudes are a stain on us, and it is precisely why Crohn's & Colitis UK's "Not every disability is visible" campaign and Colostomy UK's Stoma Aware work matter so much.

I am proud that the last Conservative Government understood that dignity in this area is a duty of the state, not an optional extra. When he was Local Government Minister, the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), led the drive to expand Changing Places toilets, with larger facilities with benches, hoists and space for carers, which the most severely disabled people need. He set in motion the change to building regulations that, from 2021, made Changing Places mandatory in large new public buildings in England, including shopping centres, stadiums and arts venues. That was backed by a £2 million fund to install them in more than 100 NHS hospitals, further investment in motorway service stations and funding for a national online map so that families could find them more easily. The public sector could lead by example across councils, hospitals and transport networks.

The number of Changing Places has risen from 140 in 2007 to around 1,200. That is a record of practical, compassionate action and I pay tribute to the programme, but—I say this candidly—Changing Places, vital as they are, are designed for the most profoundly disabled. Most people with a stoma are fully mobile. The solutions that they need are cheaper: the simple stoma-friendly standard of a shelf, a hook, a mirror and a bin in ordinary accessible toilets. Some retailers—B&Q was mentioned, but I am sure there are others—have shown that it can be done across an entire estate at a modest cost. The additions required often cost less than a few hundred pounds per facility. This is not major capital infrastructure work; it is a small retrofit that has a huge impact on people's dignity. The building blocks exist; what is missing is national leadership to join them up.

When people cannot rely on basic facilities, they withdraw —from work, from shopping and from social life. That is not just a personal loss; there are wider economic impacts, too. Constituents in Mid Bedfordshire have told me that living with these life-changing conditions can be exhausting, isolating and unpredictable. The hidden nature of their symptoms means that they are often invisible to other people, but they deeply impact the daily lives of the people who have them. It is an honour to represent those people at the Opposition Dispatch Box in such a good debate, in which there is cross-party consensus.

I would be grateful if the Minister could address three points. First, what are the Government considering doing to make places more stoma-friendly? Secondly, what meetings have Ministers had with Colostomy UK and Crohn's & Colitis UK to discuss options? Thirdly, what consideration are the Government giving to local government facilities, recognising the interesting proposal from the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, for a statutory duty?

This is not a party political issue; it is about whether someone can leave their home with confidence. The previous Government opened the door with Changing Places. I urge this Government to walk through it, finish the job and support people with stomas.

4.1 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I begin by paying tribute to Members from across the House for the incredibly thoughtful and personal stories that they have shared. I am very conscious that Members speak on behalf of their constituents, and that some Members speak from personal experience. Although I do not have that personal experience, I have a very close family member who does, and I have heard Members speak in the Chamber before about their own experiences and have reflected very carefully on the power of those remarks for those beyond the House who hear them. I thank Members very much for their contributions.

I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this very important debate, and for his continued interest in this issue. I know that he is a committed advocate for public toilet provision, including for those with non-visible disabilities such as stoma use.

I recognise the importance of the provision of good-quality, accessible public toilets more broadly. For far too many people, access to clean and safe public toilets can be the deciding factor in whether they feel able to visit a town centre, a high street, a park or any local attraction.

*[Nesil Caliskan]*

As others put it so eloquently, such facilities support the dignity and independence of people with disability and accessibility needs. Of course, accessibility to a decent facility encourages everybody to spend more time in their local areas, and to use the shops, services and attractions in them. I do not need to detail the benefits of that in itself.

It is true that for many people, it is just too difficult to access the facilities that the rest of us can access so easily every day. Members have correctly pointed out that that is a challenge not only for those with a stoma, but for many other people, including those with ulcerative colitis or irritable bowel disease. The list is much longer than that; the point is that many people are impacted by the lack of accessibility facilities.

However, this debate is focused on stomas, and I want to place on the record the Government's recognition that this is absolutely a real challenge. Approximately one in 335 people of all ages in the UK is estimated to be living with a stoma, and each year more than 13,000 people in the UK undergo stoma surgery. For people living with a stoma, access to suitable toilet provision is not simply a matter of convenience; it is fundamental to their dignity, safety and independence. Many people living with a stoma feel anxious about leaving home, particularly in the period after surgery.

The Government recognise that being able to live well, to work, to enjoy days out, to shop and to socialise requires access to appropriate public toilet facilities. However, as Members across the Chamber have said, standard public toilets may not always provide that facility for everybody in a safe and dignified way. It is important that we recognise the specific experience of people with invisible disabilities, who are often uneasy about using a disabled facility for fear that it may be a challenge to do so—assuming that the disabled facility would even meet their needs.

In recognition of the importance of this subject, at the last spending review, in 2025, the Government committed more than £5 billion over the next three years for essential local services, including public toilets, and we continue to provide 100% mandatory business rates relief for stand-alone public toilets, which is helping reduce ongoing costs for local authorities, but I absolutely accept that the facility needs to exist in the first place. I recognise that, for stoma users, practical features such as clean shelf spaces and discreet disposal bins can make a significant difference. I thank Members for raising the issue of facilities in male toilets, which are so frequently overlooked.

It is worth highlighting that all building work must meet the functional requirements of the Building Regulations 2010, which address accessibility and provide guidance on meeting those requirements, including the installation of shelves, sanitary disposal units and accessibility toilets. However, I accept that the very fact we are having this debate means that the reality on the ground is very different.

The Building Safety Regulator has a duty under the Building Safety Act 2022 to keep the standard of buildings under review, and I welcome the fact that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), drew attention to the £30 million Changing Places programme, which supported the targeted installation of almost 500 new disabled toilet facilities. I learned much about that programme when I served as a council leader—if I learned anything from my days in local government, it is that bins and toilets are two topics that people get very passionate about.

The role of local authorities is central to this conversation. It is the Government's view that local authorities are best placed to understand the needs of their communities, and to make decisions about the provision that is right for their areas. I take careful note of the important arguments made about statutory requirements and regulations, but I say gently that local authorities might not think that is the best approach. I am yet to come across a local authority that does not want to do the best for its area, and I think there is a conversation to be had about how we can better support them to do that.

**Mr Snowden:** Having been a councillor and served on the front bench of a council, I know about delivering these facilities, and I feel for councils when it comes to doing so. As has been said, the reality is that even if councils want to do their best, and they know what is best for their local areas, funding is tight. We all know that ever-increasing adult social care bills and so on are creating bigger burdens on local government finances, and statutory requirements will always take priority over other things. I do not want to create a system that ends up costing more than opening the toilets themselves through its complexity and bureaucracy, but it is really important to place some greater requirement on councils to understand the provision and fill the gaps. If the Minister is looking for a commissioner for the crappers in the future, it may be a role for me!

**Nesil Caliskan:** I absolutely take the point. There is a conversation to be had with the sector, local authorities and the Local Government Association about how we can best support local authorities to do that. I think there is a real willingness among local authorities. I accept the point about statutory services, but there are great examples of local authorities providing services that are not statutory because they recognise the importance of public provision.

**Vikki Slade:** I take the Minister's point. As a former council leader, I know that the last thing that councils need is a whole load of additional things that they have to do, but the point is that there is fear and inconsistency. If there is a postcode lottery when it comes to whether a council is sufficiently interested in ensuring provision or making information available to people, people will end up staying at home because they do not know what the rules are in the place they are travelling to. I gently urge the Minister to think carefully about placing a duty on local authorities to make provision in their area. If we want everybody to have the opportunity to engage in public life, that is the bare minimum.

**Nesil Caliskan:** I absolutely take the point, but there is scope for us to consider how to do that without putting additional statutory burdens on local authorities. Ultimately, we want the same outcome: we do not want a postcode lottery. A person who needs accessible toilets should know that they can leave the house and access them. I am open-minded about whether we do that through regulation or by having schemes that support the roll-out of better facilities. There are good

examples of services being delivered across the country, so we should look at how the sector can learn from them and how the Government can best support local authorities.

Bins and toilets are areas of interest for local authorities, councillors and council leaders. I note the experience of Members in the Chamber who have a local government background. I recall rolling out a community toilet scheme when I was council leader. That required very small things, such as small grants to businesses—I think they were £1,000—to encourage them to make their facilities available to the public. That meant that the local authority did not have to think about additional toilet spaces. In many ways, the provision of a toilet in a local business or on a high street meant that our residents had more access than they would if they had to go to a park.

**Vikki Slade:** I cannot resist the opportunity to plug the fact that, prior to being the council leader, I had a business on Broadstone high street, and we were part of the community loo scheme. There are currently five or six businesses in my ward that have open access to their toilets. Previously, there was one public toilet, which was often closed, vandalised or subject to crime. I want to take the opportunity to tell the public that "use your loo" schemes are there for people; they do not need to buy anything. It is really important that we remind our residents of that, because people are often reluctant to go into a café if they are not going to spend money.

**Nesil Caliskan:** That is exactly the point that I am making. I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that very good example of what local leadership can deliver in the community. It is important that we empower local authorities and leaders to think outside the box, champion this issue and speak up on tricky topics. That gives me the opportunity once again to pay tribute to hon. Members for taking part in this debate. By talking about and giving attention to a difficult subject, we are able to shift views and encourage our public sector to provide facilities that meet the needs of our communities.

**Jim Shannon:** The role of councils is incredibly important. The Government's 10-year health plan sets out a shift from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital. For stoma care, moving from analogue to digital could mean remote monitoring for high-risk people living with a stoma, app-based ordering of stoma appliances, reducing prescription errors and delays, and digital self-management for diet, hydration and troubleshooting. Those are all critical issues for the health service to consider when moving from analogue to digital. I ask the Minister, whether or not it is in the notes I gave her, to look at that point as well. I also ask that she meets Colostomy UK with all Members present. That organisation has much more knowledge than me, and we look forward to that opportunity.

**Nesil Caliskan:** Absolutely. I am very happy to meet any campaigning organisation to discuss this important issue. I note that other hon. Members have also made that request. If charities would like to contact me, I will happily meet them to talk about how we can better support the needs of all our communities.

On the important point the hon. Gentleman makes about the NHS plan and healthcare support, he is absolutely right. It is all the more reason why we need a joined-up approach to what local authorities and NHS local boards are doing. I take the opportunity to highlight health and wellbeing boards across the country, which will play a really important role in making sure that, as one part of the local authority is delivering something, it is making the most of what it is doing so that it meets the objectives of a different part. In the case we are talking about, health is a really obvious example.

To return to my general point about local authorities thinking outside the box and doing things differently, one area we should encourage them to consider is how they conduct procurement. There are many examples across the country where public toilets in parks and open spaces have fallen into disrepair. Some local authorities are addressing that through procurement processes by stipulating, for example, that the owner of a new café must look after the toilets in that space. Those are good ideas that should be encouraged and will ultimately make it easier for our communities to access facilities.

**Mr Snowden:** The Minister is being incredibly generous with her time. She probably entered this room and, having seen only one Back-Bench Member, thought this debate would not get close to 4.30 pm—but here we are.

I have two points. First, is there a greater role for section 106 moneys, potentially through planning processes, in supporting public toilets? The Minister gave a really good example of creative thinking around ownership of toilets in parks and cafés. My sister will kill me for saying this, but when she was growing up she had a phobia of metal toilets. I think it was actually just a phobia of unclean spaces. A lot of people would rather use a well-kept toilet in a private business, where they will not be judged for using it—provided it is not at the far end and they do not have to walk past all the tables with everyone looking at them—than use a public toilet that, by its nature and because it is not in a manned location, cannot always be guaranteed to be as clean. I think that is a great example. Will the Minister work with colleagues in local government to see whether that can be rolled out more, and consider how section 106 moneys might help to create more of an incentive for commercial operators who might not otherwise be able to afford it, or for whom it might not be viable?

**Nesil Caliskan:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman's contribution. Section 106 moneys are often thought about in terms of big infrastructure money, but for a very small amount of money we can make a big public impact; the grant funding of £1,000 to a business is a good example of that. I am very happy to take that back. There are lots of examples across the country of where this is being done well, and we should, as a Government—I will take this back—find a better way to communicate some of that best practice.

I also want to comment on the very important point the hon. Gentleman makes about lived experience. Too often, Governments and councils design and deliver schemes with good intentions, but they do not necessarily meet the real needs of communities. That is why lived experience must be at the heart of policymaking. He referenced his sister's experience, and I will join him: my sister's experience is not dissimilar. As he said, many

*[Nesil Caliskan]*

people who live with such conditions develop great resilience over their lifetime. My sister, too, is incredibly resilient, because of her experience of living with her colitis, which was diagnosed as a teenager, as it is for many people. It is a very particular experience to be diagnosed with a lifelong condition as a teenager.

People who experience that are some of the most resilient individuals in our community, and their lived experience is central to making sure that our councils and the Government design provision and services that meet their needs. In that spirit, I welcome continued dialogue with Members. I know that there are others who are not in this Chamber who also feel very strongly about this topic. Local government, MHCLG and partners can work together to deliver more accessible, well-maintained public toilets. We should look at existing schemes and new schemes that can encourage such provision.

I thank hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford for securing this important debate and for his warm words in welcoming me to my place; it was very generous of him. The Government recognise the importance of ensuring that public spaces are accessible, inclusive and supportive of people's dignity and independence. I welcome further representation from hon. Members, the brilliant charities that do fantastic campaigning on this issue, local authorities across the country and other partners who want to see the provision of public toilets improve.

4.21 pm

**Jim Shannon:** I thank everyone for their participation, and those in the Gallery who gave us information to use in the debate. The hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden) brought a focus to this issue in a way that I would have been too hesitant to do. I am too much of a traditionalist, too much of a conservative and maybe a wee bit careful, but I thank him for that. We need a bit of humour sometimes; he gave us that, and I thank him for it. I was fearful of what the next name he would come up with was going to be. I was sitting here thinking, "Don't say that!" but that is by the by.

Toilet provision must be clean. The psychological adjustment is something that we need to focus on as well. I just know how I feel and think, and if I had such a condition, I know how much worse it would be to try to deal with it. We must also focus on the knock-on effect on the NHS. The Minister has grasped that issue. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) always makes very perceptive interventions. He is no longer present, but in his absence, I thank him for his interventions on toilet provision and living with a stoma bag.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) has great knowledge of this matter. She has been active on this subject for some time, especially since she was elected but even before that when she was on the council. It would cost a small amount to address this issue, but it would have a big return. It is a bit like a credit union; if we invest a wee bit, we will get a lot more out of it. Toilet access has a big impact, as it protects people's dignity. Some 40% of toilets in the UK have disappeared. They are a public necessity, and surely England could do better. Public toilets must be a part of modern society.

The shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), also brought knowledge to this debate. He referred to the 200 to 250 people in his constituency who have had a stoma in the last year. He also referred to the "Boys Need Bins" campaign, which others have referred to, and which those in the Gallery have made us very much aware of.

The disability is invisible—we need to remember that. I know about stomas only because of friends and constituents. Under the previous Government's Changing Places policy, the number of toilets has risen, which is good news, but there is a lot more to do. I think the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire referred to that as well. He also asked for a meeting with Colostomy UK—I think we can help each other on that.

I congratulate the Minister on her debut in Westminster Hall. I wish her well in the role that she has chosen—or that someone else has chosen for her. *[Laughter.]* It does not matter; it is a role that she is capable of. On behalf of our constituents, I was very pleased with her response to us as individuals and collectively as well. She referred to the 13,000 each year who have the stoma operation. Independence for people with such a disability is important for them to live a normal life and not be conscious of all the things that can happen. The standard of public toilets needs to be up to a certain level. The hon. Member for Fylde explained things about going to the toilet that I had not thought of or even conceived of, but he explained it very well. Only then do we realise how important it is to have a certain standard of toilet.

Local authorities were also referred to. The Minister gave us some assurance, which I am very pleased about, in relation to the 10-year plan and how the scheme will change from analogue to digital. It is important that we look at ways of doing things better.

Again, I thank you, Mr Dowd. We do not often say this, but we should thank our Hansard staff who come along and decipher our words, or my accent or my Ulster-Scots-isms or whatever it may be. I thank them and the civil servants who come along and dutifully listen to all the things we have to say, take notes and never show emotion. That is the standard of a good civil servant.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered public toilet provision for people with stoma.

4.27 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

*Thursday 18 June 2026*

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### British Steel

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald):** The Government committed to updating Parliament on British steel every four sitting weeks for the duration of the period of special measures being applied under the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025.

The Government's priority remains to maintain the safe operation of the blast furnaces at British Steel. Government officials are continuing to provide on-site support in Scunthorpe, ensuring uninterrupted domestic steel production and monitoring the use of taxpayer funds.

On funding, the position remains that all Government funding for British Steel will be drawn from existing budgets, within the spending envelope set out at the 2025 spring statement. To date, we have provided approximately £555 million for working capital, covering items such as raw materials and salaries. This will be reflected in the Department for Business and Trade's accounts for both 2025-26 and 2026-27.

*Next steps*

The Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill has completed its passage in the House of Commons and has entered the House of Lords. Given the information currently available to us, the Government are strongly minded to use the powers in the Bill to bring British Steel into public ownership in the future, subject to the public interest being satisfied and taking into account all the relevant facts at that time.

[HCWS122]

## EDUCATION

### Turing Scheme

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister):** Following the decision to leave the EU and the related end of our association with the Erasmus+ scheme, the last Government introduced the Turing scheme. The scheme has been the UK Government's global programme for students to study and work abroad, funding students studying across the UK and British overseas territories, in higher education, further education and schools.

The scheme is about to start its sixth year and applicant education providers will shortly be informed of the outcome of their application. I can confirm a budget of up to £78 million for the Turing scheme for the 2026-27 academic year.

The Government decision to associate with Erasmus+ in 2027 will build on the Turing scheme's success in opening up world-class opportunities for learners, educators, young people and communities, while further strengthening our partnership with the European Union. Our renewed participation in Erasmus+ will increase the opportunities available to young people across the UK. We will therefore transition to this broad, expanded Erasmus+ in the 2027-28 academic year, ending the Turing scheme as Erasmus+ placements begin.

The Turing scheme has delivered strong outcomes in widening access to international opportunities, with the proportion of students funded who are from a disadvantaged background increasing from 39% in 2021-22 to 56% in 2024-25, with an estimated 61% planned in 2025-26. It has also provided additional funding for students with special educational needs and disabilities, additional support needs or additional learning needs.

We will build on the success of the Turing scheme through maximising the opportunities that our association to Erasmus+ brings, including supporting the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs. Erasmus+ offers a broader scope of activity than the Turing scheme, providing opportunities not only for students but also for staff, and extends to the adult education, youth and sport sectors. The programme also supports a wide range of institutional partnerships and policy development. These activities help drive quality, encourage research links and enhance international reputation.

Like the Turing scheme, Erasmus+ offers additional funding to help participants with fewer opportunities, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, take part in mobility opportunities.

We expect that over 100,000 people in the UK could benefit from mobility and partnership opportunities through Erasmus+ participation in 2027.

Erasmus+ participants can travel to any European Union member state, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye. As part of Erasmus+, grant holders in some sectors can also allocate up to 20% of project funding to support international mobilities to some countries that are not associated with the programme. Erasmus+ also supports global collaboration through partnership projects, with opportunities to involve non-partner countries under certain actions.

[HCWS123]

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### Non-domestic Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey):** I am pleased to provide an update on the Government's approach to strengthening minimum energy efficiency standards in the non domestic private rented sector, following our previous consultations and extensive recent engagement with industry, investors, local authorities and other stakeholders.

The Government consulted in 2019 and 2021 on proposals to raise non-domestic PRS MEES to EPC B, reflecting the role of energy efficiency in cutting bills, strengthening energy security and supporting the transition to net zero. Since then, we have continued to engage

closely with stakeholders on how these proposals would work in practice across a diverse commercial building stock.

Listening carefully to that feedback, the Government have now confirmed their intention to implement a revised and proportionate approach that maintains ambition where it delivers the greatest benefits, while providing greater flexibility for smaller businesses and landlords.

In practice, this means that from 2031 it is proposed that private rented non-domestic buildings over 1,000 square metres in England and Wales will be required to meet a higher energy efficiency standard of EPC B, where cost-effective. This offers a more targeted approach compared with the original proposal, which would have applied across the entire non-domestic building stock. Initial modelling suggests that raising the standard for the largest premises could save those tenants £360 million per year on their energy costs by 2031.

The intention is for buildings below 1,000 square metres to continue to be subject to the current EPC E minimum standard.

The previously consulted interim EPC C milestone for 2027 will not be taken forward, giving landlords and tenants more time to plan investment and retrofit works in a way that suits their buildings and lease structures.

Existing flexibility mechanisms, including the seven-year payback test and exemptions, will remain in place, ensuring that only improvements that are practical, affordable and cost-effective will be required.

The changes to raise MEES to EPC B for larger buildings will take effect following the successful passage of secondary legislation through Parliament.

This targeted approach focuses action where it delivers the greatest benefits, helping tenants in the largest buildings to save energy and reduce bills, protecting them from future energy shocks. While continuing to improve the poorest performing buildings through the existing EPC E standard, we are giving additional flexibility to our SMEs and high streets to upgrade their buildings over time, with no set deadline for going beyond this level. With a fair and proportionate timetable, the policy supports business investment, reduces exposure to volatile energy prices and strengthens UK energy security.

We will publish the Government's consultation response in due course, setting out further detail on the policy and implementation of the threshold, and aim to introduce legislation and supporting guidance at the earliest opportunity.

We will continue to work closely with industry and other stakeholders to ensure that the pathway to EPC B is fair, clear and deliverable.

We look forward to continuing the dialogue with industry as we move into the next phase of delivery.

[HCWS126]

## SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

### Online Safety Act 2023: Codes of Practice

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan):** The harms of viral harmful content do not end online. They can spill into our streets and destabilise communities. Recent incidents—including the disorder following the Southport attack in summer 2024, unrest in Leicester in 2022, and events following the tragic murder of Henry Nowak—demonstrate how online activity can intensify real-world harm at moments of vulnerability.

As set out in "Protecting What Matters", the Government will go further where needed to protect communities, including by ensuring the Online Safety Act's crisis response provisions are fit for purpose.

Today I am laying before Parliament draft amendments to Ofcom's codes of practice on illegal content and the protection of children. These strengthen expectations on platforms to respond effectively where their services contribute to risks to public safety during crises.

The Online Safety Act places clear duties on user-to-user services to protect users, including through systems and processes to tackle illegal content and that which is harmful to children. Ofcom, as the independent regulator, sets out in its codes the steps providers should take to meet these duties.

Following parliamentary scrutiny, Ofcom's initial codes came into force in March and July 2025. They established a proactive, systems-based approach to tackling illegal harms and protecting children.

These amendments go further. They set an expectation on relevant services to have effective crisis response arrangements, mitigate risks associated with content on their platforms, and work closely with law enforcement where public safety is at risk. This strengthens how platforms address harms such as violence, abuse, hate, extremism and foreign interference.

Ofcom has submitted the draft amendments, which I am laying before Parliament for scrutiny. Subject to the usual 40-day period, the updated measures will come into force 21 days after the codes are issued.

These amendments build on existing collaboration between Ofcom and platforms on crisis response. Following recent unrest in Belfast, Ofcom has written to online service providers to remind them of their duties under the Online Safety Act to assess and mitigate the risks of illegal content, including material that stirs up hatred or incites violence. As Ofcom said in its letter, platforms do not need to wait before they start implementing stronger measures.

These changes mark a further step in implementing the Online Safety Act and strengthening protections for communities. Ofcom will continue to keep the codes under review to address emerging harms. This Government are fully committed to using all available levers to protect the public from harms that originate and spread online.

[HCWS124]

## TRANSPORT

### Heathrow Expansion National Policy Statement

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):** I am today updating the House on the Government's review of the airports national policy statement and the next stage in that process.

In October 2025 I announced that the Government would review the ANPS to support the delivery of additional airport capacity at Heathrow airport. In November 2025

I confirmed the Government's decision to use the north-west runway scheme promoted by Heathrow Airport Ltd to inform that review.

I can today confirm that the Government have completed our review and are launching a public consultation on a draft revised national policy statement—now renamed the Heathrow expansion national policy statement—to clarify that it applies only to Heathrow expansion and its associated infrastructure.

This delivers on the commitment I made to consult on an amended policy statement by summer 2026 and marks another important milestone in the Government's ambition for a decision on development consent application within this Parliament.

Heathrow is the United Kingdom's only hub airport. It connects businesses to global markets, supports trade and tourism, and plays a vital role in the movement of passengers and freight. Heathrow has operated at or near capacity for many years and demand for aviation is expected to continue growing in the decades ahead. Expansion therefore has the potential to improve connectivity, strengthen resilience and support economic growth across the United Kingdom, with better connections and a third runway capable of boosting the UK economy and supporting more than 60,000 jobs.

The draft HENPS provides the planning policy framework against which any future application for expansion at Heathrow airport would be considered. It sets out the Government's assessment of the need for additional airport capacity at Heathrow, explains why the north-west runway scheme has informed the review, and establishes the requirements that any future proposal would need to satisfy.

This document does not grant development consent, and nor does it approve any specific expansion scheme. Any application would remain subject to the statutory development consent order process, including independent examination by the Planning Inspectorate.

However, it is an important milestone and step forward. The review has considered developments since the ANPS was designated in 2018, including updated aviation forecasts, changes in legislation and wider Government policy. It has also considered how the Government's four tests for Heathrow expansion should be applied.

> *On Economic Growth:* Expansion must deliver a credible and meaningful contribution to UK-wide economic growth, supported by a clear plan for how benefits—for example, jobs, productivity and connectivity—will be realised.
>
> *On Carbon:* The scheme must be compatible with the UK's legally binding climate targets, including carbon budgets and net zero.
>
> *On Air Quality:* Expansion must not cause new breaches of legal air quality limits, taking account of appropriate mitigation.
>
> *On Noise:* Impacts must be limited so that noise is no worse than current levels—2024 baseline—with reductions where possible, supported by effective mitigation.

As set out in the draft HENPS, the Government consider that the development covered by the Heathrow expansion NPS is critical to national growth and therefore plan to designate expansion at Heathrow as critical national growth infrastructure. This is a signal of the importance the Government place on the need for expansion and will be an important additional factor in the planning balance.

On surface access—how passengers and staff travel to and from the airport—the draft HENPS requires promoters to demonstrate how increased passenger demand would be accommodated on the transport network and how any necessary road and rail improvements would be delivered. We are publishing a surface access vision document alongside this to set our expectations.

Alongside the draft HENPS, the Government are also today publishing an updated appraisal of sustainability, habitats regulations assessment and other supporting documents.

*Draft HENPS consultation*

The Government are committed to ensuring that decisions are informed by robust evidence and meaningful public engagement. The consultation on the draft HENPS will run for over 10 weeks, closing on 1 September 2026. Alongside the consultation, a nominated parliamentary Select Committee will undertake parliamentary scrutiny on the draft HENPS.

This consultation provides an important opportunity for local communities, businesses, local authorities, environmental organisations and other interested parties to provide their views before any final decision is taken.

Following the consultation, the Government will carefully consider all responses and the parliamentary Select Committee's report before deciding whether to designate an amended national policy statement. Any amended HENPS will be published and laid in Parliament and will be subject to a vote in this House prior to having legal effect.

*Broader programme progress*

The consultation on the draft HENPS forms part of a wider programme of work to support a modern, resilient and sustainable aviation sector.

> The Civil Aviation Authority continues to develop the regulatory framework that would apply to any future expansion proposal, with a focus on affordability, financeability, cost-efficiency and consumer protection. The Government will continue to work closely with the regulator as it develops its approach, while respecting the regulator's independence. The CAA anticipates publishing its final decision on recovery of early costs and direction of travel on preferred regulatory model this summer.
>
> The Government are also progressing our airspace modernisation programme and will shortly publish updated air navigation directions and guidance to support a more efficient, cleaner and quieter aviation system. Airspace modernisation is needed irrespective of the planned runway expansion. Its purpose is to make UK airspace more efficient, resilient, quieter and cleaner—not to provide a shortcut to airport expansion.
>
> Alongside this consultation, the Government are announcing a review of the jet zero strategy, with an updated strategy to be published in early 2027. This review will consider the latest evidence on aviation decarbonisation and assess progress in delivering existing commitments.
>
> The Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill, which is separate from the Heathrow expansion programme, will support growth, strengthen consumer protections and modernise the regulatory framework for the aviation sector more widely.

*Next steps*

I will update the House on the outcome of the consultation and parliamentary scrutiny process in due course.

[HCWS125]

# Petitions

*Thursday 18 June 2026*

## OBSERVATIONS

## EDUCATION

### School bus service from Kings Worthy to Henry Beaufort School

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Winchester,*

Declares that the school bus from Kings Worthy to Henry Beaufort School is due to be withdrawn in April 2026; further declares that this would force children as young as eleven to walk over an hour on dangerous roads to get to school, which would be particularly dangerous in the winter months, or cost parents who will have to start work later or pay for expensive taxis; and further declares that the plans would mean more congestion, worse air quality and higher costs for parents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with Hampshire County Council to ensure that the school bus service from Kings Worthy to Henry Beaufort School is continued.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Dr Danny Chambers, Official Report,* 18 March 2026; Vol. 782, c. 976.*]*

[P003170]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey):* Home to school travel is an integral part of the school system. The Government know how valuable it is for many families. The Department for Education's home to school travel policy aims to ensure that no child is prevented from accessing education by a lack of transport.

The law requires local authorities to arrange free home to school travel for children of compulsory school age, five to 16, who attend their nearest school and would not be able to walk there because of the distance, their special educational needs, disability or mobility problem, or because the nature of the route means it would be unsafe for them to do so. There are extended rights to free travel for children from low-income families. More information is available in our statutory guidance: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a10649929bb11891b1cf096/Travel_to_school_for_children_of_compulsory_school_age.pdf

Local authorities have the discretion to arrange travel for other children but are not required to do so. They may charge for discretionary travel. It is for each local authority to decide whether and how to exercise their discretionary power.

Local authorities are responsible for assessing whether a child is eligible for free school travel on the grounds that they would not be able to walk there in reasonable safety. The Department for Education does not have a role in these decisions. Local knowledge is important when assessing existing routes and identifying new ones.

Our statutory guidance for local authorities explains that when assessing whether a route can be walked in reasonable safety, they should consider the whole of the route. This will include, for example, any sections that use footpaths or bridleways, as well as sections that use roads. Local authorities should consider a range of risks such as canals, rivers, ditches, speed of traffic and fields of vision for the pedestrian and motorist. The local authority should consider whether a route which would be unsafe for a child to walk on their own could be considered safe if the child were accompanied by an adult.

Local authorities have a duty to promote the use of sustainable travel on journeys to and from places of education in their area. This includes children who are not eligible for free school travel provided by the local authority. They must publish a sustainable modes of travel strategy which sets out their vision for improving the infrastructure for sustainable travel and promoting sustainable travel to places of education. It should provide health benefits for children and their families through active journeys and environmental improvements through reduced congestion and improved air quality.

The Department for Education appreciates that changes in travel arrangements can be unsettling for families. However, providing that Hampshire county council is meeting its statutory duty, the Department is unable to get involved.

Parents can appeal a decision that has been taken about their child's home to school travel. Details of how to do this can be found on Hampshire county council's website: https://www.hants.gov.uk/educationandlearning/schooltransport/appeals. If, having exhausted the council's appeals procedure, parents remain unsatisfied, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman may be able to investigate. Further information is available here: www.lgo.org.uk.

## TRANSPORT

### Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway

*The petition of residents of England and Wales,*

Declares that the Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway has submitted proposals to restore direct rail services between Wrexham, Shropshire, the Midlands and London, which would offer significant economic, social and environmental benefits for the communities along the route; further declares that the establishment of these new direct services would improve transport links, access to health services, and strengthen regional economies across North Wales, Shropshire and the Midlands.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the proposal for a Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway by encouraging the Office of Rail and Road and Network Rail to work constructively with the operator to enable the establishment of new direct services between London and North Wales, Shropshire and the Midlands.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Julia Buckley, Official Report,* 20 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 666.]

[P003201]

*Observations from Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill, Minister for Rail, Department for Transport:*

Access to the rail network is currently a matter for the Office of Rail and Road under existing legislation. The Department is unable to direct the ORR in its decision making.

The Department is clear that, in the right circumstances, open access can provide a number of benefits for passengers.

We understand the potential connectivity benefits that Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway's proposals could deliver, and for that reason have provided conditional support for its application.

This is subject to the ORR and Network Rail being satisfied that services can be accommodated without compromising network performance and without adversely affecting the rights of other operators.

The ORR is now assessing the application's feasibility and will consider whether access rights should be granted in line with its statutory duties.

# Written Correction

*Thursday 18 June 2026*

## Ministerial Correction

### CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

**Royal Albert Hall Bill [*Lords*]**

*The following extract is from the debate on the Royal Albert Hall Bill [Lords] on 15 June 2026.*

**Ian Murray:** … I acknowledge the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). She is not alone; the Charity Commission itself and several commentators, many of whom she mentioned, have long expressed the view that there is a strong conflict of interest in the majority of the hall's trustees being seat holders, because they are sometimes acting in their own financial interests instead of the charity's best interests, which is against the rules and regulations of the Charity Commission.

[*Official Report*, 15 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 646.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):*

**Ian Murray:** … I acknowledge the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). She is not alone; the Charity Commission itself and several commentators, many of whom she mentioned, have long expressed the view that there is a strong conflict of interest in the majority of the hall's trustees being seat holders, because they **could act** in their own financial interests instead of the charity's best interests, which **would be** against the rules and regulations of the Charity Commission.

# ORAL ANSWERS

**Thursday 18 June 2026**


| | Col. No. |
|---|---|
| **CHURCH COMMISSIONERS** | 977 |
| Churches: Disabled Access | 977 |
| Cost of Living: Support for Families | 978 |
| Places of Worship Renewal Fund | 978 |
| Support for Christians in Palestine | 981 |
| **CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT** | 961 |
| Access to Music and Dance Training | 962 |
| BBC Funding | 966 |
| Exchange of Cultural Artefacts: Greece | 961 |
| Support for Creative Industries | 965 |
| Ticket Tout Ban | 967 |
| **CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**—*continued* | |
| Topical Questions | 971 |
| Tourism and Leisure | 968 |
| UK Artists Touring in Europe | 970 |
| UNESCO World Heritage Sites | 964 |
| **ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE** | 975 |
| Polling Stations: Blind and Visually Impaired Voters | 975 |
| **HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION** | 976 |
| Cruelty-free Cleaning Products | 976 |
| Education and Engagement Outreach Team | 979 |


# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

**Thursday 18 June 2026**


| | Col. No. |
|---|---|
| **BUSINESS AND TRADE** | 43WS |
| British Steel | 43WS |
| **EDUCATION** | 43WS |
| Turing Scheme | 43WS |
| **ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO** | 44WS |
| Non-domestic Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards | 44WS |
| **SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY** | 45WS |
| Online Safety Act 2023: Codes of Practice | 45WS |
| **TRANSPORT** | 46WS |
| Heathrow Expansion National Policy Statement | 46WS |


# PETITIONS

**Thursday 18 June 2026**


| | Col. No. |
|---|---|
| **EDUCATION** | 3P |
| School bus service from Kings Worthy to Henry Beaufort School | 3P |
| **TRANSPORT** | 4P |
| Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway | 4P |


# WRITTEN CORRECTION

**Thursday 18 June 2026**


| | Col. No. |
|---|---|
| **CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT** | 5WC |
| Royal Albert Hall Bill [*Lords*] | 5WC |

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than**
**Thursday 25 June 2026**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

**Volume 787**
**No. 18**

**Thursday**
**18 June 2026**

# CONTENTS

**Thursday 18 June 2026**

**Oral Answers to Questions [see index inside back page] [Col. 961]**
*Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport*
*Church Commissioners*
*House of Commons Commission*
*Speaker's Electoral Commission Committee*

**Grooming Gangs: Independent Inquiry [Col. 983]**
*Answer to urgent question—(Sarah Jones)*

**Business of the House [Col. 991]**
*Statement—(Leader of the House)*

**Regional Innovation and Growth [Col. 1011]**
*Select Committee Statement—(Dame Chi Onwurah)*

**Courts and Tribunals Bill [Col. 1017]**
*Select Committee Statement—(Andy Slaughter)*

**Backbench Business**
**Infected Blood Compensation Scheme [Col. 1022]**
*Motion—(Clive Efford)—agreed to*

**Petition [Col. 1062]**

**River Otter: Sewage Pollution [Col. 1064]**
*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Westminster Hall**
**Human Rights: Supply Chains [Col. 445]**
**Stoma: Public Toilet Provision [Col. 467]**
*General debates*

**Written Statements [Col. 43WS]**

**Petitions [Col. 3P]**
*Observations*

**Written correction [Col. 5WC]**
*Ministerial correction*