

Thursday
9 July 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 9 July 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Thursday 9 July 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in the present Parliament for the County constituency of Clacton, in the room of Nigel Paul Farage, who since his election to the said County constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(*Lee Anderson.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Farm Business Sustainability

1. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the long-term financial sustainability of farm businesses. [900890]

16. **Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the long-term financial sustainability of farm businesses. [900907]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), the new farming and food Minister, and I published our new farming road map, which is the first ever long-term strategy for farming. It sets out a vision for a more productive, profitable, sustainable and resilient sector. The primary purpose of farming, as set out in the road map, is food production, which goes hand in hand with improving the environment. We are driving towards a lower-input, more nature-friendly farming system.

Dave Robertson: Farmers across Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages know that one of the most important things for them to make their businesses work is access to fertiliser at a price that allows them to be profitable. What can the Government do to ensure that fertiliser prices do not spike, as we have seen in the last couple of years, and remain stable in the long term?

Emma Reynolds: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. We are engaging with the National Farmers' Union on this; we know it is a great concern for farmers. We have asked the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board to increase fertiliser price reporting, so it is now doing that weekly rather than monthly. We have already consulted on suspending tariffs for certain fertilisers, and we have rolled out an online tool to help farmers use fertilisers more efficiently.

Anna Gelderd: Food producers in South East Cornwall, including our farmers and fishermen, are at the heart of our community, economy and food security, so I really welcome the work the Government have done to develop the new farming road map in partnership with farmers and the recognition that profitable farm businesses are essential to food security. As I will be meeting farmers at the Liskeard show later this week, will the Secretary of State set out immediate opportunities in the road map and explain how the Farming and Food Partnership Board will ensure that farmers like mine continue to shape its implementation, giving them clarity and confidence to invest in the long-term profitability and resilience of their business?

Emma Reynolds: I pay tribute to the work my hon. Friend does representing her local farmers, and I hope the Liskeard show goes well later this week. The Farming and Food Partnership Board, which has already been established, is working on two sector growth plans, starting with poultry and horticulture, to bring down barriers to growth. We are taking forward the road map's vision to ensure that farmers are more productive and profitable; that is how we will proceed.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): Attracting the next generation of farmers is key to the long-term sustainability of the sector. I recently visited Great Smeaton young farmers' club, and it was wonderful to see both their contribution to the local community and their commitment to farming. Groups like that are vital to engaging young people in farming. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to Great Smeaton YFC and the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs for their important contribution to our national life?

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more. I absolutely pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's local young farmers' club. As he knows, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs supports the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs, and we engaged with it on the drafting of the farming road map. We always have young farmers in our minds when we are designing policy, because we are committed to ensuring that the next generation can enter the sector. We are looking particularly in the road map at encouraging longer-term tenancies, which we know is an easier way to get into the sector. We have also asked the Law Commission to review legislation on farming tenancies. Like him, I am committed to ensuring that the next generation has a voice in our policies.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): The NFU is concerned that the £240 million allocated for new sustainable farming incentive agreements in 2026 does not match the scale of farmers' environmental ambitions and will not allow all farmers with expiring agreements a reasonable opportunity to access ongoing environmental land management schemes funding. How will the Government support farmers like mine in South Devon, who are keen to protect the environment while producing food but are unable to secure a new SFI agreement under this limited budget, to continue their valuable environmental work?

Emma Reynolds: I reassure the hon. Lady that those farmers whose agreements are coming to an end towards the end of this year or early next year—there are obviously

thousands—will be able to apply in the second window. We have made the technological advances necessary to ensure that that can happen. I know that issue has been raised with me in previous DEFRA oral questions, and we have taken it forward since then. We have a record farming budget for sustainable farming of £11.8 billion over the course of this Parliament. This is obviously not just about public funding; it is about how we work with the sector and how parts of the sector collaborate with each other. That is why we have put £30 million into a farmer collaboration fund and why we are also backing agritech.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Delinked payments dramatically reduced; SFI stopped and started and ultimately made competitive; targets to dramatically reduce livestock numbers recommended; the state given more power to buy farmland below market value; the fertiliser tax; the double cab pick-up tax; the introduction of family farm and family business tax; Natural England given more power; an EU realignment deal that is set to cost our farmers thousands and result in job losses; and the annual grant for young farmers removed for the first time—oh, but beavers have been released. Which one of those measures that the Secretary of State has introduced in the last two years does she think will support the long-term financial sustainability of our farming businesses?

Emma Reynolds: I would take our record over the hon. Gentleman's record any time. The Conservatives could not even be bothered to spend the farming budget when they were in power. They sold farmers down the river on various trade deals, but we have not; we have protected farmers in our trade deals. We have set out the first-ever long-term road map and vision for the farming sector, and we have worked closely with it. We commissioned Minette Batters, the former president of the NFU, to do an independent profitability review, and we are taking forward the vast majority of her recommendations. We are working in close partnership with the sector. That is all in stark contrast with what happened under the hon. Gentleman's Government.

Dartmoor Ponies

2. **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support native Dartmoor ponies. [900892]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): Dartmoor ponies are a vital part of our landscape and history. As the Environment Secretary, I have a duty to protect our native species, which obviously include Dartmoor ponies. I want to see the number of Dartmoor ponies maintained and the condition of Dartmoor improved.

Steve Race: I recognise the work that the Secretary of State and Ministers have done on this issue, and I thank them for their engagement. While the Conservatives rejected recommendation 27 of the Fursdon review, will she reassure me that this Government will find a solution that works for all the communities on Dartmoor and ensure a thriving population of Dartmoor ponies? Will she join me on Dartmoor in the coming weeks to see these beautiful native creatures and the organisations that care for them?

Emma Reynolds: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on this important issue. I know there is a lot of concern in his local area and beyond about Dartmoor ponies, but I reassure him that under this Government, there will be no planned reduction in the number of Dartmoor ponies. I am working on solutions to support this fantastic native species, and I will set out further details on that soon. I would love to visit and see the ponies for myself.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Natural England proposed that overall livestock grazing limits should be reduced to reduce overgrazing, and it was not specific to ponies—it was about overgrazing by sheep and cattle. Ponies can help to graze invasive grasses and promote biodiversity. The people who developed the Change.org petition were doing the right thing, but does the Secretary of State share my view that it was cynical of the Conservative party to develop a shadow petition to gather voter intention data?

Emma Reynolds: I agree. Given that the Conservatives created this mess by rejecting some of the Fursdon recommendations, it is a bit rich of them to have a go at the current Government, as we are trying to clear up their mess on this issue and many others. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am well aware of the different issues on Dartmoor. A third of the moor is a site of special scientific interest, and we must ensure that we put measures in place to better enable the moor to recover, particularly during the winter. We must ensure that the grazing is more widespread, rather than concentrated in the SSSI. I have recently met with the Dartmoor Land Use Management Group to discuss these issues, and, as I have said, I will continue to pursue a solution that protects Dartmoor ponies and restores the environmental condition of the SSSI.

River Pollution

4. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help tackle river pollution. [900894]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): This Government inherited record levels of river pollution. We have already passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, making pollution cover-ups a criminal offence; more than doubled the number of Environment Agency inspections to 10,000 a year; and, only yesterday, introduced automatic fines for polluting water companies. Our clean water Bill will stop water companies marking their own homework and deliver better outcomes for consumers and the environment.

Rachael Maskell: This weekend, I will be competing in York's dragon boat race on the River Ouse, but with 3,779 sewage dumps last year, the river is the second worst for pollution. The clean water Bill gives us the opportunity to take control of our water, ending the cycle of profiteering from failure, leaving our rivers full of sewage and chemicals and inaccessible to swimmers, rowers and all who enjoy them. Will the Minister urgently review her plans and take water back under public ownership, so that we can clean up this dirty business?

Emma Hardy: I wish my hon. Friend and her team the very best of luck in this weekend's boat race, and I share her outrage at the amount of pollution we are seeing in so many of our beautiful rivers. One of the things in our clean water Bill that is worth highlighting is the introduction of regional planning, to give local communities more say over the water system in their area.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): In 2025, sewage was dumped into the Ashridge stream, Emm brook, Barkham brook and the River Loddon in my constituency. Residents are thoroughly fed up with Thames Water's repeated pollution and lack of accountability. Will the Government introduce mutual ownership of water companies, professionally managed, to put customers and the environment first?

Emma Hardy: I also share the hon. Gentleman's outrage at the amount of pollution he is seeing in the environment, and recognise how much this impacts not only the local environment, but the people who live in his area. As he knows, the White Paper we published states that we will develop a clear transitional process for companies that wish to explore alternative forms of ownership, including not-for-profits and mutuals.

Teddington Direct River Abstraction Proposal

5. Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the Teddington direct river abstraction proposal on the environment. [900895]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Without action, we face a possible water supply deficit of 5 billion litres a day by 2055. This is why projects such as the Teddington direct river abstraction scheme are vital, to help secure London's water supply during droughts. Any discharges to the Thames from this scheme will be subject to strict water quality assessments.

Sarah Olney: Two months ago, Ham and Kingston riverside became the first site in London to gain bathing water status, but Thames Water's ill-conceived Teddington direct river abstraction proposal will see treated sewage discharged into the Thames above Teddington lock. Thames Water has submitted a report to the Environment Agency on the testing of a pilot plant, which shows that after just one month, the water quality would fail to maintain PFOS chemicals within regulatory limits. That bathing site is already a popular destination for local residents. It would be a travesty if Thames Water were allowed to dump treated sewage into the stream, so will the Minister meet me to discuss the environmental and social impact of the Teddington direct river abstraction proposal?

Emma Hardy: I recognise that Ham and Kingston riverside is one of the first designated bathing water spots in the whole of London, which is quite exciting for the city. When we designate bathing water sites, the water quality is monitored regularly throughout the season. That information is made publicly available, and of course, any allowance for any abstraction scheme or water recycling scheme will be subject to strict environmental tests.

Pig Farmers

6. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps she is taking to support pig farmers. [900896]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan): This Government are backing the vital British pig sector by delivering fairer supply chains and stronger protections for producers. The Fair Dealing Obligations (Pigs) Regulations 2025 are ending unfair contract practices, with all pre-existing contracts required to be compliant by 13 August. This will give farmers greater certainty, transparency and confidence to invest, grow their businesses, and strengthen the long-term resilience of the sector.

John Lamont: Will the Minister join me in praising all of our fantastic pig farmers—including Adam Marshall from Berwickshire—who do an incredible job in very difficult circumstances? The National Pig Association believes that independent pig producers are currently losing as much as £50 per pig, which is clearly not sustainable for any business. What consideration has the Minister made of the adequacy of the 2025 Regulations, especially regarding imbalances in power and price abuse?

Stephen Morgan: I pay tribute to all those who work in the pig sector across our country. I recognise the challenges that pig farmers are facing. This Government are taking action to strengthen protections for pig farmers, particularly where there are severe losses and disruption, as the sector has been facing in recent years. We will ensure fairer, more transparent contracts to build a resilient and profitable industry.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): Many independent pig producers, including smaller family farms in my South West Norfolk constituency, have been served notice on their contracts by processors. The National Pig Association anticipates that, by November, more than 10,000 pigs a week could be without an outlet to be sold. Will my hon. Friend therefore agree to meet representatives from the pig sector, including the National Pig Association and the UK farming unions that cover pigs, to see what steps can be taken to support the industry through this challenging period?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement on this matter. The pig sector is vital to British farming, and I know from my time with him at the Royal Norfolk show the other week that he is a real champion on these issues in his constituency. I can confirm that I have received correspondence from the National Pig Association inviting me to discuss industry challenges. I have accepted that invitation and will be meeting it shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): A crucial way to support pig farmers is ensuring healthy pigs, and that requires strong biosecurity and stopping illegal meat imports. When I asked DEFRA about those imports, it said that data are now not available, but alarmingly, Dover Port Health Authority reported seizing 14.2 tonnes

of illegal meat in just one week in March. DEFRA has admitted to me that in the first quarter of the year, 28% of vehicles flagged at Dover did not turn up for checks at the Sevington border control post. When we have foot and mouth in Europe just last year and African swine fever advancing up the continent, we run the risk of a catastrophic animal disease outbreak. For the sake of pig farmers and all livestock farmers, when will this Government wake up, tighten our biosecurity and strengthen border controls before it is too late?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the shadow Minister for his engagement on this issue. Baroness Hayman in the other place has visited the port to understand the issues that he describes. We take these issues extremely seriously. I will certainly take his views back to the Department, and I am happy to meet him to discuss these issues further.

Tuna Fishing Licences

7. **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the geographical distribution of tuna fishing licences. [900897]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan): The Government secured a major increase in the UK's annual bluefin tuna quota from 63 tonnes to around 230 tonnes, creating new opportunities for fishers across the United Kingdom. Licences were allocated through a fair, transparent process, with successful applicants selected by a ballot after meeting strict criteria. We continue to work with the devolved Governments and Crown dependencies to support the growth of this important fishery.

Torcuil Crichton: My constituent, Angus Campbell, held the only commercial licence for tuna in 2025. He has invested thousands in equipment and a route to market for the bluefin tuna now swimming off the Atlantic coast of the Hebrides. This year, he got no licence. In fact, the two applications that came from Scotland came from the Western Isles, but of the 29 licences allocated, none came to Scotland. Will the Minister review why there is no regional distribution of licences? Why was a fisher with an established track record of commercial landings turned down? Can the Minister look for a speedy resolution through a second round of licensing from the approximately 100 tonnes of quota allocated to tag and release, mortalities, bycatch and scientific research?

Stephen Morgan: As my hon. Friend rightly says, one Scottish fisher secured a commercial bluefin tuna licence in 2025, authorised through a fair and transparent application process. That fisher was unsuccessful in 2026. As set out in guidance, due to demand, authorisations are currently issued for one year only and are not automatically renewed. We are working with Scotland and other fisheries administrations to gather evidence on the current approach, and we will certainly consider my hon. Friend's ideas and views further.

Mr Speaker: I call John West—sorry, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I do not know how to respond to that, Mr Speaker, but I will take it that it was meant in a good way.

I echo what the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) said and I ask the Minister to focus on Northern Ireland. Why are Northern Ireland's sustainable rod and reel fishers being treated as second-class citizens? Will he commit to sitting down with the Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation to rewrite these unfair rules, so that our fishermen can access a fair geographical equal share of this quota? If there is something for Northern Ireland fishermen, I will be fighting—

Mr Speaker: I think you have had your quota. [Laughter.]

Stephen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman invited me to Northern Ireland in a Westminster Hall debate last week, rightly knowing that I am a fan of scampi. I look forward to finding time for that opportunity in due course. I thank him for his invitation to engage in these issues and I am happy to follow up with him.

Agri-tech Sector

8. **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support the agri-tech sector. [900898]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): Innovation and productivity go hand in hand, and the Government are backing British agri-tech with real investment. Innovation is central to our farming road map, and I recently announced that we are boosting the farming innovation programme to £123 million this year. We are also working across Government—for example, with the Department for Business and Trade—to open up new export opportunities and drive growth, productivity and jobs across the sector.

Josh Newbury: The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recently had the privilege of visiting New Zealand. We met an Innovate UK delegation promoting incredible British agri-tech innovations like cups that enable substrate-free hydroponics, vegetables that have 40 times the iron content, and AI analysis of drone, satellite and sensor data. Does the Secretary of State agree that agri-tech will be a key growth area for the UK? Will she work with counterparts in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and DBT to accelerate the success of British agri-tech start-ups?

Emma Reynolds: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Government absolutely recognise the potential of agri-tech as a high-growth sector. That is why it is included in the Government's industrial strategy. The UK is already a world leader in agri-tech, but we want to ensure that we maintain that leadership. Under this Government, we will continue to bolster our position and boost global exports, as he suggested. We are supporting British agri-tech innovations, such as automated fruit pickers, which are already being used around the world. We should be proud of our strong research base and our culture of farming innovation.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I encourage the Secretary of State to visit the Roslin Institute, just outside Edinburgh. It is most famous, of course, for the cloning of Dolly the sheep, and it is one of the world's leading agri-tech centres.

Although it is in Scotland, it is extremely important that it is regarded as a UK asset, and I hope that she will promote it in that way.

Emma Reynolds: I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman that the centre is a UK national asset. I or the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), would be pleased to visit to learn more about what it is doing.

River Wye: Pollution

9. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle pollution in the River Wye. [900899]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The level of pollution in the River Wye is unacceptable and we are working to accelerate progress to tackle it, including by funding a £1 million research programme to identify sources of pollution and develop practical solutions to improve water quality. We are also rolling out early pilots of regional planning, which involved a workshop with stakeholders in the Severn region on 15 May.

Catherine Fookes: I thank the Minister for all her hard work on the River Wye, but as she knows, time is running out for that iconic river. With temperatures rising to dangerous levels, our fish stocks will be further affected. The Wye needs a water protection zone across the English and Welsh parts of the river to mandate larger riverside buffer zones, prevent soil erosion and force authorities to crack down on polluters. The proposed clean water Bill could give the Minister an opportunity to bring in a water protection zone, so can she promise today that she will do that and make sure that this Government are the one to save the River Wye?

Emma Hardy: I recognise all the important work that my hon. Friend has put into this important campaign, and how much she cares about protecting this beautiful river. We will continue to work with the Environment Agency to explore all the available options, which include, of course, a water protection zone. Any designation must be evidence-led and targeted to ensure that the right measures are in place to tackle pollution effectively and to deliver lasting improvements to water quality.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): My constituency has been devastated by water pollution. We are now nearly seven years into a planning moratorium that has decimated the construction industry, because of pollution in the River Lugg, a tributary of the Wye. We are 10 years on from the first court case that said the Government should publish a plan to clean it up, but that plan, last year, set out that the current measures will not get close to fixing the problem. We urgently need a water protection zone. Will the Minister come to North Herefordshire to meet local campaigners, citizen scientists and farmers to understand why we need that water protection zone, and make a commitment to bring one in to finally resolve this problem?

Emma Hardy: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes), we are working with the EA to explore all the available options, which includes a water protection zone. It is an incredibly

important issue, and I know how much the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) cares about it—I recognise that the Wye is a beautiful river. We have the £1 million research project, which is working directly with farmers and land managers. The EA has already conducted 1,246 farm inspections and issued 1,183 improvement actions around the River Wye since 2022.

Waste Crime Action Plan

10. **Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): What progress she has made on implementing the waste crime action plan. [900900]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Since publishing the waste crime action plan in March, we have started clearing illegal waste at Kidlington, and we are investigating clearing up sites in Wigan, Sheffield and Hyndburn. We have arrested 18 waste criminals, launched the digital waste tracking scheme, so that we can see where the waste goes in near real time, and this week we approved legislation for tougher powers to tackle rogue criminals. We have 300,000 people registered to transport waste in this country, but not all of them are legit.

Lauren Edwards: I really welcome the three-pronged strategy in the Government's waste crime action plan—focused on prevention, enforcement and remediation—and I welcome the small number of recent and really significant illegal waste sites, which the Minister mentioned, that will be assessed for clearance. Will the Minister, however, outline how older but equally significant sites such as Brambletree wharf, which has blighted my local community for nearly a decade, can be tackled under the plan?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is right that, under the previous Government, there was a large amount of illegally dumped waste—about 30,000 tonnes between 2018 and 2022. Enforcement action is being taken by Medway council through a planning enforcement notice, using planning powers to remove the existing illegal businesses, and the EA will be serving an enforcement notice on the landowner to remove the waste. The difference between this Government and the last is that we are taking action. If people spot waste crime taking place, they should call Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Fly-tippers tend to vanish just as the mess gets traced back to them—much like Nigel Farage earlier this week. Closer to home, I led a community walkabout with the Friends of Outer Devonshire, alongside residents such as Emma Boyes and Kay Skinner, to look at fly-tipping hotspots in Eastbourne. Will the Minister commend them for their work, and outline what steps the Government will take to support them and their community to tackle fly-tipping once and for all?

Mary Creagh: The hon. Member is absolutely right that fly-tippers are despoiling our countryside, and I pay tribute to his local group for taking such great action to keep the beaches and countryside clean. We have introduced a penalty of up to nine points on fly-tippers' driving licences. Often these people are just doing a job for mates at the weekend, and if they could

lose their driving licence, it will certainly make them think twice about doing such jobs. However, fly-tippers are often part of a much wider serious and organised crime group. We should not think of them as little criminals, because they can often be part of quite a big criminal gang.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): My constituents who live close to the Flusco landfill site in Newbiggin are one of many communities right across the country bearing the brunt of this nationwide scandal. The owners of the site—a legitimate one on paper—have been judged to have flagrantly broken environmental regulations. Like many other sites, this one has been ineffectively regulated and poorly policed. Residents cannot leave out their washing or let their kids play outside. In this heat especially, the stench can be unbearable, and the leachate and gases utterly intolerable. Meanwhile, the country is being ripped off as the Government's landfill taxes are being flouted to the tune of at least £1 billion every year. Will the Government act urgently and powerfully to help my constituents and all those living near landfill sites, which in recent years have become toxic in every sense?

Mary Creagh: I was pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) to talk about the activities at these waste sites. Unpicking the work happening there is a long and complex legal process involving multi-agency and cross-agency working. We now have a properly funded waste crime enforcement unit. The funding for that unit was a mere £10 million in 2023-24, but it has had an extra £5 million this year to take it up to £15 million, and then we are doubling it to £30 million. That is the way we take these people down.

Topical Questions

T1. [900908] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): Since our last oral questions, we have recently published England's first long-term farming road map, as I mentioned earlier, and we have opened the first application window for our reformed sustainable farming incentive. I visited the Groundswell agricultural festival to see regenerative farming in action, and I will be at the Great Yorkshire show next week.

Our water delivery taskforce has recently unlocked the infrastructure needed to support nearly 20,000 new homes in East Anglia, and we are taking action to ensure that products on British supermarket shelves such as coffee and cocoa are not linked to illegal deforestation overseas. Like the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), I spoke at London Climate Action Week about our bold action to restore nature, and I welcomed the UN Secretary-General to Kew Gardens. Yesterday I announced the biggest ever investment in species recovery.

Finally, we are a nation of animal lovers, as you know very well, Mr Speaker. I have today published the Government's plans to reform the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 in order

to deliver better outcomes for this great profession—the Act has not been updated since 1966—and our much-loved pets.

Callum Anderson: Farmers in north Buckinghamshire have raised queries with me regarding the transition from environmental land management agreements that expired this year to the funding available through the much-welcomed sustainable farming incentive 2026. Will the Secretary of State set out how the Government are supporting farmers through the transition, so that there are no unintended funding gaps for those who want to deliver positive environmental outcomes?

Emma Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. We have worked in close partnership with farmers and stakeholders to shape the new SFI. I can reassure my hon. Friend, and Members across the House, that those farmers who have soon-to-expire ELM revenue agreements will be able to apply in the second window of SFI later this year, in September.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): In recent weeks, DEFRA's quangos have made headlines: the Environment Agency is failing to prosecute waste criminals, instead going after virtuous volunteers who are cleaning up the rivers for it; Natural England is demanding more madcap fish schemes at Hinkley Point C, on top of its recommended £700 million fish disco policy, all of which will be paid for by our constituents; and Natural England's threat to Dartmoor ponies was the quickest U-turn yet by this Government. Does the Secretary of State feel she has control over these quangos?

Emma Reynolds: That is some brass neck, given that the whole issue of the Dartmoor ponies was created under the right hon. Lady's Government. They rejected several of the Fursdon review recommendations and put the future of the Dartmoor ponies in doubt. We are having to clear up their mess, so I shall take no lectures from the right hon. Lady.

Victoria Atkins: Oh dear. This may be the last time the Secretary of State gets to give such an inadequate answer to what is a reasonable question about her grip on her Department. But let us look at Labour's wider chaos. After two years of record-breaking tax rises and the highest number of farm closures, the next version of a Labour Government are coming back for even more, with rumours of a brand-new tax on land value, which will target rural residents from their gardens to their farms. Has Labour learned nothing from its family farm tax fiasco, which every Labour Member voted for?

Emma Reynolds: The right hon. Lady lectures us about regulators. We have a tighter grip on our arms-length bodies than the Conservatives did when they were in Government. I issued strategic policy statements to all ALBs earlier this year, writing to the chairs of those organisations to tell them about the Government's direction of travel. Under her Government, the reason we saw record levels of pollution in our waterways was that they took their foot off the gas and took a blind eye to water companies polluting rivers. And they introduced a system of self-monitoring that was equivalent to Ofsted not sending anybody out to do any inspections of schools.

T2. [900909] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): This week it was revealed that Thames Water had slowed its reporting of pollution incidents by 70% since 2022, which is yet another example of institutional failure that has hurt residents across the region. Given that Thames Water's creditors are now saying that they will bid for the company if a special administration regime is set up, can the Secretary of State reassure me that consumers, who continue to pay the bills and suffer the consequences of serious pollution, will be the first priority of this Government?

Emma Reynolds: I can reassure my hon. Friend of that. He will have seen that I wrote to Ofwat setting out my early concerns that the creditors' current proposal does not do enough to protect customers and the environment. The protection of consumers and the environment is at the forefront of all my thinking. I reassure him that we will always act in the national interest. We stand ready for all eventualities, including applying for a special administration regime if that becomes necessary.

T6. [900913] **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): Last week, this House debated extended producer responsibility, and I was pleased to grill the Minister on the impact it is having on brewers, such as Asahi in Woking. Will the Minister explain why EPR costs so much more in this country than in Europe, and agree to publish the results of the Government's pilot projects in councils such as Fife?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Our waste collection systems are completely different from those in Germany and France, where they have a wide network of bring banks for glass. We have the privilege of having glass collected in our household waste collection schemes. I am conscious of the dual burden that is falling on pubs, and I have tasked my officials with working at pace on the issue to find a solution for the pubs that we are all enjoying in this hot weather, with the great football. I wish England the best for their match at the weekend.

T3. [900910] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I welcome the waste carrier, broker and dealer reforms, which will replace the outdated registration system with a more robust permit-based regime, introduce stronger background checks, and give regulators greater powers to tackle waste crime. Given that waste crime costs the economy £1 billion a year, will the Minister set out how the reforms will help to crack down on rogue operators, while ensuring that legitimate businesses can continue to operate and grow with confidence?

Mary Creagh: As we push the waste criminals out of the sector, there will be more business for legitimate operators. That also means that the carrier registration number has to be carried on the Facebook ads, leaflets and vans of waste transporters, so that householders have confidence that the people we are giving our waste to will dispose of it correctly. We are not going to have a system where dead dogs and cows can be registered. We are going to introduce criminal record and identity checks and ensure that everyone knows what they are doing when they are transporting hazardous waste.

T7. [900914] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The current heatwave shows no signs of abating, and during such times the demand for water increases. The water companies are already imposing restrictions on the supply of water, so what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the water supply and when will she consider nationwide restrictions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Last Thursday I met some of the water companies from the areas that will have the extreme heatwave, to be reassured that they will not run out of water during that period. Ofwat has also launched a public information campaign about the value of water. He will know from my previous answers that we have the water delivery taskforce, which is looking at water supply, house building ambition and growth to ensure that we have the water we need. It is one of the reasons we need to get on with building the nine reservoirs, as none have been built for the past 30 years.

T4. [900911] **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): The Secretary of State recently met my constituent Reuben Santer, whose case was featured in the "Dirty Business" documentary. Reuben campaigns to ensure that real-time sewage information is available to bathers at the beachside. Will the Minister work with local councils and water companies to explore the feasibility of such a scheme?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend raises a hugely important topic, and Reuben's story was extremely moving to hear at first hand. I extend my deepest sympathy to the families of all those who have been affected by sickness through using the water around England, and I share their anger, outrage and desire for change. We reformed the Bathing Water Regulations 2013 so that they are fit for purpose, and we are looking at water quality classification information. We also have the Environment Agency's Swimfo website. We will continue to look at how we can best keep bathers safe.

T8. [900915] **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The Minister has heard from both sides of the House this morning about the deepening crisis for independent pig producers and farmers. There are concerns that a quasi-cartel might be operating, to the detriment of small independent producers. Will the Minister consider using his powers to make a referral to the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator or the Competition and Markets Authority, so that those producers can be protected?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan): As I mentioned, I am due to meet the National Pig Association in due course. I take those issues seriously and I want to ensure that there is certainty and clarity in the sector. We recently published our farming road map, which brings that certainty and consistency, but I am happy to follow up on the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

T5. [900912] **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Under our current system, food imported from abroad, often from countries with lower standards, can be packaged in the UK but labelled as British. To stop "flagwashing",

and to back our British farmers, will the Minister back the Labour rural research group's calls to introduce a mandatory labelling system, based on the blueprint set out by Australia's country-of-origin labelling standard?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on those important matters. This is about fairness for consumers and farmers. We want people to know where their food comes from, trust what they are buying, and back British farmers who meet our high standards. I would happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss his helpful ideas.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The beautiful River Wey runs through my constituency, but storm overflows from the Farnham sewage treatment works are increasingly polluting the river, affecting my residents and businesses and those further afield, including the Peper Harow Park fly fishers in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt). What discussions is the Minister having with Thames Water about stopping the discharges from the Farnham sewage works?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Member is right to feel outraged at the amount of pollution and the situation with Thames Water. He will have heard the Secretary of State's comments on what we are doing on Thames Water and her early views on the original deal put forward by the creditors to clean this up. That is why we took action with the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 to bring in tougher regulation, and why just yesterday we announced automatic penalties for companies that continue to pollute.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): The flooding outside Tesco in Stafford is a great example of why holding local authorities to account on drainage really matters. I recently learned that the drains were last cleaned in 2020, during covid; without regular maintenance, they will continue to block. While I am glad that it looks like a fix is finally on its way, routine drain clearance should not require an MP's intervention. Will the Minister tell me and the House what she can do to ensure that council leadership meets its basic maintenance obligations, before the next rainfall shows that maintenance has not been done again?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there is no excuse for not maintaining flood defences. The Government need to hold the local authority to account for that. It has had an increased settlement and has the money with which to do the job. I hope that this lack of action by the local authority is noted by voters at the next election.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome the new Minister for farming to his post and welcome his willingness to meet the National Pig Association, and presumably the National Farmers Union Scotland pig sector, too. However, I suggest that the situation needs a bit more urgency than meeting in due course. There is a clear and present crisis for the sector, which is complex and requires action from producers,

processors, retailers and regulators. Will he convene a summit of all these different interested parties and come forward with a package for help? Without it, we are going to lose the smaller independent producers.

Stephen Morgan: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his question. I take these issues extremely seriously, and will bring forward the meeting so that I see the organisation as soon as possible.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): We are going through another heatwave, but we know that well tree-lined streets can reduce temperatures by 5°C to 8°C. The data shows that we are significantly behind Europe, with 18% coverage compared with 30%, and that, where there is coverage, it is mainly in more affluent areas rather than poorer, more deprived areas. I ask the Minister to look at a national strategy, working with the relevant environmental bodies and local councils, to ramp up and increase proofing our streets against extreme heat.

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is right about our tree cover, which is why I am delighted to tell him that tree planting is at its highest rate for 20 years. As we endure our second heatwave this summer, we know that we need to do more. That is why we are doubling the funding for tree planting through our trees outside woodland fund, which is £2.5 million this year, up from £1 million last year.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's mentioning an update to the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966; after 60 years, it is much needed to make the Act fit for purpose to regulate new business structures and paraprofessionals such as physios, and to protect the title of veterinary nurse. Could we have an assurance that, with the change of Administration, the update will remain a priority and will not be kicked into the long grass? It is much needed right now.

Emma Reynolds: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that it is a priority for the Government. I visited the University of Surrey's veterinary medicine school yesterday, and we have been engaging with the sector, which wants to modernise the legislation. It is not fit for purpose—there are plenty of things available now that were not around in 1966, such as scans for animals. We are absolutely committed as a Government to modernising the legislation to the benefit of the profession—ensuring that we continue to drive up standards, celebrate good practice and root out bad practice—and to the benefit of pet owners, too.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): From sea to plate, fisheries need the same long-term certainty as farmers in order to strengthen our food security, encourage healthy, high-protein diets and help to build jobs and skills pipelines that coastal communities need. Will the Minister consider committing to adopting the all-party parliamentary group on fisheries' national action plan?

Stephen Morgan: I welcome the leadership that my hon. Friend is demonstrating through the APPG on fisheries for industry and coastal communities like ours. The Government are focused on delivering practical support for the sector through measures such as the

sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, fisheries management plans and the fishing coastal growth fund. I welcomed the opportunity recently to catch up with my hon. Friend on her important work, and I look forward to engaging with the APPG on its priorities.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): My constituent Guy Smith runs Sky Birds Sales, which successfully imports budgies. The Animal and Plant Health Agency has drastically changed its approach to batch testing, which is devastating his business. Will one of the Ministers meet me and my constituent to discuss this issue?

Stephen Morgan: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Member.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The biggest cause of river pollution is agricultural run-off. Will the Secretary of State ensure that, through the sustainable farming measures, she is prioritising farms that are taking action on agricultural run-off? Will she confirm that in the clean water Bill the issue of agricultural run-off will be considered alongside taking action on failing water companies?

Emma Reynolds: I can reassure my hon. Friend that agricultural pollution is top of mind for me as Secretary of State and for the Water Minister, and the issue will form part of the clean water Bill. We need to crack down on water pollution from agriculture in partnership with farmers, making sure that they have the tools that they need to do the right thing, because agricultural pollution accounts for around 42% of overall river pollution.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): At the Environmental Audit Committee yesterday, the Minister for Nature did not have a clear answer for why the national security assessment on ecosystem collapse has not been released in its full form to MPs. I got the impression that it was not her decision to withhold the full unredacted report from MPs. Whose decision was it?

Mary Creagh: We have been around the houses on this. The document that has been released talks about coral collapse by 2030 and mangrove collapse by 2050. I would say that there is enough to worry about in the document that has been released without worrying about what versions 1, 2 and 3 said.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

Jury Trials

1. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What advice she has given the Government on the potential impact of removing jury trials in certain circumstances on the rule of law. [900932]

3. Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): What advice she has given the Government on the potential impact of removing jury trials in certain circumstances on the rule of law. [900934]

7. Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): What advice she has given the Government on the potential impact of removing jury trials in certain circumstances on the rule of law. [900940]

The Solicitor General (Ellie Reeves): Jury trials remain a cornerstone of our justice system, and will always be in place for the most serious crimes. The Government must guarantee everyone a fair trial. Timeliness is essential for fairness, and the fairness of the system is being undermined by the record backlogs in the Crown court, which we inherited from the previous Conservative Government.

Dr Johnson: In restricting access to jury trials, the Government have leant quite heavily on the Leveson report, but the Government go much further than the report recommends. Will the Solicitor General explain why?

The Solicitor General: Leveson in his report stated that investment alone was not enough and that the system needs reforming as well. We have made a record £2.7 billion investment in the courts, which provides for unlimited sitting days, an increase in defence fees, and includes half a billion pounds for victims services. That is fixing the mess that we inherited.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Where is the evidence that jury trials are causing the delays? In the south-east and other parts of the country, the backlog is already falling. The Government should be commended for that, but what are the other causes of delays, and are they not much more significant than any delay caused by the fact that they are jury trials?

The Solicitor General: We have put record investment into the courts, with measures such as unlimited sitting days. The Crown Prosecution Service has increased the number of Crown advocates on the Crown advocate panel and increased support offered to victims. Leveson was clear that investment alone would not fix the problems that we inherited and the 80,000 case backlog. The proposal suggests that it will speed up cases by 20%, and that has been backed by the Institute for Government.

Douglas Lumsden: Juries are the bedrock of our legal system, and public involvement in the justice system is central to public trust and consent. It cannot, and it should not, be eroded. This is a prime example of this failing Government implementing reforms for no good reason. Why will the Solicitor General not call this out as the attack on the rule of law that it clearly is?

The Solicitor General: I am astonished that the hon. Gentleman says that the measures we are introducing are for no good reason. We inherited a courts system in crisis, with a backlog of 80,000 cases and victims waiting years for their cases to get to court. Doing nothing was not an option, which is why we have invested record amounts in our courts and why Justice Ministers are looking at reforming the system.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Sir Brian Leveson made 180 recommendations, very few of which concerned juries. His review covered the whole criminal justice system, including the CPS. The Government have never responded to Sir Brian's review, and they have never said how each of those recommendations will be treated and how they will contribute to reducing the backlog. Are they still planning to do that, and if so, when?

The Solicitor General: We have considered all of Sir Brian's recommendations. I have met him to discuss those relating to the work of the CPS, and I continue to meet the CPS regularly to discuss what more it can do to support the criminal justice system. For example, just this week I announced the early victims' right to review, which will be rolled out nationwide. We are also extending more support to victims of domestic abuse, offering them a pre-trial meeting with the prosecution. It is important that we do everything we can, not only to speed up cases but to make sure that victims have confidence in the justice system.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The Solicitor General has just mentioned the early victims' right to review, or the VRR. As a west midlands MP, I am proud that we were the first area in the country to trial the scheme for victims of rape and serious sexual offences. Will the Solicitor General confirm that jury trials will still be available for such cases, and will she please tell Members what assessment she has made of the impact of the VRR scheme?

The Solicitor General: Jury trials will always remain in place for the most serious cases. My hon. Friend raises a point about the early victims' right to review scheme, which will be rolled out nationwide on Monday. He is right that the west midlands led the way with the first pilot of the scheme. Under the scheme, victims of rape and serious sexual offences will have the opportunity for their case to be reviewed by a second independent prosecutor before any decision is taken to stop the case before trial. That gives victims a second chance of justice and a greater say in their case. I am pleased that the west midlands led the way on that.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Although it is a civil matter, where a jury trial cannot apply, yesterday we found out that Virgin Media has been fined a record £28 million for ripping off its customers, yet the chief executive appears to be getting off scot-free. I think that the shareholders should be considering his future and the possibility of bonuses being returned. Does the Solicitor General agree that constituents will be asking who is accountable for such predatory corporate behaviour?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituents, and for all those affected by this issue. I share his concerns about accountability. Although the matter does not sit with the Attorney General's office, I will ensure that his question is passed on to the relevant Minister and he receives a response.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): At Justice questions last Tuesday, the Minister for Courts and Legal Services restated her total support for the Government's attack on jury trials. She described it as "pragmatic structural reform", and suggested that those who oppose it are burying

"their heads in the sand"—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 743.]

She also said that it is a point of principle to limit trial by jury, and that she would pursue the policy regardless of the crisis in the courts. Whatever the practical concerns, are the proposed changes to jury trials also a point of principle for the Solicitor General—yes or no?

The Solicitor General: As I have set out at this Dispatch Box over recent months, Sir Brian Leveson said in his report that investment alone was not enough, and that reform was also necessary to bring down the backlog of 80,000 cases that we inherited from the previous Conservative Government. Inaction just was not an option. The Ministry of Justice has had to take difficult choices. I remind the hon. Lady that, unlike the previous Conservative Government, we have invested in our courts, introduced unlimited sitting days and invested in victim services. We are doing everything we can to get the backlog down, so that victims can have their cases heard without having to wait years and years for justice.

Helen Grant: The right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), likely the next Prime Minister, has said that jury trials are the

"lynchpin of a fair society"

and that the plans to curb them should be paused. When he takes over, can we look forward to the Solicitor General's supporting the scrapping or watering down of the very same changes that she has robustly supported? Does she think that any jury would believe a defendant whose story changed quite as often as this Government's?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady will know that I am not the spokesperson for my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield, but I am sure that, like all of us in the House, he is concerned about the unprecedented court backlogs that this Government inherited, and that he will engage with Ministry of Justice Ministers as the Courts and Tribunals Bill progresses through Parliament. Victims are waiting years for a date in court. That is why the Government have invested record amounts in the court system and will continue working to bring down the backlog.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I visited Croydon Crown court a few weeks ago with the Bar Council and listened to some of its members. It was clearer than ever that the demands of jury trials are not what is leaving victims waiting years for justice. The real question is how we get the most urgent cases listed, prioritised and heard fast to deliver timely justice for our constituents.

Will the Minister listen to calls from the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and the right hon. Member for Makerfield—I do not know what Count Binface thinks about this, but I am pretty sure he will be on the right side of the argument—to instead consider reforms

that would make an immediate difference to Crown court backlogs, such as having specialist sexual offences and domestic abuse courts, as the Bar Council has recommended? Those would ensure that victims get justice sooner, without curtailing the fundamental right to trial by jury.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member will know that a national listing framework is being introduced to tackle some of the issues that he describes. He will also know that it was a manifesto commitment to introduce specialist rape courts. The Ministry of Justice is determined to do that, so that victims of rape and serious sexual violence are not waiting years for their cases to get to court.

Violence against Women and Girls: Prosecution Rates

2. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for crimes involving violence against women and girls. [900933]

4. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases involving violence against women and girls. [900935]

6. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for crimes involving violence against women and girls. [900938]

8. **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates in cases of violence against women and children. [900941]

The Solicitor General: This week, I announced the national roll-out of the early victims' right to review scheme. From Monday, if the Crown Prosecution Service is considering dropping a case, rape and serious sexual assault survivors across England and Wales will have the right for that view to be reviewed by a second independent prosecutor before a final decision is taken. I have sat with advocates and survivors who fight every day, and are determined for the system to change. This week, we have changed it.

Peter Swallow: My right hon. and learned Friend is right that the system needs to change. I have been contacted by a constituent who has waited four years for her day in court, following her ex-partner being charged with coercive and controlling behaviour. She has seen her trial date repeatedly pushed back, often within two weeks of when it was due to start. My right hon. and learned Friend will know that this is a well-known tactic that abusers use to continue the harassment of their victims, to delay justice, and, ultimately, to frustrate their victims and urge them to drop out of the trial altogether. What work are the Government doing to stop this tactic, and ensure that victims like my constituent see the justice that they deserve?

The Solicitor General: I commend the bravery and courage of my hon. Friend's constituent in coming forward, and I am very sorry to hear about the additional trauma that they have faced waiting for justice to be served. As well as tackling the backlog to reduce delays, this Government are committed to supporting victims.

In April, I announced an additional £5 million of Treasury funding to offer domestic abuse victims in Crown court cases a pre-trial meeting with the prosecution team. These crucial meetings will support victims in the lead-up to their trial. A similar service is already offered to victims of rape and serious sexual assault, and I am pleased that we are now able to pilot that for victims of domestic abuse in three CPS areas.

Catherine Fookes: I spoke recently, at a surgery, to one of my Monmouthshire constituents who had served on a jury in a case in which the victim had been subject to domestic violence. I was horrified to hear that there were only two women on a jury of 12, and that my constituent had heard other jurors victim blaming and making judgmental comments about the victim's appearance. They were concerned that prejudices may have impacted the outcome of the trial. Of course, I understand that jurors are picked at random, but in cases of violence against women, what more can we do to change the system, so that survivors get the justice they deserve and are treated fairly?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and for everything that she has done on this important issue. The Government's landmark strategy to halve violence against women and girls starts with prevention, by focusing on the root causes and designing interventions to tackle outdated societal attitudes. We are investing a record £20 million in education to address harmful attitudes and behaviours head-on, so that young people are taught to identify positive role models, and to challenge unhealthy myths about women and relationships. In trials by jury, the judge gives directions that each juror must evaluate the evidence before them dispassionately, putting aside any bias towards the victim.

Liz Twist: It is absolutely vital that victims are at the heart of our justice system. My Blaydon and Consett constituents know that for too long, the system has not been working for victims of rape and serious sexual offences. What impact does the Solicitor General believe that the early victims' right to review will have for victims?

The Solicitor General: I start by paying tribute to the tireless campaigning of Jade Blue. Jade was a victim of rape, but the CPS wrongly dropped her case just 13 days before trial. Ever since, she has campaigned for change. The early victims' right to review gives rape victims the chance for their case to be reviewed before the CPS makes a final decision. If that had been in place for Jade Blue, her case would have continued, and in the pilot, cases that would previously have been stopped have carried on. I am determined that we will put victims at the heart of our justice system. Because of that, we are rolling out this scheme nationwide.

Andrew George: The fact that so many colleagues have raised these questions again today is a clear indication of how serious the issue of low and slow prosecution rates is. If the primary purpose of custodial sentences is public protection, does the Minister understand why victims in my constituency clearly feel discouraged, having witnessed violent offenders being given very short custodial sentences, or being granted early parole in spite of the danger that they represent to society?

The Solicitor General: Tackling violence against women and girls is my No. 1 priority as Solicitor General. I oversee the unduly lenient sentence scheme, and where a sentence is clearly unduly lenient, I can refer the case to the Court of Appeal for review. Members of the public, and victims and their family members, can all refer cases to the scheme. It is an important way of ensuring transparency in our system, and that there is an ability to challenge, where things go wrong.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I work with a wonderful charity in Bath called Voices, which supports women through their trauma, and helps them to cope with a complex and often unsympathetic court system. What are the Government doing to make it easier for survivors of abuse to cope with a system that often seems to add insult to injury?

The Solicitor General: I commend Voices in Bath and its important support for women. The CPS has introduced an enhanced service for victims of rape and serious sexual abuse. Victims now have a dedicated victim liaison officer, who they can contact throughout their case, and they are offered a pre-trial meeting with the prosecution. Following the success of that scheme, it is being trialled for victims of domestic abuse, and I have secured £5 million of funding to pilot a scheme in which victims of domestic abuse whose cases are in the Crown court are also offered that pre-trial meeting. We are leaving no stone unturned when it comes to supporting victims.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Too many abusers escape justice in court, leaving victims, including my constituents, without proper justice. In May, I called for the mandatory involvement of independent domestic violence advisers in the family court process. In response, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), said:

“It cannot be warm words; there needs to be action.”—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 37WH.]

What steps have the Government taken to make independent domestic advisers mandatory in family courts, to help deliver justice?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for championing the role of independent domestic abuse advisers. They do incredibly important work. I will ensure that his question and comments about the specifics of the family courts are passed to a Minister in the Ministry of Justice, so that he receives a full response.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am relieved that, ahead of the summer recess, the Government have not brought back to the House their controversial proposals to curtail jury trials, which I opposed on Second Reading of the Courts and Tribunals Bill. Also included in that Bill were crucial measures to repeal the presumption of child contact in family court cases, after years of campaigning by Women’s Aid, Claire Throssell and others. Some reports suggest that the jury trial proposals have now been shelved, but will the Solicitor General confirm that the Government will still deliver the commitment to abolish the presumption of contact, perhaps through alternative legal means?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important and powerful point, and I commend her on all her work to tackle violence against women and girls, and on the courage that she has shown. The presumption of contact changes are incredibly important, and will progress in the usual way, as the Bill goes through Parliament.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is well recognised that people who inflict deliberate pain, injury or violence on animals are more likely to be involved in domestic abuse, yet if someone is prosecuted for deliberately injuring an animal, they are prosecuted under animal welfare laws, meaning that their conviction is unlikely to show up under the domestic abuse disclosure scheme. Will the Minister look at how we can change the recording of such offences, so that people who deliberately harm animals are likely to be reported as being at risk of committing domestic abuse against people?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point: some research has shown a correlation between someone abusing their pet and domestic abuse. That is touched on in the cross-Government VAWG strategy. It is important that vets are aware of that research and that link, and can detect those issues and signpost and escalate when necessary.

Mr Speaker: That completes questions. [*Interruption.*] Hon. Members might be disappointed, but it is not my fault—it was the length of the questions. We allowed almost 30 minutes instead of the allocated 20 minutes, so I ask Members please to look to colleagues who asked the longest questions.

Iran Conflict: Ceasefire

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary to ask the urgent question.

10.45 am

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office if she will make a statement on Iran's violation of the ceasefire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): We strongly condemn the outrageous Iranian attacks on the territory or vessels of our Gulf partners Bahrain, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. This is a serious escalation. Strikes into countries in the region and their waters are a clear violation of international law and must stop. I have been in touch with my counterparts from all the mentioned countries to express our solidarity and condemn these attacks.

Iran's attacks on civilian vessels were in Omani waters. The UK stands with Oman, with its sovereignty over its own territorial waters, and for the principle and the law of freedom of navigation both in the strait and across the world. We stand with our partners in calling for de-escalation and a return to diplomacy. We want a durable, negotiated peace and the strait of Hormuz to fully reopen.

The dangerous re-escalation over the past few days and continued attacks hurt everybody. The greatest impact is, of course, felt by the poorest and the most vulnerable. Our priority now is ensuring unimpeded transit passage through the strait without the threat of violence, tolls, fees or conditions. The ceasefire must deliver predictable access rather than ad hoc, case-by-case transits. We will continue to stand up for international law as reflected in the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, freedom of navigation, global navigational rights, seafarer safety and the consistent application of existing rules.

Priti Patel: The terrorist regime in Tehran has once again violated the ceasefire, illegally attacking commercial shipping in the strait of Hormuz and striking our allies in the region, including Bahrain and Kuwait. These new assaults in the strait on at least three tankers were the most in a single day since April, according to the UN International Maritime Organisation. Earlier this week, the Iranians said they targeted Salman port in Bahrain, where Britain and the US operate naval bases.

What were the Government doing when British assets were in danger and our friends and security allies were being attacked by Iran? What exactly are the Government doing to help protect the thousands of British nationals in the region who once again find themselves under rocket fire from Iran? Our security allies once looked to the UK to be a reliable and dependable partner, but their confidence is increasingly shaken. How will the Government put that right? This is a time for action, not words.

I have asked again and again what are the British Government doing, or what have they done to date, through the comprehensive security integration and

prosperity agreement to support Bahrain? The NATO Secretary-General said that the strikes by the US were "absolutely necessary"—do the Government agree?

We have had little of substance from the Government in recent days, other than the Foreign Secretary's telly remarks when she said yesterday that she was "very concerned" by the Iranian strikes. The US Administration have announced that they are reimposing oil sanctions on Iran—of course, oil funds its terrorism. When will the Government stop the UK's financial system being used to launder Iranian terrorist funds? What is the Government's assessment about whether the ceasefire framework and the 60-day period in the agreement remain?

Let us be honest: the fact that Iran continues to breach the ceasefire and threatens our interests on a daily basis demonstrates that the Government have failed to have a clear plan to get defence spending to 3% of GDP by the end of the decade, leaving our country exposed and our security at risk. While Ministers are putting their job security ahead of the defence and the interests of this country, this discredited Labour Government have failed to offer solutions to the most serious and significant conflict that the world has seen in decades or to be part of any negotiations. Britain has a huge stake in the future of the middle east, but under Labour our interests have been neglected and our standing in the world has fallen.

Mr Falconer: I do not quite know what to say to that. I am sure that the shadow Foreign Secretary will know—she can look me in the eye—that it is unlikely to be the debates around the defence investment plan that led to strikes in Iran and the Gulf over the past few days. I am here to talk about serious questions of war and peace, and I hope we can avoid party politics in doing so.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I associate myself with the Minister's condemnation of Iran's attacks on its neighbours? Does he agree that at least part of the problem in the fragility of the deal is its very ambiguity? It is a deal that was negotiated in haste, at a distance and through third parties, and it inevitably does not reflect agreement, but rather fudges some of the deep differences between the parties. Does he agree that we need a sustainable deal that is thoroughly negotiated, has more detail and includes recognition that, inevitably, concessions are needed on both sides?

Mr Falconer: As a former negotiator, I am reluctant to criticise fudges and creative language as negotiators must often reach for them. However, there are many areas that cannot be fudged and where there is no ambiguity, for example the location of Oman's territorial waters and the rights that flow from that. The strikes conducted by Iran this week were not only against land targets, but against commercial shipping. There was no ambiguity whatsoever about the location of those vessels: Oman's waters and its rights under UNCLOS. These are not questions that were at the negotiating table in relation to the memorandum of understanding. We will continue to stand for them, here and in every place.

Mr Speaker: It would be helpful if the Minister turned to me now and again during his answers. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Iran is continuing to hold the global economy to ransom through its reckless strikes in the strait of Hormuz—we all agree on that. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's continuing tit-for-tat retaliations risk dragging the whole region back into a full-blown conflict. This would threaten the lives of citizens across the middle east, while heaping even more economic harm on millions of British people already struggling with the spiralling cost of living. Donald Trump has claimed that the war has been a huge success, but in reality it has been a costly humiliation for the President. Will the Minister confirm what steps the Department is taking to get both sides back to the negotiating table? Are we working with our reliable allies to secure a diplomatic resolution?

Will the Minister also update the House on the status and health of Craig and Lindsay Foreman, who are still imprisoned in Iran? Will the Minister recognise their detention as arbitrary and will he refer the case to the International Court of Justice? Will the Minister confirm that after the National Security (State Threats) Bill was passed yesterday, the Government will move immediately to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the exporter of Iranian terror?

Mr Falconer: I will not get ahead of the process laid out in the legislation that was passed last night, but it is clearly an important step forward in providing the British Government and Britain as a whole with another weapon in our armoury to tackle hostile state threats.

I have not had the opportunity to update the House since I summoned the Iranian chargé d'affaires on Monday, so I am pleased to do so. We will have all seen the judgment handed down in the case on Friday related to Iranian threats in this country against journalists. I reiterated in the strongest possible terms to the Iranian representatives the strength of feeling among Members of the House and people across the country, and the fact that we are taking concrete steps, including the ones the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in order to ensure that no agent of the Iranian regime can commit violence in this country.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am very much focused on the case of the Foremans in Iran, but for reasons of sensitivity I do not wish to be drawn further into the case at this moment.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): We are still waiting to learn the full extent of British military involvement in this conflict. The Minister must confirm whether the UK's authorisation for the US to use British airbases continued as the ceasefire has collapsed. With 170 US airstrikes on Iran over the past two days, is the UK undertaking case-by-case authorisation for each individual strike?

Secondly, I have asked numerous times about the 2020 UK-Israel military co-operation agreement, and I have not received a straight answer. With credible evidence of crimes against humanity in Gaza, the Minister has not yet replied to my letter from over a month ago asking whether an international law review of that agreement has been conducted. Can the Minister outline when I can expect a response?

Mr Falconer: I am sorry I have not replied to the correspondence yet; I will do so as quickly as I can. In relation to the question about military support, I want to be clear: the UK stands with our Gulf allies in a defensive capacity. As the shadow Foreign Secretary alluded to, we do provide capability to our friends and partners in the Gulf to protect themselves against these attacks. We do also continue to provide permissions to the United States to use our airbases, where they are taking defensive action on behalf of our partners and allies. Those arrangements have been discussed by the relevant Ministers from the Ministry of Defence on a number of occasions, and they remain in place.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I ask this question in all sincerity. Throughout this conflict, the Government have pleaded for de-escalation, but if Iran is gratuitously escalating, should we not give unambiguous support to the Americans for retaliating? Who else is going to retaliate against gratuitous escalation by Iran if it is not the Americans? Rather than hedging our bets, can we not give more unambiguous support—if not military support, then political support—for the United States' efforts to resolve this conflict? It has already given so much ground in the negotiations. We cannot complain that it has not tried to be as reasonable as it possibly can.

Mr Falconer: I have sought in all my remarks to remain grounded in the relevant principles of international law. It is absolutely clear that the strikes Iran has conducted this week in Omani waters or on the territory of our friends and partners are a breach of international law. That then provides, under the relevant framework, options for response. We are not party to that response, but we are party to seeking to shoot down these attacks when they threaten our friends and partners. I do not want to enter into an emotional discussion of these questions. We are absolutely clear that what is happening in the strait of Hormuz and the wider region is a threat to international law, which this Chamber and this country hold dear, and it must be upheld.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that among the geopolitical military strategy and the diplomatic negotiations surrounding the conflict, we must not lose sight of the millions of innocent civilians across the region who are trapped in the middle of violence, displaced from their homes, hungry and without access to healthcare, while grieving loved ones and living without safety and security? Will he set out what steps the Government are taking to press all parties to uphold international humanitarian law, to protect civilians from acute hunger and allow them access to basic healthcare?

Mr Falconer: As I alluded to earlier, the impact on the cost of living in this country from the events in the strait of Hormuz is obvious and pronounced, but it is even more acute across the region—for example, in Yemen, where people already face severe and acute malnutrition. The economic pressure caused by these continued closures will plunge some of the most vulnerable people in the world even deeper into hunger and poverty, and we are raising that point in all our engagements.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The flagrant breaches of the ceasefire that have taken place clearly demonstrate that Iran has no interest in anything other

than dominating the region. The Minister may call in the *chargé d'affaires*, and he may call for action, but we want to see some action from the UK Government. Will he undertake to expel those people who are involved in action in the UK that threatens Iranian citizens living in the UK who are not part of this regime? Will he take action to ensure that the so-called foreign diplomats in the Iranian embassy are kicked out, to demonstrate that we are not going to tolerate this?

Mr Falconer: It is important that we maintain relations with the regime in Tehran. It is important, for many of the reasons that have been alluded to this morning, that we continue to make our point of view understood forcefully and directly to Iranian representatives.

The hon. Gentleman asks about concrete steps. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), alluded to one that was voted through just last night—one that was not put in place over the period of the previous Government. We are taking the steps required to ensure that Britain has the armoury necessary to take action against state threats, including those that emanate from Iran, as we heard from the judge in the case on Friday.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) has alluded to Craig and Lindsay Foreman, who are still imprisoned in Tehran. Craig Foreman is on day 61 of his hunger strike, and Lindsay Foreman is on day 50 of her hunger strike. They clearly need to be released immediately and returned to the UK. I understand that the Minister said he did not want to be drawn on this matter, but will he tell me why the Government will not publicly and officially declare the imprisonment to be arbitrary? Why will they not provide Craig and Lindsay Foreman with diplomatic protection, work closely with allies to get them released and bring their case before the International Court of Justice?

Mr Falconer: The reason I am not often keen to be drawn in this Chamber on specific cases is that I have to make a judgment, as the whole Government do, about what we can do in the best interests of British nationals detained overseas. The hon. Lady references arbitrary detention—a concept that does not exist in UK law. She also mentions the ICJ—I think she is referring to a previous case, which was withdrawn—and the view held by some that that would be a helpful thing to do in other cases.

Unfortunately, the responsibilities that fall to me mean that I need to be careful publicly what I say about particular cases, particularly when they are about two named individuals who are under the jurisdiction of the Iranians. All the responsibilities for the welfare of Craig and Lindsay Foreman fall, for now, on the authorities in Tehran. Until they are released, which they should be immediately, Iran must take full care of our nationals under its control.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I join the Minister in condemning Iran's attacks in the region, but at some point very soon the UK will need to review its own defensive posture vis-à-vis UK armed forces responses in the region. Iran's nuclear programme is diminished, not destroyed. Its ballistic missile programme is diminished, not destroyed. The Iranian regime is diminished, not destroyed. Meanwhile, the Iranian people continue to

suffer—many of them have been executed in the last few days—and so do our friends and allies in the region, as we have seen over the last few hours. My constituents in Shropshire also continue to suffer, because of higher fuel prices.

The United States has been around for 250 years; Iran—Persia—has been around for 2,500 years. Given that President Trump is supposed to be the great dealmaker, does the Minister agree that the Iranians are perhaps a little better at doing deals—or at not doing deals—than President Trump first thought when he set out on this adventure? Does the Minister also agree that it is perhaps time for the United Nations to get more involved?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to comment on the role that the United Nations has played in recent weeks, particularly the role of the IMO. We support the IMO's efforts, because there are many seafarers whose welfare depends on being able to get out of the strait of Hormuz safely. We have been in regular contact with the IMO, and we support its efforts; it is absolutely vital that it can make them. For diplomatic reasons, I will decline to comment on age versus youth as a superior skill in diplomacy.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am glad that the Minister made that point. May I welcome his acknowledgment and recognition of the implications for domestic industry of what is happening in the Gulf, especially for our food producers and food price inflation? The Minister's Department has an enormous amount of expertise and knowledge. Will he give me some assurance that that expertise and knowledge is being deployed across Government so that we can mitigate the worst effects on our domestic economy, especially in relation to giving early warning of what is going on?

Mr Falconer: That is a very important question. I was involved in foreign affairs before I came to this House, and I recognise that, perhaps more so than in practically any period in recent history, foreign affairs determines the cost of living for every one of our constituents, and sets the circumstances in which every business in every constituency is now operating. The Foreign Office is seeking to play its full role across Government in helping British businesses and Britons to navigate what are difficult times.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Minister and I have a shared interest in Yemen, and I am sure he will welcome the fact that next week, the International Development Committee is holding a focused inquiry into the current situation in Yemen, particularly the issue of malnutrition. More generally, can the Minister give us confidence that contingency plans are in place for communication with British citizens in the Gulf if the situation escalates further?

Mr Falconer: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's focus on Yemen. I reassure the House that I do remain focused on Yemen, as do other Ministers—it is vital that we see the release of the detained humanitarian workers, access to humanitarian supplies for the Yemenis, and peace and security for a country that is much benighted. I can also reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we do have contingency plans in place, and I encourage

[Mr Falconer]

Members of this House to encourage their constituents to look at travel advice. We have relaxed the travel advice in recent weeks, particularly in the Gulf region. We do our best to make sure our advice is as up to date as possible, and people should look at it before they travel. We try not to be over-cautious; we will do all the contingency planning we can, but British nationals also have a responsibility to take sensible precautions.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Iran's attack on commercial shipping in the strait of Hormuz is clearly a flagrant breach of international law, and incredibly dangerous and irresponsible. The escalating US response is also extremely dangerous, and it is not just tit for tat—it is a disproportionate escalation. Let us not forget that this war was started by the US and Israel choosing to launch attacks on Iran on 28 February. Can the Minister say what the UK Government are doing to maximise pressure on both parties to come back to the negotiating table—through sanctions and so forth, on Iran and on the US—to pull them back from the brink of this incredibly dangerous moment of escalation?

Mr Falconer: As I hope was clear in my response to the shadow Foreign Secretary, there are international principles in play here that go beyond simply Iran, the United States, or even the region—principles of the freedom of navigation and the global commons. That is why I sought to focus so much on those issues in my response. The hon. Lady asks what we are doing to ensure that the talks succeed. We are in close contact with all involved, which includes making points directly and forcefully to Tehran and, of course, talking to our friends in Washington. We want diplomacy to succeed, but we also must see those international principles—those linchpins of international law—sustained and maintained, both in the strait of Hormuz and globally.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): The ongoing conflict puts our own energy security at risk, so can the Minister assure us that our energy supply routes are safe and there is no risk of blackouts this winter?

Mr Falconer: I am sure a Minister from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero will give the hon. Gentleman such an assurance—I do not think there is any concern in that area—but let me be direct. We get a lot of energy via the strait of Hormuz. The strait of Hormuz is clearly not open, so if the hon. Gentleman is asking me, “What do the supply chains for British energy look like?”, the answer is that they look like global energy supply chains: under very considerable pressure, and under more pressure because of what Iran has done this week.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): Could I take the Minister back to the question raised by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum)? How many US flights have recently taken off from the UK to bomb Iran? When decisions on granting permission for those flights to take place are made, is the Minister consulted on the target and purpose of them, and is he really satisfied that anyone in Iran thinks these are anything other than aggressive attacks on the people of Iran?

This is an awful situation—it is very, very dangerous in many, many ways. Is it not time to try to bring the good offices of Pakistan back in, to try to arrange a further ceasefire and a long-term, peaceful arrangement to stop this conflict in the strait of Hormuz, which is so dangerous?

Mr Falconer: The arrangements that govern UK-US military co-operation and the use of our bases have been set out in some detail by Defence Ministers. They remain in place and they include provisions that the Secretary of State for Defence has discussed on the Floor of the House a number of times before. I agree with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) that we want to get back to a ceasefire. Pakistan has played a vital role, as have Qatar and other mediators. I have been in regular contact with mediators from a range of countries, and I was glad to discuss these issues during my recent visit to Islamabad.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The Iranian regime is abhorrent. It has oppressed its people for decades, murdering protesters and activists, and it is no friend of ours. Its attacks on civilian shipping risk a global crisis, yet Donald Trump's escalation and the US's poorly targeted attacks have put civilians and our friends in the Gulf at huge risk, with the risk of a large-scale regional conflict. Will the Minister assure us that the FCDO keeps plans for the evacuation of British nationals in the region under review, in case they should be required?

Mr Falconer: I reassure the House that the Foreign Office keeps contingency plans for the region under close review. We were incredibly grateful for the co-operation of our partners and, indeed, the support of British nationals themselves in the very speedy departure from the Gulf during the outbreak of this conflict. It is clear that should there be any difficulty—although there is no suggestion that there is—in the region for travelling British nationals, we will need the co-operation of British nationals and those in the region. It is very unlikely, and it is quite a distant prospect, that a further evacuation will be required.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. His words are always well chosen, and I think he encapsulates the energy and opinion of this House. The IRGC continues to wage war against humanity, executing prisoners, ruthlessly spying on dissidents on British soil and orchestrating severe targeted persecution against religious minorities, including our Christian brothers and sisters in Iran. The IRGC also continues to block the strait of Hormuz and attack peaceful neighbours. What discussions have the Minister and the Government had with our NATO and USA allies to collectively respond and show Iran that its continued state-sponsored terrorism will no longer be tolerated?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the threats that the IRGC has posed in the region and internationally. As I said in an earlier answer, domestic measures are being introduced in relation to state threats, and I imagine that we will have more to say about the employment of that new tool shortly. On the international position, we have made a series of interventions, both internationally and in the region, to try to reduce Iran's malign role in the region. We have spent most of this

urgent question discussing what is happening in the strait of Hormuz, but there are clearly Iranian militias right across the region continuing to threaten civilians, stability and the security of the region.

Mr Speaker: Before we start business questions, I would like to thank David Weir, the Clerk at the Table today, who is retiring from the House after 32 years, working first in Hansard and then as a Clerk. I wish David all the best. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] He is a man of many talents—he is a writer, a playwright, a director and a producer. The strings of his bow will be played elsewhere, rather than at the Table. I say to David, thank you for all that you have done.

Business of the House

11.14 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Mr Speaker, I thank you for your gracious words, and I echo your thoughts and thanks to David Weir for all his service.

Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 13 July will include:

MONDAY 13 JULY—Second Reading of the Immigration and Asylum Bill.

TUESDAY 14 JULY—Remaining stages of the Representation of the People Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments to the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 JULY—Opposition day, third allotted day. Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to national security.

THURSDAY 16 JULY—The Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the summer recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 16 July and return on Tuesday 1 September.

Jesse Norman: What a sporting week this has been! Youth, vitality, incredible physical stamina in the most testing of environments—and that is just the Leader of the House, whose birthday it was yesterday. He has never begrudged me my own naivety and inexperience, and I know that everyone present will join me in wishing him a massively happy birthday. In other news, the England football team decisively defeated Mexico at the Azteca, and we look forward with keen anticipation to their taking on Norway on Saturday evening.

We send our congratulations and commiserations to the United States of America on the tragic wrong turn it took towards independence 250 years ago. Edmund Burke famously said:

“In this character of the Americans, a love of freedom is the predominating feature”.

Whatever temporary disagreements we may have, let us never forget this deepest of shared commitments.

Kim Jong Un himself would admire the North Korean precision of the Labour leadership vote, which has opened today, with precisely one candidate on the ballot paper. How very different from the forthcoming by-election in Clacton, which appears to be a choice between a novelty comedy act with no real policies, and Count Binface. It is a long time since we had a count in the House of Commons, and when the time comes—as it surely will—we will have to leave to you, Mr Speaker, the delicate question of whether and how to suspend the rules on headgear in the Chamber for the new Member.

On a more serious note, the House has already expressed its great sorrow at the recent death of Sir George Howarth. I would also like to draw attention to the very sad death on Monday of James Mackay, Lord Mackay

[Jesse Norman]

of Clashfern, at the age of 99. He was a brave, energetic and imaginative reformer of the law as Lord Advocate in Scotland, and then as Lord Chancellor. It is hard to think of a man more widely respected in public life. We send our very best to his wife Bett and their family.

I have just one item of business today. It is related to the River Wye, which the House will know is not only a particular obsession of mine, but an issue of national importance. When the last Government cancelled the action plan for the Wye, it also cancelled the accompanying commitment to £35 million in clean-up funding, and replaced it with a paltry £1 million, supposedly aimed at research.

I was very distressed to receive the news this week that only £115,000 of that £1 million will actually be spent on research, that even that tiny sum will be spent over three years, and that the balance of the £1 million will be consumed by administrative costs. Will the Leader of the House instigate an immediate inquiry and ensure that Ministers clarify to me, my constituents and national campaigners on this issue that the full £1 million will be kept intact and used for the purposes for which it was intended?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank that shadow Leader of the House for his remarks, and particularly for wishing me a happy birthday for yesterday. I advise him and other hon. Members as they approach my age that, generally, the more birthdays you have, the less you have to celebrate—but there we are. I thank him for his kind remarks.

I also join you, Mr Speaker, and the shadow Leader of the House in thanking David Weir for his service to the House over 32 years. I look forward to the play or book based on his experiences in this House.

The shadow Leader of the House mentioned that the Labour leadership contest has started. I am afraid that he has misread the rules, because it is the opening of nominations today. It is therefore presumptive to say there will be only one candidate, because it rather depends on how the next few days play out.

Jesse Norman: Oh!

Sir Alan Campbell: That is simply a statement of fact, not a statement of anything else. [Laughter.]

I thank the shadow Leader of the House for his kind tribute to Sir George Howarth, who passed away recently. George was a dedicated politician who served his constituency of Knowsley for 38 years, and I am sure the House will join me in sending our condolences to his wife, Julie, and to his family and friends at this sad time. I also echo his words about the death of Lord Mackay.

I am very sad to learn today of the death of Bonnie Tyler. This matter was raised with me at business questions recently, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for giving us the opportunity to wish her well at that point. I am sure her family and friends are devastated by her loss, and we send them our very best wishes, indeed.

This year marks 21 years since the London 7/7 bombings, which killed 52 people and injured many more. I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with those whose lives were changed on that terrible day, and that

they will recall the bravery and commitment of our emergency services, particularly the NHS, which continues to show such exemplary service.

Since our last business questions, we have celebrated the second anniversary of the election of this Labour Government. The election saw a huge intake of new and talented MPs on both sides of this House, and we thank them for the contribution they have made thus far. Since that election, we have taken action as a Government to fix the foundations of our country and deliver the long-term change that Britain needs. That means cutting waiting lists, cutting net migration and the asylum backlog, lifting half a million children out of poverty and having the fastest growing economy in the G7.

In reference to what my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said yesterday, we are changing the balance of power in Britain through the Hillsborough law, ensuring that the state can never hide from the people it is supposed to serve. As he outlined yesterday, significant progress has been made, and I hope we can bring the Bill back to the House soon.

Turning to other matters, the veterinary sector has been raised with me during these sessions on a number of occasions. Pets are part of the family, but for too many households the cost of caring for them has become a real worry. Today, we are setting out the biggest reforms to the vet sector in half a century to help owners avoid unexpected bills, compare prices more easily and get the best value from pet care. I know you take a keen interest in this, Mr Speaker.

On the Wye valley, I will raise this matter with the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers. However, I understand that the matter was raised at DEFRA questions earlier today, although I have not seen the response of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy).

The shadow Leader of the House also raised the Clacton by-election. Let me make it clear from the Dispatch Box that this by-election should not be taking place. When we stand for election to this place, which it is an honour to do, we give an undertaking that the highest standards should be kept, including of openness and transparency about political donations. That is the issue here, and that will be the issue in this unnecessary by-election. Nigel Farage has serious questions to answer, and he cannot run away from them.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I add my birthday wishes to the Leader of the House.

I recently had the absolute pleasure of attending not one but two wonderful theatre performances. The first was a dress rehearsal by StagedRight theatre group and the second was “Aladdin” by the Rocket theatre group. These wonderful theatre groups give our young people the opportunity to build skills, grow confidence and have a fantastic time. Could the Leader of the House advise how we can best celebrate the contribution that theatre groups such as these right across our country make to our communities, particularly for our young people?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this issue to the House. She will know, from an earlier confession, that I am indeed a fan of musical theatre. Amateur and youth productions truly are a great vehicle

to build confidence, harness creativity and build communities, so I congratulate all those involved in treading the boards this summer. This is a topic of interest across the House, so I recommend that she looks towards a Westminster Hall debate, perhaps when we return, or towards the pre-recess Adjournment debate next week.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, and the remarks by the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House of both congratulations and condolences.

On the business the Leader of the House has announced, I have to say that I am very disappointed that it means the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks yesterday to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) about the Hillsborough Bill were not accurate. I hope we will see it return after the summer recess.

On the world cup, all I will say is that, like fellow Scots, I am probably looking for my Viking helmet at the moment.

We all know that the former Member for Clacton's resignation is nothing but a stunt designed to distract the country from the raft of allegations facing him and, it increasingly appears, his colleagues. Such allegations must be fully investigated, so that voters have all the facts about the candidates they are voting for, whether they be a bin or a politician who sees being a Member of Parliament as a part-time job.

Now that the writ has been moved, does the Leader of the House share my regret that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards investigation into the former Member for Clacton must pause? Does he agree that, in circumstances where the nature of an allegation is sufficiently serious, there is merit to it continuing, even if the Member is no longer an MP? Does he agree that it could and should continue regardless? Obviously, those of us on the Liberal Democrat Benches wish Count Binface well.

It was interesting to read overnight that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has plans for changing the culture and narrative of the Labour party. I am sure those on the Government Benches are looking forward to that new-found freedom. But for all the talk of collaboration and modernisation, we still do not know anything about the legislation that the new Labour Government are planning to bring to the House. We know more about the right hon. Member's love of guitar and rugby league than we do about his plans for fixing the problems facing the country. The Liberal Democrats would welcome detail on his plans to fix social care, tackle the special educational needs and disabilities crisis and support the small businesses bearing the brunt of the Government's jobs taxes. Will the Leader of the House commit to doubling the length of Prime Minister's questions next week, and give the Prime Minister-in-waiting the opportunity to answer questions and outline his views on the issues that really matter?

Sir Alan Campbell: I just gently say to the hon. Lady that I sat on the Government Front Bench yesterday and I do not believe that the Deputy Prime Minister did say something that was inaccurate. As I said in my

opening remarks, we are doing all we can to get the Hillsborough Bill across the line. If that means we can bring it sooner rather than later, then that will be our intention.

I agree absolutely with the hon. Lady, and I stand by what I said to the shadow Leader of the House, about this unnecessary by-election. There are serious questions to answer and Nigel Farage cannot run away from those questions. She is right to talk about the standards investigation, but the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards investigation is independent of the Government and the House, and it is important—I want to emphasise this—that all Members of the House respect the standards and procedures of the House. Members should not interfere with live investigations or do anything to prejudice them. She talks about what happens if a Member is no longer a Member and an investigation has begun. The procedural protocol in respect of the code of conduct sets out what happens to an ongoing commissioner inquiry if a Member ceases to be a Member of the House. That is what I would expect to happen in this instance.

The hon. Lady talks about what the manifesto will be of my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) if he is successful in becoming the Prime Minister. Let me just say this: there is a Labour Government with a legislative programme that we have set out. There will be continuity of that Labour Government. Even if the Administration changes, this will remain a Labour Government. I would expect that to be the case. As for PMQs being extended next week, by any stretch of the imagination I cannot see a situation where my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield will be Prime Minister by the time of next Wednesday.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Today we are launching our petition to save Scout Dike activity centre in my constituency with fantastic local campaigners Darren Padgett and Nick Stubbs. We are campaigning against Barnsley council's plans to sell off this valuable community asset for development. Scout Dike activity centre has served local people for generations and offers an incredible outdoor space—including a Quidditch pitch—for young people to gain life skills, confidence and access to wildlife in the heart of our beautiful South Yorkshire countryside. Selling it off snuffs out these opportunities forever. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how I can work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to reopen the centre to benefit the next generation of young people?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in recognising the work of local campaigners such as Darren and Nick. We absolutely recognise the importance of such sites and are empowering local people through the new community right to buy, but also through our Pride in Place programme. I will ask the Secretary of State to write to my hon. Friend on this important matter and to give her the information she needs to take forward her campaign.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Of course, we do not know whether the Leader of the House will become Prime Minister in a few days' time, but we do know that either he will continue in his current role or

[Bob Blackman]

someone will replace him. On behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, I ask that we get early warning of what time we will receive when we return after the summer recess. The Leader of the House has suggested that our Committee will get a slot on the day we return. If that does happen, we already have potential offers out to bidders for both the Tuesday and the Thursday.

I turn to the business in Westminster Hall. Next week, on Tuesday 14 July, we will have a debate on isolation and hidden deprivation in coastal communities. On Thursday 16 July there will be a debate on the impact of the national policy planning policy framework changes, followed by a debate on capital funding for Changing Places toilets. On Tuesday 1 September, when we return from recess, we will have a debate on the provision of face-to-face banking services in rural areas. On Thursday 3 September there will be a debate on vaccination rates in England, followed by a further debate, the subject of which is yet to be confirmed. On Tuesday 8 September there will be a debate on the safety of the Jewish community. On Thursday 10 September there will be a debate on reform of the vascular sector, followed by a debate on the contribution of fathers and positive male role models to families and society. Finally, on Tuesday 15 September we will have a debate on building safety remediation of residential buildings. As you can tell, Madam Deputy Speaker, we are getting on with the job of allocating the time that we have available to us.

The Leader of the House will probably be aware, there is currently a scandal around local authority social rented properties and housing association properties being let on Airbnb. I have been a strong campaigner for more social housing to be built in this country, but it is clearly important that the people who have the tenancies actually live in those properties and use them. If tenants do not use them, they should be vacated and used for people on the waiting list who desperately need them. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to make a statement in the House next week on what the Government will do to expose this scandal and ensure that the tenants who are supposed to be in these properties actually live there? If they are not living there, the properties should be released for those who desperately need them.

Sir Alan Campbell: As ever, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work and for the work of his Committee. He raises the question of what business will be like when we return in September. I expect to announce the business in the normal way at business questions next Thursday. The House knows my view on scheduling business on the first day back, and it has not changed: we need to be cautious about putting on a lot of business on that day, because invariably there are many important things on which to report back after such a long recess.

The hon. Gentleman has a strong record of raising social housing matters. As we announced yesterday, people who illegally sublet social housing will be identified and may be removed from their property, following a new data-sharing partnership between the Cabinet Office and Airbnb. By working with Airbnb, we are sending a clear message to those cheating the social housing system that they will be prosecuted. Social rented homes exist to help people who genuinely need them, not to line the

pockets of fraudsters. We are calling on short-term letting platforms and councils to follow our lead, and I will draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of the relevant Minister and see if we can get an update from him.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Later this month, Holmfirth Pride will take place in my constituency. I welcome the strong support shown by the many local businesses that are sponsoring events, such as a pink picnic in the park. Events such as those help foster respect and acceptance in our communities, and counter the hate and division that we too often see. Will the Leader of the House reaffirm this Government's commitment to inclusive communities and the huge benefits that diversity brings to our society?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the support of local businesses for Holmfirth Pride. My hon. Friend has been a champion on issues of inclusion and countering hate in our communities, and I pay tribute to him for that. This Government will continue to stand with LGBTQ+ people in this country and around the world.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Leader of the House did not mention in the forthcoming business that the House is about to be asked to decide on whether to issue a writ for a farcical and unnecessary by-election. [*Interruption.*] Have we had it already? I beg your pardon; I was not in the Chamber. What opportunity do I have to raise the question of how the by-election should be paid for? Many of my constituents live in the tendering district and will be inflicted with the cost of the by-election. It seems most unfair that this political stunt should cost council tax payers in my constituency or in Clacton.

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman's constituents, as well as residents of Clacton, will also be concerned about the cost of this unnecessary by-election. I hope that they will bear that in mind when they decide to cast their vote. It has been suggested that individuals might come forward and pay the cost of the by-election, which is ludicrous—that simply cannot happen. It is an unnecessary by-election and a waste of money, and I hope that people will think about that when it comes to casting their votes.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): On Armed Forces Day a few weeks ago, our community came out not just to celebrate our armed forces personnel, but to support Ben Hardy. Ben, who is 11 years old, has had 10 operations on his eyes and is severely visually impaired, but that did not stop him putting on an outstanding sensory exhibition, bringing Dunkirk spirit to life for local people through sight, sound, smell and taste. Will the Leader of the House, and indeed the whole House, join me in congratulating Ben and thanking him for his outstanding contribution to our celebrations and all his hard work?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Ben and his mother Liz on their hard work raising awareness for the Royal British Legion and Moorfields eye hospital. Such events demonstrate the importance of communities coming together to highlight and celebrate the work of our armed forces, and that depends on remarkable individuals like Ben.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I associate myself with the tributes to Lord Mackay of Clashfern. He was a giant of the Scottish legal profession, Lord Chancellor in two Governments, and a strong voice for Scotland and the Union in the other place. I benefited immensely from his wise counsel during my time in the Scotland Office. My thoughts are with his wife and family at this time.

The Leader of the House will be aware that in the Government's recent Green Paper it was suggested that terrestrial television—free-to-view television—might be switched off in 2034. That would be a hugely detrimental move for many people across the UK, particularly elderly people and people living in rural areas who do not have the best internet access. It would mean that everybody would have to pay for the internet in order to receive television services. Will he have a word with the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), as he takes office, and ensure that his Administration rule out that possibility?

Sir Alan Campbell: There will be no immediate changes to how people watch TV; terrestrial TV will stay until at least 2034. However, as the right hon. Gentleman and the House know, TV is increasingly moving online. We recognise the particular challenges in remote and rural areas, particularly for older people, people with disabilities and others who might spend more time watching TV. I want to emphasise that we want to ensure that the transition is managed responsibly and that no one is left behind, which is why we are consulting on two dates for the switchover, with either date contingent on a full and watertight transition plan. I will ensure that Ministers hear of his concerns.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I had the pleasure of watching England versus DR Congo with some of the good folks at the Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting. Thankfully, the England men's team have not taken the title of the campaign too literally, and are still on the hunt to bring at least one trophy home this summer. There should be only one trophy, though, because this party has pledged to end the import of trophies acquired through hunting. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement from the relevant Minister to update us on progress in this area, so that we can finally end this barbaric practice?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this important issue—I know that he joined campaigners in taking the campaign to No. 10 last year. As he will know, the Government remain committed to banning the import of hunting trophies from species of conservation concern, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs continues to engage with relevant stakeholders to ensure that we can implement a robust ban. I am not sure whether this matter was raised at DEFRA questions this morning, but I will certainly ensure that Ministers hear of his concerns.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Earlier in this Parliament I raised the potential of Russia returning to Eurovision. Last week I raised the issue of a Russian animated children's cartoon on British TV. This week we have heard that the International Olympic Committee is paving the way for Russia to return to the next Olympic games. We are seeing the normalisation,

rehabilitation and re-emergence of the Russian state on the world stage, with little to nothing being said by this Government. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement on Russian soft power and what we can do to ensure that we hold the regime to account, while an illegal war is still being waged and abducted children have not been returned to Ukraine?

Sir Alan Campbell: I do not share the hon. Gentleman's analysis that the Government are either slow or, worse, doing nothing about Russian soft power, because our support for Ukraine is unwavering and our opposition to Putin's illegal war is absolute. We have introduced sanctions on individuals and entities as part of our Russia sanctions regime, and we are working with allies to pursue all lawful ways of ensuring that Russia pays for the damage it has caused. However, I will raise with the relevant Minister the hon. Gentleman's concern about Russia being readmitted to things on a case-by-case basis. He is right to say that the general public may well think it is not the time for that.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): We know how much land there is in the UK, and we know the extent of our inland waters and seas, so we can know how much we have to do to protect them, as we are required to do by target 3 of the global biodiversity framework. Target 2 of that framework requires us to restore 30% of degraded land, but the Government have not published the amount of degraded land or degraded ecosystems in inland waters and marine environments. How are we supposed to meet our global commitment when we do not know what we have to do?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend has considerable experience and knowledge about these matters—far greater than would allow me to respond in the detail that his question requires. I am therefore going to offer him a meeting with the relevant Minister so that he can make his case. The Government will be committed to meeting those timelines and qualifications, and it is important that he makes that case to the relevant Minister.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is clear to me that the National Crime Agency has released details of my company bank statements, my individual bank transfers, and private conversations between me and my bank managers to *The Guardian*, which have been published. This involves multiple criminal offences, and I believe that there should be a full investigation. Does the Leader of the House agree that there should be such an investigation and that if people at the National Crime Agency have committed serious criminal offences, they should face the full force of the law?

Sir Alan Campbell: There is a great deal of "if" in that matter. I find it astonishing that a party's finances should need to be investigated by the National Crime Agency, frankly, but these are very serious matters. Individuals should have protections, and when investigations are necessary those protections should be respected. Let me take the matter away and raise it with the relevant authorities, because it is important that even the National Crime Agency and others are held to account. I have absolute faith in the National Crime Agency to get on with the important job that this House gives it.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Last week I asked a question about a new café opening in my constituency, and it has caused a bit of a kerfuffle. I cannot mention every single fantastic café in my constituency, but I am going to list a few. I have got to name Rick's café, and I apologise profusely for not mentioning it last week—it was obviously an oversight. We also have Suzie's Cup of Joy, Elle's and Darracotte's—the list goes on. The Leader of the House is very welcome to visit me in my constituency to enjoy any or all of these fine establishments. On a serious note, when will be the next opportunity to come together to discuss the very important issue of hospitality venues and the support that the Government are giving them?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend illustrates the power and influence of business questions. She is a true champion for small businesses in her constituency. As I have said on a number of occasions, small businesses are at the heart of our local communities, and we are absolutely committed to supporting them, including through our £10 million hospitality support fund. She has listed what I am sure are just a few of the fantastic cafés in her constituency. Should I find myself in Grimsby, I would be delighted to accompany her to one or more of them. She may want to raise the issue of hospitality more widely during the pre-recess Adjournment debate or in a Westminster Hall debate when we return. I am sure that if she were to raise the issue, others would join her, because Members have similar concerns across their constituencies.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I just want to make a very quick remark on this wonderful summer of sport. It is not just football that is potentially coming home—what about tennis coming home? The amazing Arthur Fery's performance at Wimbledon was an absolute joy to watch.

Bath's Royal United Hospital has supported promising early-stage research to improve endometriosis diagnosis. It has the potential to reduce diagnosis times and spare women from invasive surgery. Women are waiting on average nine years for a diagnosis, and research like that is crucial to helping them access support much sooner. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating this pioneering work supported by the RUH?

Sir Alan Campbell: I wish everyone involved with the hospital all the very best for the future, and I thank them for the work that they are doing. It is truly pioneering work, and it is really important. The women's health strategy sets out our renewed strategy to address the issues that women face every day. We want to ensure that no woman is left behind and has to endure long waiting times for a diagnosis. That is why we are rolling out diagnostic centres and putting more resources into the NHS. As well as thanking the hospital, I will raise its work with the relevant Minister.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that we have celebrated the Leader of the House's birthday, may I draw his attention to the upcoming birthday of H & E Smith in my constituency? It is one of the last standing embossed and glazed tile manufacturers, and anyone who travels on the underground in this country will see many of its work on display. As it is one of the last companies standing, keeping artisan skills and abilities alive is proving difficult. May we have a

debate in Government time about how we keep skills alive in such long-standing, but reducing, traditional manufacturing industries, so that there is a future and another 100 years of companies such as the one in my constituency to celebrate?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are committed to doing everything that we can to support traditional and new businesses in what can be quite a difficult environment. My hon. Friend tempts me down the route of saying that were the House to decide at some point on renewal and restoration, I would hope that tile manufacturers, stone providers and steel manufacturers around our country would benefit from the investment that I hope we would make.

My hon. Friend raises the question of traditional skills. Such jobs are not, by and large, ones that can be replaced by AI. We should be very proud of those skills, and I thank my hon. Friend for being a champion for his constituency and for continuing to raise those skills.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): On Tuesday morning, I, along with Members across the House, attended the national parliamentary prayer breakfast, which was a very uplifting occasion. Does the Leader of the House agree that there should be an opportunity to thank the churches and faith groups across the country that provide so much support in our local communities? Will he arrange a debate in Government time so we can express our thanks and identify the many people up and down the country who contribute so much?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is right when he says that churches and faith groups do an incredible amount of good work in our local communities. The national prayer breakfast in Westminster Hall was a fantastic way to celebrate their contribution in Parliament. Should the hon. Gentleman wish to raise the importance of churches and faith groups in our local communities, he has an opportunity to do so on Thursday in the pre-recess Adjournment debate, or indeed, in a Westminster Hall debate when we return.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): My constituent Billy Hood, a son and father, has spent more than five years in a prison in the United Arab Emirates after being convicted of possessing trace amounts of cannabidiol vape oil. His family are deeply concerned about his welfare, the conditions of his detention and the lack of progress on the pardon process, and are disappointed by the support they have had from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Given the UK's close relationship with the UAE, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on supporting British nationals in overseas prisons and the proactive steps that the Government can take to bring people such as Billy home?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a concerning matter. We are committed to strengthening support for British nationals overseas. I will ask the Foreign Office, in the first instance, to write to him with an update on the case—I am sorry that the family feel disappointed by the response so far. Following that, I am sure that a Foreign Office Minister will be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): This Saturday, we have the Newport agricultural show. Does the Leader of the House agree that agricultural shows are the lifeblood of many rural communities, a great showcase for the rural way of life and a great family day out? May we have a debate on the importance of agricultural shows, not only to Shropshire but to other counties as well? I also have a belated birthday present for him. If he would like to come to the Newport show—I do not know whether it will be the first time, but it may be the last—I invite him to get on and drive a tractor.

Sir Alan Campbell: That is a very tempting offer. I have been to a number of country shows. I appreciate their importance for rural communities and the rural economy, given the important work that people involved in agriculture do, as well as for the wider rural communities. The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the importance of that, and again, because it is timely, I invite him to raise the matter on Thursday during the pre-recess Adjournment debate.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is Muslim Climate Action Week, and mosques, youth groups and community organisations are coming together to explore environmental action through the lens of Islam, in a campaign that has been led by the charity Islamic Relief since 2024. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to all those in Poplar and Limehouse and across our country who are taking part in workshops, river clean-ups, film screenings and much more that encourages and celebrates Muslims in connecting our faith with practical environmental action?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely will, and I pay tribute to everybody involved in Muslim Climate Action Week. It is important that we take this issue seriously, not least given the period through which we are living, and I wish them well. It is important that faith groups and interfaith groups come together on what is, in many ways, the defining issue of our age.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Hospitality Together recently reported that 84% of small independent hospitality businesses across the UK said that it was either possible or very likely they would face closure in the next 12 months. A range of punishing policies has been inflicted on small, locally owned outlets, but the Government could address the situation by reducing VAT from 20% to 10%. That is exactly what my presentation Bill, the Hospitality (Value Added Tax) Bill, which is due for Second Reading next year, would do. Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate on the issue, so that Members from all parties can make the case for reducing VAT on hospitality and so protecting jobs, encouraging growth and supporting the renewal of our high streets?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is raising the importance of supporting hospitality now and through his Bill. The Government are committed to doing everything that we can. I gently say to him that a reduction in VAT is a costly matter, and we cannot have it both ways; he wants to reduce VAT, but that means he and others will be looking for more money for our public services.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Over the past six weeks, I have had 430 pieces of casework about uncollected bins in my constituency—I am sure that every one of those constituents can tell the former Member for Clacton how infuriating and unsuccessful it is to shout at a bin for six weeks. Does the Leader of the House agree that there is no more essential service for a council to get right than bins and waste collection? Constituents are right to expect better. At the very least, they should expect better updates and communications on what is going wrong and when it will get better.

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Her constituents do deserve better from their local council, and it is simply not good enough to blame teething issues or technical problems. She is right to raise the issue and stand up for her constituents. I hope that East Suffolk council, which I understand is run by the Lib Dems and Greens—how Greens can get themselves into a situation about environmental management is beyond me—has heard what she said, and gets on and resolves the matter.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Silverstone put Northamptonshire on the map this week with the best attended grand prix ever: 564,000 people visited over three days, which is amazing. The next date I want Members to put in their diaries is the Blakesley Show on 1 August. In its 141st year, it is the perfect opportunity for locals to celebrate our farming community. I hope that the Leader of the House will join me in encouraging people to come along and support our farming and agriculture.

Sir Alan Campbell: As I said in response to a previous question, I respect the importance of shows for the farming community. I encourage everyone who can go along to do so, to get a better understanding of the rural community and the importance of rural matters to our economy. The hon. Lady refers to Silverstone; I also recognise the importance of grand prix and Formula 1 for technological invention, jobs and its wider contribution to the economy. I am delighted that it has put her area on the map.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Historic buildings are a huge part of our national identity, yet restoration is harder than demolition. As the former manager of Leigh Spinners Mill—I am not sure I have mentioned that in this House before—I have seen the barriers that regeneration projects face at first hand. Given that more than 600,000 potential homes are locked up in historic buildings, will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the reuse of existing buildings and ensure that the issue is prioritised in the forthcoming high streets strategy?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to champion the restoration and reuse of historical buildings; I know that there have been many successful cases of that happening in her area. This is an important matter for local communities, and she raises an important point about housing. I will ensure that she gets a reply from the relevant Minister, so that she can hear more about what the Government are doing and intend to do. In the meantime, she could consider applying for a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, or taking part in the pre-recess Adjournment debate, to give further voice to these important issues.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all the young people, particularly in my constituency, who have completed GCSEs, A-levels, BTECs, T-levels and degrees, and all the brilliant teachers who got them there, and will he wish them all the best for the summer holidays and a well-deserved rest? The brilliant Esher sixth-form college in my constituency has been hit by the underfunding of post-16 education, as compared to lower secondary brackets, and also by the fact that the confirmed base rate of funding for post-16 is well below inflation. This means that high-achieving post-16 institutions may be forced to cut their academic cloth. Will the Leader of the House give time for debate on this sector, which is so important to our country's prosperity?

Sir Alan Campbell: The sector is important to our country's prosperity, and the Government are absolutely determined to do everything we can on that, including getting investment into post-16 education and, indeed, employment more widely. I am more than happy to join the hon. Member in congratulating all the young people in her constituency who have undertaken examinations. I wish them well for when the results come out. I pay tribute to them and the staff, and also to their sometimes long-suffering parents.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): SPARK is York's frontline incubator for the next generation of food, drink and creative businesses; it supports young entrepreneurs to establish their businesses with strong values and good practice. It has identified that VAT is the problem, and it is calling for the Government to support a 10% cut in VAT to enable its hospitality businesses to flourish. Can we have a statement from the Treasury on the impact of that, and on how we will enable community interest companies, such as SPARK, to support start-ups, so that they thrive?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter, and is a stout defender of the interests of her constituents. We recognise the contribution that hospitality businesses make to jobs, growth and local communities across the UK, but His Majesty's Revenue and Customs estimates—this follows on from an earlier question—that reducing VAT in the way she mentions would cost around £11 billion a year. To put that in context, it is roughly equivalent to the total expenditure on the Royal Navy. We are, however, committed to supporting the sector through targeted measures, such as our £4.3 billion business rates package and the Great British summer savings scheme.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Solihull's Men Walking and Talking group is a huge success. It can lay claim to being if not the most successful one in the country, then certainly among them, and it improves both physical and mental wellbeing. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to all those who are organising that group and making it a success? Can he set out what more we can do in this place to promote such groups?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly pay tribute to the hon. Member's local Men Walking and Talking group, and the important contribution that such groups make, not least to mental health. The Government are absolutely determined to tackle the issue of poor mental health head-on, because it is important that men can play a full part

in family life and their local communities without the scourge of poor mental health. He asks how we can raise these matters. He can raise them during a debate that he calls, or in the pre-recess Adjournment debate—but he has also just done it.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): In the highland games season, there are gatherings across my constituency in Blackford, Balquhider, Lochearnhead and Strathyre, Bridge of Allan, Killin and Stirling. These games celebrate Scottish culture, boost local economies, and bring communities together, and no gathering would be complete without Scotland's remarkable pipe bands. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the talented young musicians of Stirling and District Schools Pipe Band every success this year, and thank their tutors, Chris Gibb, Andrew Wallace and Chloe Taylor, for all they do to nurture the next generation of pipers and drummers? Will he also make time for a debate on the importance of highland games and bagpipes to culture, heritage and tourism, and thank all the local volunteers who do so much to ensure the success of every event?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in wishing the musicians of Stirling and District Schools Pipe Band every success, and I thank all volunteers who make events like the highland games possible. Tutors such as Chris, Andrew and Chloe, who pass down their skills to future generations, are invaluable; they are responsible for keeping such important traditions alive. If my hon. Friend is able to, I encourage him to highlight this success, and these important matters, in next Thursday's pre-recess Adjournment debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am aiming to finish business questions around 12.15 pm, so perhaps we could have very short questions and answers.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Without wishing to disappoint colleagues who have excellent local agricultural shows, the Driffeld show is the biggest and best one-day show in the country, and this month it will celebrate its 150th edition. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking all those involved in the Driffeld Agricultural Society, both now and in the past, and may we have a debate in Government time on food security and the importance of the rural economy?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly make a special case for the Driffeld show and everybody involved, and 150 years is a remarkable achievement. As I have said, such shows are an important part of local communities. The Government take food security very seriously, and the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity next Thursday to highlight the importance of not just Driffeld Agricultural Society, but all the other agricultural societies in his constituency.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): This month, Ayrshire college won the UK training provider skills champion award at the Egnuity skills awards, for its work in development, engineering and aerospace. Engineering and aerospace remain critical for Ayrshire's economy, and that national recognition demonstrates the vital role that further education colleges play in developing our young workforce. Colleges across

Scotland continue to face financial pressures, despite delivering exactly the kinds of outcomes that Governments want. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the importance of investing in further education colleges across Scotland?

Sir Alan Campbell: I congratulate Ayrshire college on its well-deserved award. We are committed to creating a skilled workforce that is fit for the future and aligned with local needs, with our £182 million industrial strategy and engineering skills package. Should my hon. Friend wish to apply for a debate on this subject in Westminster Hall, I am sure that it would be well attended; the shadow Leader of the House, for instance, does fantastic work on these issues in his constituency.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): Crooked SNP chief Peter Murrell had his hand in the SNP piggy-bank to the tune of hundreds of thousands of pounds; he bought camper vans, crockery, and even toilet paper. We now learn that Police Scotland is also probing the Yes Scotland movement. Will the Leader of the House bring forward a debate, in Government time, on the financing of the SNP and the independence movement?

Sir Alan Campbell: As I have said before, the SNP should come clean on these matters, and authorities should hold it to account. The hon. Member talks about an investigation that is under way, and I will not comment on that. We will debate these matters in the future, but let us await the outcome of the investigations.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): At the end of May, a 94-year-old woman in my constituency was hospitalised with life-threatening injuries after she was run over by a teenager who was recklessly and illegally driving a Sur-Ron e-bike. The Government have rightly taken action through the seizure of bikes that are being driven illegally, but will my right hon. Friend allocate time for Members to consider, in the House, what action might be taken at point of sale to tackle this huge problem, which is causing damage and harm in our constituencies?

Sir Alan Campbell: E-bikes and e-scooters can be a great way to travel around the city, but we have heard too many tragic stories of unsafe e-bikes and e-scooters. Rogue sellers not only risk bringing dangerous products into homes but undermine confidence in active travel. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's concerns are raised with the Department for Transport, and should he seek a meeting with the relevant Minister, I will help him to arrange one.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): As well as it being world cup and Wimbledon season, we are in the middle of sports day season. I am sure that many hon. Members will be heading home to take part in parent races. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) raised with the Secretary of State for Education the issue of transitional relief following the reduction in the sports premium in schools. The Secretary of State responded that there was a misunderstanding, and that she would speak to my hon. Friend. However, the headteacher of St James' school in Gaunt's Common—a double award-winning sports

school—and trust leaders in my constituency are equally confused, and need clarity in order to plan before schools break up. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State, or a Minister, to come back to the House and provide us all with clarification?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly wish everyone involved in sports days all the very best. I have to say, sports day triggers memories that are less than happy, but that is another matter. I know that the hon. Lady asked about a general concern, but if she lets me know the details of the particular school that she mentioned, I will raise the matter with the Department to see if we can get the clarification that she seeks.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): This year is the 500th anniversary of the battle of Linlithgow bridge, a pivotal moment in Scottish history, and part of a power struggle for the regency of King James V. To mark the occasion, Linlithgow Civic Trust and Battle 500, alongside local historians, schools and volunteers, have a huge programme of summer events, including a battle re-enactment. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all those involved in bringing our local history to life? Will he make time for a debate on local volunteers who promote Britain's rich heritage?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating everyone involved in bringing the re-enactment of the battle of Linlithgow bridge to life. As she rightly points out, volunteer organisations like Linlithgow civic trust play a vital part in our living historical memory, allowing us to connect with our heritage. I pay tribute to them for their work. If she wishes to enlighten the House further, she could do so in the pre-recess Adjournment debate next week.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Can I welcome visitors from a very special school in Carmarthenshire, who have come to the House today? Three learners and their support staff have come the whole way from west Wales. Welcome to Westminster!

This Monday, a judicial review passed judgment on a case on land access, amid other matters, brought by a local landowner and the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales against a private limited company—an energy company. That followed two court cases last year about landowners—people who had never been in trouble and had never been to court—being forced to give access to land or face legal bills of over £35,000. Why should farmers be forced to pay tens of thousands of pounds to defend their livelihoods? Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on meaningful community engagement between private limited energy companies and landowners, so that these bully-boy tactics are stopped?

Sir Alan Campbell: It sounds like a very concerning situation for the hon. Lady's constituents. New energy infrastructure is important to ensure energy security, but it should be delivered through robust and proportionate consenting processes. Should she seek a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, I am sure that it would be well attended.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I am sorry to report to the House that last week, a 13-year-old boy lost his life in the Royal Victoria dock in my constituency, following a similar incident in the Thames in my constituency last year. The Royal Life Saving Society has reported evidence of an 80% increase in child deaths related to drowning over the last five years. This week, I joined the Port of London Authority in launching a water safety campaign ahead of the summer holidays. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, this has been an issue across the country this summer. Could we have a debate in Government time on what more we can do to improve water safety, particularly for our young people and children?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend refers to tragic cases. I am sure that the whole House sends its sympathies to the friends and family of everyone who has lost their life during the extreme weather—and indeed previously—in water incidents. The National Water Safety Forum brings together a wide range of national groups to provide consistent guidance. There was a Westminster Hall debate on this matter last month, at which I understand it was agreed that a meeting would take place between all responsible Departments to look at what further action should be taken. I will get an update from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), on what is happening on that.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Businesses in Runcorn and Helsby are adversely affected—penalised, in fact—by the Merseyflow bridge tolls that make it difficult or impossible for them to compete with companies over the bridge in Widnes, and difficult to recruit from over the bridge. The 10-year funding review is due to happen this year. Will the Leader of the House ask the Transport Secretary to make a statement on how those businesses' views and needs can be represented in that process?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand the concerns that the hon. Lady raises. Let me raise that with the relevant Minister and get her an update on how they may be able to do that.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): More than a thousand British Jews and British Israelis have written to the Minister for the Middle East, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), to urge a ban on settlement goods and services by the United Kingdom. That is because Netanyahu's Government are expanding illegal settlements at such a rapid rate that we are effectively seeing the annexation by stealth of the west bank.

Does the Leader of the House agree that while this Labour Government have taken the historic step of recognising the state of Palestine, that is put at risk by Israel's actions? We need not only to show that we share the anger of the British people over the death and displacement of the Palestinian people, but to stand up to Israel and ensure that a Palestinian state will become a reality, rather than be wiped off the map, which is what Israel proposes at the moment.

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government's position remains clear. Settlements are illegal under international law. They undermine international efforts to secure a just and lasting peace in the Middle East and risk doing

permanent damage to the prospects of a secure and viable Palestinian state being able to live in peace alongside a secure Israel. We have a debate on this matter this afternoon, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to attend it to make his case.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Last month, the High Court issued its judgment permitting the development of 119 homes in a flood risk area in the village of Yatton in Somerset. The site had failed the flood risk sequential test. The judgment prioritises building and development over protection against flooding and imperils existing homes and businesses in the area, and flies in the face of everything that insurers, lenders, Flood Re, the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are trying to do. Will the Leader of the House ask his colleagues in DEFRA and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to assess jointly the likely impact of the judgment, which may set a national precedent whereby flood risk assessments shall be ignored?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I will, and I will seek an update for the hon. Lady.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Yesterday was one of my favourite days of the year—not because it was the Leader of the House's birthday but because my Stafford students came down for their summer school. They met the Chancellor, the Speaker, other MPs and a Minister. They are passionate and inspiring young people who are keen to use their voices for good. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking those people who gave their time for those young people yesterday? More importantly, will he thank those people around the UK who regularly volunteer to support young people and give them a safe space to be themselves?

Sir Alan Campbell: I do indeed join my hon. Friend in thanking everyone involved in making her summer school a success and all the volunteers who support youth groups in all our areas. I have heard many good things about her summer school—long may it continue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary what recent assessment she has made of the case of Uyghur Muslim Rahile Dawut, a folklorist and academic imprisoned in China solely for her faith and cultural identity, and what steps His Majesty's Government have taken to secure her immediate release and to uphold freedom of religion or belief across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland's foreign policy commitments?

Sir Alan Campbell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a serious issue. As he knows, we stand firm on violations of human rights. We have raised our concerns regarding the treatment of Uyghur Muslims with the highest levels of the Chinese Government. I will ensure that he gets a response from the Foreign Secretary, who will have heard his remarks, so that we can get the specifics of that case.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Black Country Day is on 14 July, and we have a lot to celebrate. The Black Country was the heart of the industrial revolution, we have Dudley castle and the Wren's Nest nature reserve, where people can pick up a fossil—and, of course, we can celebrate the people of the Black Country. Will my

right hon. Friend join me in wishing all those celebrating Black Country Day a great day? Will he grant a debate on the Black Country?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly echo my hon. Friend's words about the importance of Black Country Day, and I wish everyone involved a success. We have got a pre-recess Adjournment debate—I said it was the day after tomorrow, but clearly it is next week—and should she wish to raise it in that debate, I am sure it would be a cause for celebration.

NATO Summit

12.19 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): With permission, I would like to update the House on the NATO summit in Ankara, on the building of a stronger Europe within NATO with major increases in European—including UK—defence investment, on our continued and unwavering support for Ukraine, on our discussions with Gulf partners about the strait of Hormuz and on the opportunity that the Prime Minister and I took to raise with other leaders and Foreign Ministers the issue of Sudan. These are all issues that directly affect our national and economic security in the UK.

The NATO summit took place at a time when the world is becoming more dangerous than it has been for decades, and we have a war in Europe that has now been going on for longer than the first world war. Drones and missiles are changing the nature of warfare and there are continuing threats to the security of NATO allies, including cyber-threats, hybrid threats, sabotage, industrial scale misinformation, attempts to interfere with undersea cables and drone incursions. Just this week, we have seen Russia engaging in reckless and dangerous activity around our British aircraft carrier, which is on NATO operations in the north Atlantic. Three weeks ago, I went to see the concrete trenches and anti-tank defences being prepared by Polish troops along the Kaliningrad border, a sign of how seriously they take the importance of deterring Russian threats.

NATO has been the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security for over 75 years, protecting more than a billion people, but to ensure it remains as strong for the next 75 years, it needs to respond to changing threats. NATO is a defensive alliance, but we maintain our strength and security through deterrence and holding the capabilities to deal with any threat we may face. As the summit made clear, that means building a stronger Europe in a stronger NATO.

The United States remains an indispensable and fully committed ally in NATO, but the burdens must be shared. In response to increased threats in Europe, Europe must step up. That is what allies committed to last year in The Hague, and what we are delivering this year in Ankara. European and Canadian allies are spending \$140 billion more on defence this year than the year before, a rise of 20%. The UK is the third biggest cash contributor to NATO, including crucial specialist capabilities, such as our nuclear deterrent. Now the defence investment plan involves the biggest sustained increase in UK defence spending since the cold war, spending almost £300 billion over the next four years. As the Defence Secretary has set out, that means new capabilities, a new hybrid Navy, investments in digital and autonomous systems, and enhanced strike and air defence capabilities.

In Ankara, we brought together 12 allies to lead a European initiative to step up funding for deep precision strike capabilities, an initiative set to invest more than £37 billion over the next 10 years. We are working jointly with Norway on new frigates, with Italy and Japan on the next generation of fighter jets, and we are strengthening our maritime partnership with the Netherlands, with new amphibious transport ships. We agreed a new security

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and defence partnership with Turkey, and we discussed the importance of strong collaboration across our defence industries, which support tens of thousands of jobs in the United Kingdom. We are also bolstering UK leadership in NATO by appointing General Nick Perry to head up Joint Force Command Norfolk, which leads the protection of the High North and the US eastern seaboard.

NATO met at a critical moment for Ukraine's resistance against brutal ongoing Russian aggression. Over the last week alone, Russia has launched two of the largest and deadliest missile strikes on Kyiv, killing at least 30 civilians overnight last Wednesday and at least 26 civilians overnight on Monday. Throughout this conflict, Putin has underestimated the strength of Ukraine and the solidarity of Ukraine's friends. As a result of Ukraine's resistance, Putin now faces deteriorating conditions within his armed forces, on the battlefield and in his economy, suffering a net loss of territory for the first time since 2023. Some 500,000 Russian soldiers have now been killed since the start of the invasion.

Ukraine is stepping up attacks deep inside Russia and occupied Crimea, causing Russia's worst fuel crisis in decades, with queues at the petrol pump and prices rising. This is underpinned by continued sanctions by the UK and our allies against Russian oil and gas, and through action against the Russian shadow fleet. Despite that pressure, Putin still deludes himself that he can outlast Ukraine, and outlast NATO allies in our support for Ukraine. That is why it is so important that our support for Ukraine is enduring.

Since 2022, the UK has provided almost £25 billion in support for Ukraine. Two weeks ago, I announced £500 million in support for Ukraine's recovery and energy security, alongside our military investment. In Ankara, we and allies have together pledged €70 billion in support to Ukraine in 2026, and at least equivalent levels in 2027, so that Ukraine is in the best possible position to negotiate a just and lasting peace.

On Tuesday, NATO Foreign Ministers also met with four of our Gulf partners, under the Istanbul convention initiative, to discuss the situation in the strait of Hormuz and in the region. The House will be aware that on Monday night, despite having made a clear commitment that the strait of Hormuz would be reopened, Iran attacked three commercial ships close to the Omani coast. Those attacks are a breach of the memorandum of understanding, a violation of Omani sovereignty and a contravention of the law of the sea. These are international shipping routes that commercial shipping has a right to pass. The United Kingdom condemns unequivocally the recent Iranian attacks on commercial shipping, including on Saudi and Qatari vessels.

No country has the right to hijack international shipping or to hold the global economy hostage, so we also condemn in the strongest terms the Iranian attacks on sites in Bahrain and Kuwait. We stand in solidarity with our partners across the region. Iran must halt these attacks on international shipping, support the reopening of the strait and return to de-escalation and diplomacy.

The UK stands ready to support a return to talks, because Iran must never be able to develop a nuclear weapon and we need the full reopening of the strait of Hormuz. That is why, alongside France, the UK has established a multilateral maritime mission to support

the de-mining of the strait, verification and reassurance to shipping, and ultimately to support the global economy, and ease the cost of living back home.

While in Ankara, I also raised directly with our allies the urgency of sounding the alarm on El Obeid in Sudan. I am deeply fearful that the Sudanese city is at risk of mass bloodshed and civilian casualties, with signs of plans for an assault by advancing Rapid Support Forces that are already encircling the city, as they cut off supply routes and unleash repeated drone attacks on fuel, infrastructure and storage sites. Strikes have already killed civilians and humanitarian workers. An estimated 500,000 civilians are now at risk, many of them women and girls who have already carried an intolerable burden throughout this three-year conflict. Last year, El Fasher became the site of unspeakable violence and suffering, atrocities that the UN's fact-finding mission concluded bore the hallmarks of genocide. The world must not fail the people of Sudan again.

Last week, the UK convened an urgent debate at the United Nations Human Rights Council. A UK-penned resolution condemned atrocities, called for an urgent UN fact finding inquiry and urged the RSF to comply with international law and halt this attack, urging both the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces to accept proposals that have been put forward for a truce. We are calling for an end to the external support and arms flows from other countries that are extending this conflict and fuelling this horrendous suffering. The United Nations arms embargo does not cover El Obeid, so it must be extended. We are urging all our allies and countries from across the world, as we discussed in Ankara this week, to maximise the pressure calling on all sides to protect the people of Sudan.

Effective foreign policy is domestic policy. Championing freedom of navigation supports UK energy security. Preventing bloodshed in Sudan speaks to our values and our interests. Supporting Ukraine's security is supporting our own security. Strengthening NATO is how we make our country safer, our economy stronger and our people more secure. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.29 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of her statement. I start by recognising some of the positive commitments in the NATO summit communiqué, including the important reaffirmation of the alliance's commitment to collective defence under article 5 and to the transatlantic bond, and the essential new defence procurement announcements. The recognition of Ukraine as a contributor to transatlantic security is overdue, and we back the reiteration of the alliance's support for Ukraine. I share the Foreign Secretary's disgust at the Russian attacks in Kyiv in recent days.

The outcome of the Ukrainian war matters profoundly to NATO, as does our collective commitment to lead the world in helping Ukraine turn the tide in this war. We all know that the best deterrent against an invasion like this ever happening again is Russia's expulsion from Ukraine. Now is the time to ramp up our support for Ukraine. Will the Government provide Ukraine with

additional military capabilities or broker any new international packages of support, as we did so effectively at the outset of the war? Following the boarding of a Russian shadow fleet ship last month, will there be a sustained effort to disrupt the fleet's operations? Will the Foreign Secretary commit to leading international pressure on the refineries buying Russian crude oil in order to cut the financial flows that are funding Russia's illegal war?

The NATO communiqué refers to the conflict in Iran and touches on the strait of Hormuz. As I said this morning in the urgent question, this despotic terrorist regime, which has been illegally attacking commercial shipping in the strait and our allies, including Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman's ships and territory, all while repressing its own people in the most brutal ways imaginable, must be made to feel the consequences of its actions.

I put on the record our solidarity with Oman following the outrageous breach of its sovereignty by Iran. We understand that Oman has agreed to work with Britain and France to ensure that its territorial waters remain safe. Last week in a joint statement with the French, Downing Street said:

"The UK and France also stand ready to deploy the wider Multinational Military Mission to support freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz."

What does that mean in practice? Will there be a deployment? What will be the scale of the deployment? What will it consist of and over what timeframe? How will we reassure our strategic and security partners in the region of our commitment, so that they do not think we have stepped back, particularly given the rising tide of attacks from Iran? What opportunity will we have in this House to scrutinise and debate the Government's plans?

As Defence Secretary, my good friend Ben Wallace invested millions in the development of cutting-edge autonomous minehunters. In his previous role as Minister for Defence Procurement, the shadow Defence Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge), delivered Britain's first ever defence drone strategy in 2024, which emphasised the use of uncrewed drones in the maritime domain, including for mine detection. Will either of those capabilities be deployed in the mission?

It is vital that Britain has capabilities to operate in theatres around the world, and of course that requires cash now, which the current Labour Administration are refusing to provide. Britain is already spending less of its GDP on defence than Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Norway, the United States, Denmark, Greece and Finland. How can we expect others to find more for defence when we are not leading by example? Because this Labour Government, in the words of the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), have been "unable" and "unwilling" to provide the money we need to keep Britain safe, our country faces a huge shortfall in the years ahead. By the end of this decade, Britain will be nowhere near the 3% and barely ahead of where we are now, while all our allies continue to surge. I do not need to remind the Foreign Secretary of the numbers, but Germany is set to spend 3.7% of GDP by 2030, while Sweden has pledged to reach 3.5%, as have other countries.

There will be a change of Labour leadership in the coming weeks. The right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has been left to find £4.7 billion at his

next Budget, and there is no serious detail about the billions of pounds of so-called efficiency savings that this Government have identified. As the Foreign Secretary's counterpart, the Polish Foreign Minister, said of Britain under Labour:

"You're spending something like £65 billion on defence and £360 billion on welfare. Lucky you, you must not feel any danger".

In reality, this Government are prepared to plough billions into welfare while short-changing defence. We want to change that, and I ask the Foreign Secretary again: will she work with us to make progress on this? This is a serious time—Britain is under threat—and we need to step up in a significant way.

The Foreign Secretary also mentioned Sudan and the horrific situation in El Obeid. We know that words are not enough; action is needed. I agree with her on the need for the arms embargo to be extended, and the two warring parties must be pressed into a ceasefire.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her response, particularly her support for the commitments made in Ankara and the continuing condemnation of the Russian strikes. It has been an important part of the cross-party debates in this House and across the whole country that we have stood united behind Ukraine and in solidarity with it, and long must that continue.

The right hon. Lady is right that we will need to maintain the pressure on Russia. We see that as being about increasing sanctions; continuing to apply pressure through sanctions and maritime services bans; continuing with our military support for Ukraine, both directly and in partnership with our European allies, including through the loans for Ukraine that we continue to provide; and, crucially, providing energy infrastructure support and resilience—Ukraine needs the resilience to get through the winter, which we know is when Russia most heavily targets the civilian population. We will maintain that support. In fact, it is because of our commitment to the long-term future of Ukraine that we have signed a 100-year partnership between the United Kingdom and Ukraine in the spirit of solidarity.

I welcome the right hon. Lady's condemnation of Iran's behaviour. It is telling that, despite having signed a memorandum of understanding with the United States, Iran seems to persist in the view that it has the right to control the strait of Hormuz, which is an international shipping route, and to attack commercial ships in Omani waters. That is a violation of Oman's sovereignty, as well as a violation of the law of the sea. That is why we have been so strong in our condemnation and in seeking to mobilise countries across the world to put pressure on Iran and to get it to recognise the importance of the whole world's support for freedom of navigation, the law of the sea and getting the global economy moving again.

The right hon. Lady raised the issue of defence investment. She will understand that we are increasing investment in defence at a rapid pace—at the steepest pace since the cold war—and have made commitments to go further, but I should point out that it was her party that cut defence spending by 20%.

Priti Patel: Times have changed.

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Foreign Secretary says from a sedentary position that times have changed. She is right: times did change. Times changed when Russia

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invaded Crimea. That was the evidence that the post-cold war peace dividend had gone, and yet it took her party 10 years to recognise that defence spending needed to increase. [Interruption.] For most of that period—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. My constituents and, I am certain, everybody's constituents will be very interested in what the Foreign Secretary has to say.

Yvette Cooper: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

For most of the period before the election, defence spending was nearer 2% of GDP. That is just too low, which is why we are increasing it; we have already increased it from 2.3% to 2.7%, and we have committed to go further. That has involved some difficult decisions, including on official development assistance and other areas. I hope the whole House will support that increased investment in defence, because ultimately, it underpins the security of our country and the security of our future.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. The alliance is growing stronger by the week, but it is clear now that national security rests on economic security. Can she update the House on what conversations she had about how the allies will come together to build and enlarge an arsenal of democracy for the 21st century, whereby we collaborate on defence industrial policy and defence finance strategy on a wholly new scale that is fit for this new age of insecurity?

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. There are links between our national security and our economic security; they are closely intertwined. That comes from the fact that if our economic security is jeopardised, including through things such as the closure of the strait of Hormuz, it has an impact on our national security and particularly on supply chains for critical minerals, for example, which may be crucial to our defence. As we increase the demand and procurement for and investment in defence, it is crucial that our supply chains and our defence industry collaboration across allies can keep up. That is why we had a meeting of Foreign Ministers at Ankara specifically about how we can better collaborate and integrate aspects of our defence industry. That is what supports tens of thousands of jobs here in the UK, but we need to do it in collaboration with other countries.

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

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. As we have come to expect of all major international summits, NATO's meeting in Ankara was taken over entirely by Donald Trump's tantrums and threats. He restated his claim that Greenland should become American, threatened the withdrawal of all remaining US troops from Europe, and once again lambasted allies for not joining his and Netanyahu's calamitous war in Iran, which has upended the world economy and worsened a spiralling cost of living crisis for millions across Britain. That is no way

to conduct international diplomacy. Did the Prime Minister make it clear to Donald Trump that his threats against Greenland are totally unacceptable?

However, there were some positive moments from the summit. NATO allies reaffirmed support for Ukraine, and the Prime Minister announced plans for the development of a new deep strike capability with our European partners. Will the Secretary of State outline how exactly the UK will provide its share of the £37 billion of funding for that capability?

Even before that new commitment, as has been pointed out, the Government's own defence investment plan delivered only just over half of what military chiefs deem necessary for our national defence. Together with the Secretary of State's colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, will she consider how defence bonds could be used rapidly to support the UK's contribution to that initiative, bolster the confidence of our allies and send a clear signal to our adversaries? Have these plans been drawn up together with the Ukrainians? They have shown with incredible effect how deep strike capability can be developed fast and much, much more cheaply than £37 billion.

On defence funding, the Prime Minister discussed the possibility of collective financing and procurement models as a critical way to generate cheaper loans for military programmes and support greater interoperability. Will the Secretary of State update the House on whether any progress was made at the summit to bring together the existing Defence, Security and Resilience Bank and our own multilateral defence mechanism into a single European rearmament bank?

Finally, the Secretary of State mentions El Obeid in Sudan and the thousands of lives at risk. The UK has the power to act, so will she proscribe the RSF, as has just been done with the IRGC? Will she suspend all UK arms sales to the UAE, given its role in arming the RSF?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman mentions a range of issues. In terms of the areas of agreement and disagreement, there will be areas where we continue to disagree with the President of the United States and have said so, including in our continued support for the sovereignty of Greenland and Denmark, which we have always made clear. That is why we worked in NATO and with the support of the United States for a new Arctic Sentry in NATO. The UK carrier strike group is operating as part of that. That is an important way of having a multilateral and shared defence of the High North, which is about protecting Canada, the United States, Norway and the western flank of Europe, including the United Kingdom, as well as the whole of Europe. That is the way in which we approach our Arctic security. That has strong agreement from the United States, which I think is a reflection of the way that we have worked to deal with those issues.

On the £37 billion for deep precision strike, we have allocated £3 billion over the first four years from the defence investment plan. That will help to fund some of the work we are doing with Germany and some separate work we are doing with France and Italy as part of a series of programmes all about deep precision strike, which we have brought European allies together on.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank and the multilateral defence mechanism. He may have seen that the Prime Minister

and the Canadian Prime Minister put out a joint statement over the last couple of days to set out how we seek to work together to ensure that those initiatives, which do slightly different things, can combine and collaborate to ensure that we get the best possible impact.

On Sudan, we continue to raise the issue of arms flows, and we take that immensely seriously. That is exactly why we want to extend the arms embargo and believe that that needs to continue across the whole of Sudan. That is also why I have raised this issue with the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who are members of the Quad, and we will continue to pursue it.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of proscription. He will know that that is a matter for the Home Office, but we believe that there should be a full arms embargo on Sudan.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement and for the work that she and the Prime Minister have done at the NATO summit. May I register my huge concern, and that of my constituents, that the ceasefire between the US and Iran appears to be over, due to the egregious breaches by Iran? The situation has escalated, with the US taking military action. May I ask for reassurance that those who helped to bring about the first ceasefire, including the UK, by working very closely with allies behind the scenes, will now do everything to try to bring about a new ceasefire, so that we can get a deal in place that will lead to a permanent peace? That will be good for the region and much better for the UK and the world economy.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's points. We need to see an end to Iran's attacks on commercial shipping in the strait. Crucially, that means Iran must give up its claim that it somehow has the right to control international shipping routes and Omani waters, because it does not. We want to see a return to talks, and we want the ceasefire to be sustained. We have offered to support the technical talks around preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and the reopening of the strait through our multilateral maritime mission.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I agree with everything that the Foreign Secretary said in her initial statement, particularly the point that we live in a more dangerous world than ever—I also agree with the shadow Foreign Secretary, obviously. The point is surely this: there is no point apportioning blame between us. We are where we are now, in the most dangerous position that we have ever been in. Will the Foreign Secretary take away this thought in her talks with the new Prime Minister? Will she say that Members on both Front Benches, including the new Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, should co-operate in meeting our NATO defence commitments in full? That means no black holes or creative accounting. We should pay for them by curbing the spiralling welfare bill, which is out of control. It is a win-win situation; we defend the nation, get people off benefit dependency and work together to save our country.

Yvette Cooper: We agree about the nature of the increasingly dangerous world we live in and the importance of us being able to defend ourselves and maintain our security. We have committed to reaching the 3.5% commitment on defence, but that is part of a 5% commitment that was made to cover broader defence

and security intelligence. The Father of the House will know that the UK invests substantially in our intelligence capabilities, which are unrivalled. That is why, if we combine that with the broader measure, the assessment is that we are already over 4% and on the trajectory towards the broader NATO figure of 5%. That is important. In addition to continuing to increase our investment in defence, we need to ensure that we are investing in wider intelligence, resilience and defence issues. That is how we will keep our country safe.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement and for her focus on Sudan at the summit. The world has never been in a more dangerous place, with Russia playing a dangerous game in and around our waters and harassing our carrier strike group. I welcome the £70 billion for Ukraine pledged at Ankara. What difference will that make to Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression?

Yvette Cooper: This is partly about the immediate support that Ukraine needs, both in terms of its military capabilities—we provide support, but we also learn from Ukraine's phenomenal innovation and strength, and the way in which it is using that investment and support—and its resilience, including civilian and energy infrastructure resilience. Perhaps most importantly, however, the fact that we have made a long-term commitment is also crucial to Ukraine's defence. It is because Putin thinks he can outlast Ukraine and its friends that he continues with his war and will not come to a peace agreement.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Could the Foreign Secretary say anything about the bilateral discussions between President Trump and President Zelensky, and can she shed any light on the discussions they had about the United States sharing its Patriot missile production licences with Ukraine? What can the Government do—apart from welcoming that, as I hope the Foreign Secretary will—to facilitate that exchange and ensure that it happens? It could be crucial.

Yvette Cooper: I can certainly tell the hon. Member that we support what I think were very positive bilateral discussions between President Trump and President Zelensky, which included the range of support they discussed, as well as the progress that Ukraine is making and the strength it has shown. I do not have further details for the House on the next steps, but we strongly welcomed the commitment that the US President made regarding licences for Patriot missiles.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. Recent events have underlined the need for us to co-operate much more closely with our European allies and partners, so what discussions did she have at the summit with her European counterparts on joint procurement between British and European defence industries, which I think will ultimately make our country safer and stronger?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We know that no one country can do this alone, especially for some of the most advanced capabilities; we also know that if we want really effective interoperability, joint procurement with our closest allies is hugely beneficial, and it helps our defence industries and jobs as well. One of the best examples of that is our joint procurement of

[Yvette Cooper]

new frigates with Norway—we are effectively procuring the same frigates for Norway and the UK, so we will have full interoperability as well as our combined strength in the procurement process.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The Foreign Secretary has rightly highlighted the UK's unwavering commitment to our ally, Ukraine. Her Estonian counterpart recently said that

“Russia wages war not only with missiles, but with narratives.”

With that in mind, last week I sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport about “Masha and the Bear”, a Russian children's TV show that is on ITVX and which Netflix has recently picked up. Funding from that show makes its way back to the Russian state, funding Putin's illegal war. We have also recently seen the International Olympic Committee allow Russia potentially to participate in the next Olympic games, and Eurovision has said that Russia may return to the stage, so what steps is the Foreign Secretary taking with UK colleagues and international counterparts to ensure that we stop allowing Russia to use the world stage to push its propaganda and its narratives?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the hon. Member about the importance of challenging Russia in every sphere. Not only does it attempt to use different spheres for its narratives and its misinformation, but it has used misinformation on an industrial scale to seek to undermine democracies, which is why we have imposed sanctions in that regard. As the hon. Member knows, we have strongly condemned the IOC's decision on the Olympics—we strongly disagree and believe it is the wrong thing to do. I will pass on the points that he has raised to the Culture Secretary.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I am really pleased that the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister were able to discuss Sudan at the NATO summit, because it is the biggest humanitarian crisis the world is facing. However, did she also have the opportunity to discuss the situation in Gaza and the west bank? It is nearly two years since the ICJ gave its advisory opinion and recommended that all states refrain from entering into economic or trade dealings that support illegal settlements. During business questions this morning, the Leader of the House confirmed that those settlements are illegal, so does the Foreign Secretary agree that we should follow countries such as Spain, our NATO ally, in giving full effect to our obligations under international law?

Yvette Cooper: I did take the opportunity to discuss the situation in both the west bank and Gaza with some of our allies and partners. I am deeply worried that last year's 20-point plan for Gaza—which was hugely important and which we supported, as did the whole world—is at risk of running into the ground. The humanitarian crisis there is not yet eased. I am also deeply worried about the expansion of illegal settlements in the west bank, as well as the increase in settler violence that we are seeing, some of which is effectively settler terrorism. That is jeopardising the two-state solution that we strongly believe in. We are looking at what stronger measures we can take in this area, including working with allies; we are looking at restrictions on trade with

illegal settlements, but also at the strongest sanctions regimes. We will continue to work on those issues with partners, because we need a two-state solution that supports the security of Palestinians and Israelis alike—it is the only way to ensure that.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I recognise the Foreign Secretary's personal commitment to Sudan, and I am very pleased that she is shining a spotlight on El Obeid. However, although I recognise how difficult it is to work closely with our Gulf allies on the situation in Iran while at the same time having to condemn them for their activities behind the scenes in Sudan, surely the lesson of El Fasher is that unless we take a robust approach with those Gulf allies, we will not be able to prevent another El Fasher in El Obeid.

Yvette Cooper: I agree with the right hon. Member about the importance of preventing another El Fasher. That is exactly why I raised the issue directly with a series of European allies and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and why the Prime Minister raised it with President Trump and President Macron—we have raised the issue across the board. We want concerted diplomacy across our allies, but there also has to be pressure on all those who have the potential to influence the warring parties. Some of those are countries that have influence, while some of them are involved in arms flows—we believe that around 12 countries are involved in arms flows that are supporting the different warring parties. That is why we want the arms embargo to be extended, and it is why I am having intense discussions with a series of nations, all of which have potential influence in Sudan. I will continue to shine a spotlight on what is happening.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the Foreign Secretary's responses to questions about the defence, security and resilience bank and the multilateral defence mechanism, can she flesh out how the UK envisages those initiatives working more closely together, in practical terms and maybe in financial terms?

Yvette Cooper: That work is under way, and has a joint commitment from our Prime Minister and the Canadian Prime Minister, who have been responsible in parallel for beginning those initiatives. The multilateral defence mechanism focuses mostly on the joint procurement side, while the defence, security and resilience bank focuses particularly on support for small and medium-sized businesses. They are effectively complementary initiatives, so we want them to be able to operate together, and to look at how we build a much stronger link between those initiatives and take them forward. That work is under way at the moment, and I am sure we will provide my hon. Friend with regular updates.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jeremy Corbyn.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) that he must not walk in front of another Member when I am calling him.

Jeremy Corbyn: According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, global arms expenditure has now reached \$2.8 trillion, with the USA, Europe, Russia and China spending the largest amounts. At any time during the NATO summit was there any strategic discussion about the way the world is spiralling out of control, with massive levels of expenditure on armaments, increasing wars, cuts in overseas aid by almost every country, and attacks on welfare budgets in every country as well? We are becoming a world that is increasingly at war, with increasing poverty at home. I realise that none of these issues is simple, but surely there needs to be some strategic look at what we are doing, or is the history of the 21st century going to be how we allowed the world to burn and spiral into war while increasing poverty at home in every country?

Yvette Cooper: As I have said, our security since the second world war has very much depended on the NATO alliance, which has always been a defensive alliance that has built its strength through deterrence. Deterrence is immensely important. When we reached the end of the cold war in 1990, there was at that point a substantial peace dividend. Many countries, including our own, saw reductions in investment in defence and more money went into other things in that period. Sadly, since then, what we have seen, including in Europe since Russia's invasion of Crimea, is the end of that post-cold war peace dividend.

When we see growing threats to our security, we have to maintain the defensive alliance that NATO has always been and make sure that NATO has the capabilities to respond to any threat that might come in our direction. That is how we deter those threats, whether that is through our deep precision strike capability that we have been talking about or through other increased capabilities, such as matching the technical capabilities that Ukraine has demonstrated in anti-drone warfare. We have to ensure that we have all those kinds of capability, including air defence capabilities, so that we deter the threats against us and maintain our security. It is troubling that we now live in a more dangerous world, but we have to rise to that threat and ensure that we can keep our people safe.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): While it is always great to see the Foreign Secretary, it is convention that the Prime Minister comes to the House to give the statement after a NATO summit. When she goes back to Downing Street, perhaps she can remind the Prime Minister that the country expects him to govern as Prime Minister for the 11 days he still has in the role, and this House expects him to come to the House on important matters such as the NATO summit.

What discussions did the Foreign Secretary have with her counterparts on improving missile defence for Ukraine, whose hard-pressed civilian population are still being bombarded every single day? In particular, Patriot missile systems may not be available, whether through cost or availability, given their redeployment to the middle east, but are there not systems in Japan and South Korea that could be used? Although there are some issues around the Japanese and South Koreans exporting some of that technology, where there is a political will, a way can be found to help the Ukrainian civilian population.

Yvette Cooper: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that there were extensive discussions at the NATO summit about air defences for Ukraine and the potential to mobilise a wide range of different partners and allies from across the world who may have other capabilities which could provide immediate and short-term support. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is not disappointed to see me at the Dispatch Box. I saw the Prime Minister at the NATO summit in a series of meetings, bilaterals and in the main NATO council, too. He was continually raising the importance of our 100% solidarity with Ukraine, our support for NATO and our commitment to these long-term defence partnerships for the future. He was also seeking to raise at the highest of levels the issues around Sudan, which are about our values and our interests. I pay tribute to everything that the Prime Minister has done over the past two years to put the UK back on the world stage.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Having criticised successive coalition, Conservative and Labour Governments for inadequate defence spending, may I yet again remind the Foreign Secretary that during the 1980s we successfully came through the height of the cold war by spending between 4% and 5% of GDP on defence, and that was without creative accounting? On a more positive note, did she detect the seeming shift in the attitude of the American President towards the Ukraine conflict? Is that because he just wants, as always, to be on what he perceives to be the winning side, or is it a sign that the depredations of the killer in the Kremlin are finally getting through to the occupant of the White House?

Yvette Cooper: I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for being liberal in his criticism of all Governments—I accept that point. The US assessment of what is happening recognises Ukraine's strength and resilience and the fact that, despite all the initial expectations that Putin would win the war easily, the opposite has been the case. It is also recognition of some of the links between Russia and Iran and their shared technologies and support, and how those relate to the security threats we face. It recognises the breadth of the Russian threats to NATO allies, but in particular Russia's failings in Ukraine and the strength of Ukraine's response and the willingness to support Ukraine in that.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Scotland stands ready to play its full role in the defence of Britain with many fine young men and, increasingly, women in our forces. We also have a huge array of industrial companies working on defence contracts. There is a problem, however, which is the Scottish Executive. In a remarkable display of overreach, they have blundered on to the world stage and refused to put vital public funds into defence firms that have legitimate commercial relationships with our ally Israel. What can the Government do about a fifth columnist First Minister in Edinburgh, John Swinney, who is damaging British security and thereby NATO, too?

Yvette Cooper: Defence and foreign policy are rightly reserved matters, because they relate to the security of the whole United Kingdom. Scotland plays a crucial role as part of that—not just as part of our armed forces, but by having crucial parts of our defence industry. We must continue to support that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, which had vast portions of positivity and good news within it. While the £70 billion Ukraine package and the 5% spending target by 2035 sound impressive, our constituents want to know just how well those declarations translate into safety on the ground. Russia continues its brutal onslaught. As was rightly pointed out at the summit, Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional aggression are incredibly worrying, too. How will the Government ensure that all NATO countries are fully playing their part and that every pound coming from our taxpayers will be matched by fellow NATO countries and their taxpayers?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member's question. I can assure him that the commitment to increasing investment in defence—both in each country's sovereign defence and in our shared defence—was evident right around the NATO council table from every country, and I am sure that that will continue. NATO's strength has been the commitments from all allies working together, and that commitment will make us strong into the future, too.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): May I take the Foreign Secretary back to the reply she gave to the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh)? By including some other admittedly vital services, she managed to come to a figure of 4% spending on defence. The reality, as we know, is that Europe is still heavily reliant on the US for its defence. Bearing in mind the President's recent comments, will she acknowledge that further increases will have to take place over the coming years? It is an internal debate for Government whether that comes from the welfare budget, as the Father of the House suggested, or elsewhere.

Yvette Cooper: I agree that we need to go further. The defence investment plan has set out a plan that takes us from 2.3% up to 2.7%. We have made commitments to go to 3% and then to 3.5% on core defence spending, so we of course need to go further. We need to ensure that as we increase investment, we also increase our capabilities and expand our defence industry. We must do so collectively, and with the most modern technology and capabilities. We must also show leadership, because it is not just about investment. As we work with our partners, those crucial UK capabilities and leadership are what keep our people safe.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During business questions, I mentioned the interests of council tax payers in Tendring district. I probably should have drawn attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where it says that I am a council tax payer in Tendring district.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, which is now on the record.

Timms Review: Interim Report

1.10 pm

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the Timms review of the personal independence payment—to make it fair and fit for the future, both for the disabled people who need it and for the taxpayer.

Today, the Government are publishing an interim report on behalf of the review's steering group. Copies will be placed in the Library in both Houses. We are committed to openness and transparency, so it sets out the evidence gathered so far and the emerging themes. It will inform the recommendations that will now be developed for the final report, which is to be submitted to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions this autumn.

PIP was introduced more than a decade ago, but the benefit has never been fully reviewed. Since 2013, the number of people reporting a disability has increased significantly; patterns of disability and ill health have changed; and the workplace and wider society have evolved. We have seen a sharp rise in disability and long-term health conditions, including in mental ill health among younger people. The number of people receiving PIP has risen considerably and is forecast to continue growing. Against that backdrop, we are taking a fresh look at whether a system introduced 13 years ago still reflects the realities of modern life, supports independent living and is sustainable for the long term.

The Timms review is the first time that the UK Government have co-produced reforms on this scale. Our aim has been to have a review that is not just about disabled people, but shaped with disabled people. That means working together with disabled people and drawing on their lived experience. The review is led by three co-chairs—me, Sharon Brennan and Dr Clenton Farquharson—and a steering group of 12 people we have recruited, almost all of whom have lived experience of disability or long-term ill health. The group represents a range of impairments, as well as different parts of the country. No single group can represent the full range of experiences of disability, however, so we have set up a wide programme of engagement of varied, accessible opportunities in which people with differing lived and learned experiences can get involved.

The interim report brings together the evidence we have heard so far. It includes a summary of findings from the call for evidence, which received over 38,000 responses, and an evidence pack provided by my Department to the steering group as a starting point for further evidence gathering. It is the strongest evidence base ever assembled on PIP, on the assessment process and on the experiences of those who rely on the payment.

The interim report presents a clear message from the steering group: PIP is hugely valued for managing the additional costs of disability, but its current design and delivery are no longer fit for purpose. The assessment for PIP is often described as stressful and dehumanising, and over 90% of those responding to the call for evidence reported that their experience of the PIP assessment was negative.

PIP provides a lifeline for many, but the fear of losing it on reassessment can create serious barriers to participation in work, community life and other everyday activities.

That is the direct opposite of the intention, which has always been to support independence and participation. The report also highlights that the benefit has not kept up with wider changes since PIP was introduced.

This work will sit alongside the Milburn review into young people and work, which is looking at the factors behind rising economic inactivity among young people and how the Government can better support participation, opportunity and independence.

The interim report sets out the next steps for the review. It outlines the evidence and engagement programme over the coming months, and how the review will test emerging thinking and develop recommendations that reflect the steering group's ambitions for radical reform, and that are credible, deliverable and grounded in experience.

We are not looking for quick fixes here. Reform needs to be guided by the evidence, if we are to address the underlying problems in the system and deliver lasting change. The Government are committed to a fairer system that has the trust of both the public and the people who rely on it. We have introduced the recording of health assessments by default, and we are substantially increasing the proportion of face-to-face assessments to 30%, which reverses the sharp decline under the previous Government and helps to improve trust, accuracy and confidence in the assessments.

Our objective is to reform the system so that it works better for disabled people, while ensuring that it is sustainable for the long term, and that the support will be there for future generations who need it. The review has been tasked with developing recommendations that can be delivered within the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast for future PIP spending.

I thank everybody who has contributed time, evidence and expertise so far. I thank the steering group, including my fellow co-chairs, Sharon Brennan and Dr Clenton Farquharson, for their support, commitment and determination. Crucially, I also thank the very large number of disabled people who have shared their experiences to help shape this work. The Government are committed to helping to remove the unnecessary barriers that disabled people too often face. This groundbreaking review is only part of that work, but it is an important part. We want to support disabled people in playing as full a part in society as possible. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.16 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): I thank the Minister for the advance copy of his statement. I put on record my thanks to the 38,000 people and organisations who took part and responded to the call for evidence.

Let us be honest about how we got here. This review was not born out of principle; it was born out of panic. Last summer, the Government brought forward proposals for £5 billion of welfare savings, but 126 of their own Members rebelled, and within days, Ministers had abandoned the lot. The Timms review is a fig leaf draped over that failure—a review commissioned not to fix the system, but to get the Government through a difficult week.

A year on, what do we have? An interim report. Not a decision, not a reform, but a report about a report, with a promise of full findings in the autumn, and perhaps legislation at some later stage. Meanwhile, the welfare bill keeps rising. Spending on PIP alone is forecast to reach £43 billion a year by the end of this decade. Every month of drift is paid for by working people, and every month of uncertainty is endured by nearly 4 million claimants.

The Opposition accept that the system needs reforming. That is why, last month, we launched the Conservative party's review of disability and sickness benefits. It is a root-and-branch review of a failing system that will look into who should get help, how they should be assessed, what form that help should take, the conditionality of support and how to control the level of overall spending. It asks a much more fundamental set of questions than this review. It sets out to make savings, as well as to build a better system.

The Government have now had two years, one abandoned Bill and two reviews, but they have not delivered a single lasting reform. The official Opposition's position is clear. We would restore face-to-face assessments as the default, because decisions of this consequence should not be made down the phone. We believe that people with milder health conditions are better served by treatment and support to get them into work than by being signed off for a lifetime on welfare. We would restrict access to sickness and disability benefits for those without a long-term connection to this country. We would bring the welfare bill down, because a welfare system that is unsustainable is no protection for those in genuine need.

Let me press the Minister on a few points, because there was very little detail in his statement. First, after two years of dither and delay, the Government have finally accepted what we have been saying all along: the welfare system is in urgent need of reform. Ministers boast about consulting nearly 40,000 people, yet they appear to have ignored the most important stakeholder of all—the British taxpayer. When will the Government actually take decisive action to get the system back on track? Secondly, the Minister told the Work and Pensions Committee in June that the review has the power to recommend reductions, and that he had personally asked it to consider conditions such as anxiety and depression and neurodiverse conditions. Will the interim findings address whether PIP is the right benefit for those conditions, and will he tell the House whether he is ruling them in or ruling them out?

Thirdly, before this review began, we were told that spending would not rise beyond existing projections, yet those projections already build in £43 billion of PIP spending by 2030. Does the Minister seriously believe that this amounts to meaningful reform? Would it not be better for the review to focus on identifying savings and restoring the long-term sustainability of the welfare system, rather than rubber-stamping an ever-growing bill for taxpayers?

Finally, the Milburn review concluded that the PIP system is failing to engage young disabled people in meaningful conversations about aspiration, challenges and the support that they need, yet the Government response appears to move precisely in the opposite direction by extending PIP award periods and reducing the frequency of contact between claimants and the system.

[Mr Peter Bedford]

Does the Minister accept that there is a fundamental contradiction between Alan Milburn's diagnosis of the problem and the Government's proposed solution?

Welfare should be a safety net, never a way of life, and a Government who cannot reform welfare cannot control spending. Disabled people deserve certainty, and taxpayers deserve value. The country cannot afford yet another year of dithering and delay, so I ask the Minister simply: when will the Government stop reviewing and start reforming?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman has set out some trenchant criticisms of the system that his party set up and left behind, and the question in everybody's mind is: why did the Conservatives not do anything about it? They had 14 years, and they left the problems to which he has referred. He should be apologising to the House for the system that the party he represents left behind. The biggest ever rise in the welfare bill was in their last year in government.

We previously heard that the Conservative party has a plan for £23 billion of welfare cuts, although nobody has any idea at all what those cuts will be. The hon. Gentleman did not refer to that figure in his statement, so I am not quite sure whether the Conservatives now have a plan. He said that the Conservatives will review PIP; I welcome his belated recognition of the value of a review, but I do not know whether that means that they do not have a plan any more, or that they are throwing away the plan until they have carried out their review.

The hon. Gentleman has rightly expressed concern about the rising costs of the system—the public are rightly concerned about that—and particularly about the steep increase in the number of young people who are claiming, but we have set up work to address that problem. His party abandoned the growing number of young people applying for benefits; we will not do so. We are changing the question that the system is asking, and we are providing employment support and the youth guarantee to give young people the chance of a decent future.

The hon. Gentleman complained about the small number of face-to-face assessments, but that is what was left behind by the previous Government. Understandably, the system moved away from face-to-face assessments during the pandemic, but they were never brought back; that is the problem. We are increasing the proportion of face-to-face assessments, which is an important and positive step. When we were upstairs debating a measure to facilitate greater face-to-face assessment, another shadow Minister said that it was a “nice to have”, rather than essential. We think that face-to-face assessments are key to rebuilding trust in the system, and that is why we are making the changes we are.

The system that the Conservatives left behind did not work for disabled people, and did not work for taxpayers. This review will bring forward proposals to fix the problems that they created.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I apologise for the fact that—as I have explained to you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I will have to leave straight after my question to chair Westminster Hall.

I thank my right hon. Friend for doing this very challenging piece of work. I think that the theme of fairness, for the people who need benefits and for taxpayers, is right. I have spoken to him briefly about the complaints from the Link Community Hub in Stradbroke in my constituency about the fact that people there with mental health conditions who are claiming PIP have drug abuse and alcohol abuse conditions, and are using PIP to fund those conditions. I have also complained about the young lads in their 20s driving around in Motability cars in Darnall; someone in the community has been paid to fill in the forms for them. On the other hand, so many constituents with really serious conditions get turned down for PIP, and can get it only if they struggle through the appeal system, sometimes without any help at all. So the system is not fair to anyone at present. I commend him for his suggestions, but is he going to have a real look at the different reasons people give for applying for PIP, and at how to respond to them properly?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I think we have an appointment in the diary to talk about the issues that he has raised about his constituency, and his constituent who has drawn his attention to them. My hon. Friend is right that, at present, the system does not work properly for disabled people, and it does not give taxpayers confidence that the funding is being well used. We are determined to turn things around and to be fair to both, and I am grateful for his support for the efforts we are making.

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

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I thank the Minister and everyone involved in the review for their hard work; this is a difficult subject, so it is much appreciated.

Today's report has confirmed what perhaps all of us knew for many years, which is that PIP is supposed to act as a lifeline, but is administered through a broken system. Disabled people say that the application process actively disincentivises them from staying in work and maintaining an active social life. That is unfair on claimants and damaging for our economy, and it should worry us all. People deserve far better. We welcome this interim report, and we will engage constructively with the Government and play our role in the delivery of genuine improvements to the system. We want a society in which everyone can live independently and with dignity. We need the right support in place to ensure that disabled people and their carers can live their best possible lives, and the PIP system must be built around those principles.

We must, however, recognise the structural underlying challenges in the operation of the system. In 2024 prices, spending on incapacity and disability benefits rose from £34 billion a year in 2019 to £51 billion a year in 2024, under the previous Conservative Government. The number of those economically inactive due to long-term health issues rose from 2.1 million to more than 2.8 million in the same period, and the figure is stuck at a similarly high level now. This is seriously worrying, and the UK is largely an outlier in that regard. On current trends, the total bill for working-age sickness and disability benefits is projected to rise to £78 billion in 2030, which means that it will have more than doubled in 10 years.

Managing these economic pressures in an effective, fair and sustainable way is vital, so could the Minister expand a little on the work done to make sure that the evidence gathered is representative? Is work under way to address the root causes of these challenges in a holistic way, looking at everything from employment support to mental health? Can he also update the House on progress on merging PIP and universal credit incapacity benefit assessments?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for this review, and for his tribute to those who have put a great deal of work into it already, and who will be putting in a lot more between now and the autumn.

The hon. Gentleman is right to make the points that the system is not working well for disabled people at the moment, and that its costs are rising rapidly in a way that is of concern to many, including, rightly, taxpayers. He is right to highlight that this benefit, which is supposed to contribute to independence and participation, too often presents a barrier to those things, because so many people are worried that if they undertake an activity, the Department for Work and Pensions will say, when they get reassessed, “Oh, so you didn’t need your benefit after all, then,” and take it away. There is striking evidence of the scale of the concern about going to work, or taking part in exercise or sport. The current system presents significant barriers, and we want to address those. There are, absolutely, concerns about the rising costs, which we also need to address. All those factors will be in the minds of the steering group as we progress with the review, ahead of our final report in autumn.

The steering group, as I mentioned, is made up almost entirely of disabled people. The concern about the financial sustainability of this benefit is of great concern to them as well, because if it is deemed to be not financially sustainable then there is a risk to its future. We need the support to be present for the long term for the large number of people for whom it is vital.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his work and look forward to welcoming him to Graeae theatre in my constituency, which is an exemplar of how to support disabled people to work and fully participate. In the discussions he has had so far, is he looking at adaptive technology? Money can be one of the barriers to living a full life, but there are now new technologies that can sometimes be in place of some of the funding that has been available for people to buy things themselves. Is he having any discussions with the steering group on that issue?

Sir Stephen Timms: We are doing quite a lot of work in the Department specifically on assistive technology. In fact, the Secretary of State was at a roundtable recently with representatives of the tech industry. One problem is that the technology is moving on rapidly but a lot of people do not know about it. People are not even aware of the technology that is already in our phones and available without any extra charge. We are doing quite a lot of work on that at the moment. I hope we will, later this year, be able to issue a call for evidence on how to do a better job on exactly the areas my right hon. Friend highlights.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for his statement. What a shame he has been asked to look at this issue only now, when his party had 14 long years in Opposition to work out what they wanted to do. Given that he acknowledges the system needs reform—as every new Government acknowledge—does he accept that, in today’s world, a system of cash payments to some people with conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, where half the claimants are aged between 16 to 24, is not what they need most? Indeed, some of them have no financial needs at all. Does he accept that the money would be best saved—will he confirm that there will be savings?—and some of it invested in better health and community services, technology, and incentivising businesses to employ the six in 10 young people who are not in education, training or work?

Sir Stephen Timms: I think we can take the hon. Member’s question as a tacit recognition that in 14 years the previous Government should have done something to fix these problems. The steering group is clear that the provision of cash to meet the additional costs of disability is vital. We will not be moving away from the importance of that, but I think there is a question about whether the process can also point people towards help that may be valuable to them in addition to, or in some cases perhaps instead of, a cash payment. There is help and support that people need, and I think the process could help to point people to that. One problem people have had to contend with is the terrible NHS waiting lists, which thankfully are now being reduced, but the system may be able to point people to the right place in the health service. We are looking at all those issues and we will come back with recommendations in our final report.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and I welcome the review’s direction of travel. As we know, the PIP system is not fit for purpose. Indeed, it has created much mistrust, stress and worry. More importantly, it has created a hostile environment for disabled people. At a recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on disability, which the Minister attended along with representatives of the steering group, we heard from disabled people about their experiences, and from organisations including Mencap and the Royal National Institute of Blind People that the assessment and PIP do not truly reflect or recognise the lived experience of many disabled people. As we move forward into the second phase of the review, can my right hon. Friend assure me that he will continue to have co-production at the heart of this process? The Minister should be commended for the work he is doing in co-producing the review. It is the first time the Department has taken that step, so we really cannot take lessons from the Conservative party. Can he reassure me that co-production will remain at the heart of this work?

Sir Stephen Timms: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I pay tribute to her work as the chair of the APPG on disability, and I am grateful to her for her welcome to us the other week. She is absolutely right. I very much hope that people with sight impairments and others looking at the review will feel that the Government have listened to the points that have been made for a long time. I assure her that co-production will be at the heart of the rest of the work as well. It was, of course,

[*Sir Stephen Timms*]

a decision of this House that the review should be co-produced. We have worked very hard to ensure that we are properly co-producing it. I think we are gaining the benefits of that approach and that the outcome from this exercise will be significantly better because it is a co-produced review.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the review plan to look into the question of what happens when something goes wrong in the arrangements for a disabled person receiving PIP or universal credit? This time last week I raised with the Leader of the House at business questions the fact that my casework team had been trying for six months to get an answer on behalf of someone who lost PIP and UC. We had a holding letter in February, but we have still had no substantive reply and this lady is getting more and more desperate. We did write to the Minister on 8 June. I know he has been very busy, but he should be receiving a letter, if he has not already, from the Leader of the House. When he deals with that individual case, will it perhaps serve as a guide to what is needed more generally to be able to communicate on behalf of our constituents?

Sir Stephen Timms: Yes, I shall look out for the right hon. Gentleman's letter and I hope he will receive a reply in short order. He is right that the system needs to work well for people to be confident in it. One thing he may welcome is that we have just started recording by default the assessments for PIP—the focus in the review is on PIP specifically—partly so that when something does go badly wrong, and his constituent's case may well be an example of that, we can look back at what happened in the assessment and ensure that that mistake does not happen again.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his work with disability groups as part of the review. As I saw during the APPG on disability roundtable and at the roundtable in Newcastle that I organised, the lived experience of those affected by disability must drive the reform of the disability benefit system. The report highlights that that lived experience is also shaped by the misinformation, disinformation and confusion around disability benefits as part of the wider public debate, which can lead to the demonisation of those with disabilities. It can also lead to unrealistic assumptions and expectations in communities more broadly. What can he do as part of his review to address that misinformation, disinformation and confusion, and ensure a stronger, more rigorous and better evidenced public debate?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and she is absolutely right. It has certainly been very clear in our review that there is concern among disabled people about some of the misinformation that she refers to. We want to ensure that correct and clear information is provided to people, and that there is clarity on the eligibility criteria for PIP and the assessment process. I hope that is going to help, but I think there will need to be other efforts, and we will work with disabled people's organisations and disability charities to significantly improve the position.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): There is a fundamental question here about what our priority is. Is it to reduce the bill, to reduce the amount of money that we are spending, or to ensure that disabled people can access all the human rights that the rest of us can, access society and be supported? We must recognise the extra costs of disability. What is the priority? The Conservatives are very clear: their priority is to reduce the bill. Our priority is to ensure that disabled people can live full, pleasant, excellent and wonderful lives. I appreciate the really hard work that has been put in by the team who have been involved in the co-production. May I continue to encourage the Minister to talk to Social Security Scotland and our colleagues in the SNP Government about their experiences of the adult disability payment and whether the changes that have been implemented in Scotland would make a positive difference to those claiming PIP?

Sir Stephen Timms: Our objective must be both the things that the hon. Lady refers to. We need a system that works well for disabled people and that helps to remove unnecessary barriers that too often hold them back, but we also need to create a system that has the confidence of taxpayers, which is the objective of our review. We are certainly very interested in what has been happening in Scotland, and in the work of Social Security Scotland. At one of our forthcoming expert evidence sessions, we will hear from Edel Harris, who, as the hon. Lady knows, has recently undertaken a review of the adult disability payment in Scotland. We are very keen to monitor what has happened there.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I welcome the review and thank disabled people, who have shaped it. Last year, I was pleased that the Minister accepted my amendment to the Universal Credit Bill to ensure that co-production with disabled people was put at the heart of the Timms review before any future changes to PIP were brought forward. Today's rich and important findings demonstrate why "nothing about us without us" is so crucial in shaping Government disability policy. How does the Minister plan to ensure that colleagues across his Department—as well as Alan Milburn and Sir Charlie Mayfield, who are reviewing ways to close the employment gap for disabled people and young people with mental health problems—learn from the Timms review and integrate the voices of disabled people? Will the Minister agree to come back to the House with the full findings of his report and to ensure that changes to PIP are joined up with the findings of the two other reviews, so that there is strategic coherence across Government policy on getting more disabled people into work?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am very pleased to be able to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her amendment. As she rightly says, that was what took us down the road of co-production, which I think has been a very fruitful avenue for the review. Central Government have certainly not done co-production on this scale before—I am not sure that we have done co-production at all in the past—but we are undertaking this review in a thoroughly co-produced way. It has been a very positive experience, including for the Department for Work and Pensions, and we will want to learn the lessons for future work. One thing that we will be doing is evaluating this review, so that those lessons can be properly documented and taken account of in the future.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to stay in touch with Sir Charlie Mayfield, who leads the Keep Britain Working review, and Alan Milburn, whose work I have referred to. I spoke to Alan the other day, and we will ensure that all this work is taken together. I am pleased that both Alan and Sir Charlie Mayfield have been talking to disabled people's organisations to contribute to their work, and I know that will continue.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), I welcome the broad direction of the review. I acknowledge that this is happening in the context of some people attempting to create a hostile environment—I hope Count Binface will deal with one source of that hostile environment in the weeks to come—but there is also the issue of language, as I think the Minister acknowledges. We should use less of the language of “welfare benefits” and “dependency”, and more of the language of “investment in people”, particularly investment in mental health services. Will he work with Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that people are supported before they need benefits, and that we invest in people so that their talents can be enjoyed in the workplace?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the importance of language. This is a topic that the organisation Turn2us has been thinking about lately. One of the things that I am pleased about is that my job title is Minister for Social Security. I think that I am the first Minister to have “Social Security” in their job title since the abolition of the old Department of Social Security at the end of the 1990s. I think “social security” is a good term, and this review is about delivering that.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all the work that he has done, especially on the co-production front, which has been so important to disabled communities. One of my constituents had his PIP disallowed on renewal over a late form. He was reassessed, with no change to his condition, and scored zero points, which was upheld on review. It was only at tribunal, where my team represented him, that he finally won the highest rate of daily living support, having gone two whole years without any help. What reassurances can the Minister give me that this type of dehumanising failure will not be seen under the new system?

Sir Stephen Timms: It is certainly our objective that the dehumanising aspects of the current system—he describes an example very well—should not be a feature of the future system. That is the clear aim of this review. The case to which he refers is not unusual, and many hon. Members will have similar examples from their own constituencies. The fact that we are now recording assessments by default could help us to find out why that assessment went so badly wrong. I really hope that we can improve things and rebuild confidence among disabled people and taxpayers that the system is doing the job we need it to do.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I have heard from constituents of different ages who are concerned about the planned changes to PIP, and who highlight its importance in enabling them to work and to play a full part in society. I want to ask specifically about young people under the age of 25. What mechanisms are being

put in place as part of this review to ensure that young people with cancer and other disabilities are considered, and that their distinct experiences are properly accounted for and heard as part of this process?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. This benefit is there to contribute to the additional costs of disability. Too often, what has happened—my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) just gave us an example—is that people have applied, the outcome has been wrong, and there has been a long, drawn-out process involving an appeal to get to the right answer. I hope that we will be able to develop an assessment that much more frequently comes up with the right answer the first time round, and that recognises where somebody has additional costs as a result of cancer and is therefore eligible for PIP. We will be talking to representatives of people with cancer, including young people, as part of our work, and I hope we will be able to come forward with recommendations that deal with the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is very welcome to hear of the work that the Minister is doing. He will know that one of our long-standing concerns is that one of the missing pieces of this puzzle is employers' attitude and approach to working with disabled people, and some of the misinformation that they might hold about things like PIP. He will know that disabled people often have to make 60% more job applications to get even an interview, and that one in three reports experiencing direct discrimination in the workplace. Can he update us on the response that he has had from employers about the role that they can play in changing the situation and recognising the talent that exists within our disabled communities?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point, which is at the heart of the Keep Britain Working review that Sir Charlie Mayfield is leading at the moment. He produced his report in November, which was directly about what more employers can do to ensure that their workplaces are accessible to disabled people, so that people who run into a health problem or disability in the course of their work do not automatically have to leave work, as too often happens. The reasons for that concern are exactly the ones that my hon. Friend raises: huge talent is too often being wasted.

I am pleased that after Sir Charlie's report was completed, he started working with 75 vanguard employers to develop the ideas in the report. I understand that the number is now up to about 250; there is a lot of employer enthusiasm here because they recognise how important it is. Quite often, the problem is that employers are not sure what to do in a difficult situation when somebody has a health problem. That review will take us a long way forward on exactly the concerns that my hon. Friend raises.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The Timms review pledges to develop ambitious, evidence-based recommendations that are practical, deliverable and capable of delivering meaningful change. I welcome the interim report. The devolution of social security to Wales is a prime contender, as it would allow the creation and delivery of social protections that better

[Ann Davies]

reflect the needs of our communities in Wales, as part of the Welsh benefits system. That is widely supported in Wales, including by disabled people's organisations. Can the Minister assure me that the Timms review will not let the opportunity for devolution pass?

Sir Stephen Timms: We certainly do not want to let any opportunities from the review pass; it is a one-off groundbreaking review, and we want to make the most of it. This morning, I had a good conversation with the new Minister in Wales, and we have agreed that we will work closely together. It is important that voices from Wales are properly heard in the review. A member of our steering group is a former board member of Disability Wales, and I want to make the most of the expertise and experience from Wales in the course of the work.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his update and his collaborative approach to the co-production process, as well as the time he spent with me and colleagues earlier in the year to discuss the experiences of those living with conditions such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's. The Minister mentioned that disabled people find the assessment dehumanising and stressful; that is particularly the case for those who live with fluctuating conditions and invisible symptoms, for whom no two days may be the same. Will the Minister provide an update on how the lived realities of those with fluctuating conditions will be better reflected in any new assessment process?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her help in the discussions and her continuing interest in the review. Criticisms of the way that the current assessment process handles fluctuating conditions are probably the most frequently aired criticism of how the system works at the moment, and it is important that we come up with something that does that job well. We have talked to a lot of people with Parkinson's, for example, and yesterday my two co-chairs and I were at the Multiple Sclerosis Society. The need to do the job well for people with fluctuating and degenerative conditions is at the centre of our concern, and I am hopeful that we will be able to do the good job that my hon. Friend wants us to do.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister and the steering group for their work. Their findings that disabled people find the assessment process dehumanising and stressful reflect the conversations that my constituents have had with me. Paragraph 64 of the review finds that

"the reliance on PIP has likely increased due to difficulty accessing vital services and support, such as community mental health services"

and Access to Work. Does he agree that the reform of disability benefits in the future must go hand in hand with improving those support services, such as by widening Access to Work and, in particular, cutting NHS mental health waiting lists, which are far too long? The Minister referred to falling waiting lists; I gently say to him that while physical waiting lists are falling, mental health waiting lists have not been falling. The longest waits have increased since last December, and the Government need to get a grip on it.

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that the NHS is delivering on all aspects of its work. There is a big problem with long delays and backlogs in the Access to Work scheme. We have recently announced the recruitment of an additional 480 people, which means that the number of people working on Access to Work applications will have more than doubled since the general election. We are confident that that will enable us to eradicate the backlog for Access to Work by September of next year. My hon. Friend is right that all those services need to work well and support people together. That is our aim.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): I thank the Minister for his statement and the recognition that, for many people, claiming PIP is not an easy process; it is deeply stressful, particularly reapplications and reassessments or delays on appeal. There are appalling levels of stress in the community as a whole, and I hope that this can be addressed seriously in the future. Page 8 of the interim report mentions that future PIP spending will be within the envelope predicted by the OBR. Does that mean that there is going to be some form of cash limiting for PIP, or does the report accept the principle that personal independence payments—which are incredibly valuable—are based on an assessment of the needs of people, rather than a Treasury-based limit on spending?

Sir Stephen Timms: The right hon. Gentleman is right about the degree of stress involved in the process. I spoke to somebody at a roundtable in Northern Ireland who told me she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the course of her working life, which came as a terrible shock and was a traumatic experience. A few years later, her condition had deteriorated and she had to apply for PIP; she said that the experience of applying was as traumatising as the original diagnosis. The effects that people have suffered are very serious.

The terms of reference for the review require us to stay within the currently projected OBR spending on PIP. There is not a cash limit, but one can project what the spending is going to be. The steering group is constrained to stick within currently predicted spending. I think that there may well be reductions, because if we do all the things that we have been talking about, we can do a better job for both disabled people and the taxpayers whose taxes are paying for the system.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's interim report and the commitment to co-production with deaf and disabled people's organisations. The report rightly recognises that while PIP is a highly valued benefit, too many people experience claiming it as stressful, dehumanising and simply not fit for purpose. Frontline organisations such as the Trussell Trust and Disability Rights UK have welcomed that honest diagnosis, but they warn that disabled people remain anxious about where the review is heading. Does the Minister agree that the real test of success will be the final recommendations being recognised as genuinely co-produced and commanding the confidence of those who rely on PIP? The Minister has mentioned that a good system will bring about savings, but can he assure the House that this will be driven by improving support, not by achieving savings?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to organisations like those that my hon. Friend mentioned—the Trussell Trust and Disability Rights UK—for their support for the interim report. I assure my hon. Friend that the final report will be properly co-produced. It will be led by the steering group that I have referred to, and there is going to be a lot of engagement after the summer around our initial thinking on conclusions, which we will draw up over the summer. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that people will be able to be confident in the conclusions we eventually reach.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I apologise for crossing between you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) earlier.

I thank the Minister for Social Security for his statement, for the interim update, which, as he said, is a rare thing as part of a process, and for his approach to dealing with this complex subject with kindness and compassion and treating disabled people with dignity. They really appreciate that. Nearly 300 of my constituents contacted me about the proposed changes to disability support during this consultation period. They consistently described a system that is too often unfair, distressing and mistrustful of disabled people. Can the Minister explain how today's proposals will restore confidence among claimants that PIP exists to support disabled people, rather than to challenge their entitlement at every turn, and that those who need it will receive it?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for this review. He mentions being contacted by 300 of his constituents; as I mentioned, our call for evidence received 38,000 responses, which I was very pleased about. We are doing further work, too. At the moment, Workshops in a Box are being carried out around the country to ensure that we also hear from people who may not be up for or willing to submit a formal reply to a call for evidence. The objective that the hon. Gentleman sets out is absolutely right: I do not think it is necessary for the application process for this benefit to have the hostile and adversarial characteristics of the current one, and we are determined to put that right.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I regret the stigmatising language that we have heard even today—this division between disabled people and taxpayers, as though disabled people do not pay taxes, and a division between those who work and those claiming PIP, when we all know that PIP is used to get people into work and support them overall. It seems that those now being targeted for invidious smearing are young people who are facing mental health issues. I urge my right hon. Friend to publish detailed analysis of that issue as soon as possible to give us a greater understanding of it, so that we can perhaps avoid the stigmatisation of these young people.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am certainly keen to avoid stigmatising anybody. If my right hon. Friend looks at the interim report, he will see that there is quite a lot of evidence specifically on that point. It is very important that that evidence is properly sifted and assessed in the course of our work, and we will do that. We want to remove barriers, because too often young people in particular

have started to claim benefits and then the system has abandoned them, which is neither in their interests nor consistent with their aspirations. It is not in the interests of the Government or society, either. We need to support young people to be able to participate in work and in other things by removing the barriers that have stopped them doing that in the past, and that is what we are determined to do.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Many of my constituents, including those already suffering the devastating consequences of the cuts to the health component of universal credit, are following the work of the Timms review closely and with trepidation. Like me, they know that PIP is not an out-of-work benefit, but is intended as a contribution to the extra costs of living with a disability, from food to fuel and transport. Will the Minister ensure that any proposals brought forward to the House are not driven by the desire for short-term cuts that motivated the last two proposals, and that the focus is instead on how people actually experience disability?

Sir Stephen Timms: I can give my hon. Friend exactly the assurance that she seeks: this will be a properly and carefully considered piece of work. She is absolutely right that PIP can be claimed by people who are in work or out of work. When we were having the debates last summer, a lot of people made the point that PIP is what enables them to go to work; without it, they would not be able to get to work. The question that arises in the terms of reference is: what can we do to ensure that in future PIP does a better job of removing the barriers that have stopped people working in the past? We want to bring that about.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The interim report rightly recognises what disabled people have long been saying, which is that PIP is a broken system. What assurances can the Minister give that the recommendations of the final report will be grounded in disabled people's right to social security, right to independent living and right to participate in society? Will disabled people and their organisations properly shape the next phase of the reforms, rather than merely being consulted on them?

Sir Stephen Timms: Yes, they will. The co-production approach that we have taken so far will be the approach that we take throughout the review. Over the summer, we will be formulating our initial thoughts about conclusions and recommendations and then, in September or October, we will be discussing them with disabled people and disabled people's organisations and we will hold events in different parts of the country to ensure that it is disabled people who are shaping the final conclusions that we bring forward.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I declare that one of my children is in receipt of the disability living allowance. I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the interim report. Earlier, we heard—without irony—a list of criticisms from the Opposition about the personal independence payment that they handed over to this Government. Clearly, part of the problem is also the SEND policies and the health service that they handed over to this Government. As my right hon. Friend knows, I believe that we need

[Daniel Francis]

cross-departmental buy-in as part of this process, as part of the SEND review, as part of health reform in the 10-year plan and as part of a review of PIP. Will he commit today to continuing to look at that issue, particularly for young people, and to looking again at whether to raise the age of transfer from DLA to PIP from 16 to 18?

Sir Stephen Timms: On his final point, as my hon. Friend knows, that proposal was consulted on in the Green Paper last year, and we are looking at that. I think he makes a very good point. I can assure him that we are going to be working across Government on exactly the concerns that he raises.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome the interim report and agree that PIP is no longer fit for purpose. However, meaningful reform will succeed only if the DWP adopts the culture of mutual respect that we are seeing through this co-produced process. Will the Minister therefore assure the House that the review will also examine the wider culture in the DWP, which far too often harms the very people it is meant to support?

Sir Stephen Timms: The focus of the review is very tightly on PIP itself. However, as I touched on earlier, I do think that the Department will want to, and will, learn lessons from the success of this approach to date, which I hope will be fully borne out in the final report that we submit to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in the autumn. I think that will be a mechanism for changing the culture in the Department and the way that it and, I hope, the wider Government work.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, his experience and his compassion, and thank the steering group for their work. Walking by on the other side, as others did, is not an option here. We have to get a grip of this broken system, driven by a real focus on ensuring that those with chronic conditions and disabled people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across the country get the dignity, respect and support that they deserve. As the Minister knows, because I have told him many times, many of my constituents have very loud views on and real experience of this broken system, so will he come to Newcastle-under-Lyme to meet those constituents and hear their views? He will get a very warm Staffordshire welcome if he does so.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his invitation. If he would like to drop me a line, I will see how my diary is looking in the next couple of months.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement today and for all the hard work that has gone into getting us to where we are now. The interim report finds very low levels of trust in the legacy scheme that we inherited from the Conservatives. How will the Minister go about rebuilding that trust not

only with disabled people and people with long-term conditions, but with the general public, to ensure that there is the understanding and respect that we all think should be part of the system?

Sir Stephen Timms: The key first step is to complete this review in co-production with disabled people and disabled people's organisations, and we will be doing that. Then I think it is a question of people seeing what the new system will be and observing in due course how it works. I hope that in that way we can rebuild trust and confidence in the system on the part of both disabled people and taxpayers—recognising the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) that there is a big overlap between those two categories.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his leadership on this issue. One of the leading causes of disability, particularly for working-age adults, is stroke. It is a subject I know all too well; my dad had a life-altering stroke at 55, and 10 years later, just days after his 65th birthday, it was a stroke that killed him. During those 10 years, PIP was an absolute lifeline for him. We learned very quickly as a family the importance of rehabilitation, which is why I was so concerned recently when I met representatives of the Stroke Association, who said that just 7% of stroke survivors are receiving the rehabilitation recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Does my right hon. Friend agree that investment in rehabilitation will not only improve people's mobility and independence but reduce their reliance on PIP?

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree that rehabilitation is very important. Perhaps I should refer my hon. Friend's point to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who I know will be very interested in it as well. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that when the health service is doing the job that we all want it to do, there will be less of a need to call on PIP, because people's needs will be dealt with by the health service. I will certainly pass on the important point that he has raised.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I declare an interest as the father of a child in receipt of DLA. "Not fit for purpose", "degrading", "dehumanising", "stressful"—the findings of this report reflect what I hear from my constituents. As the Minister moves to the next phase—co-production—will he look at moving to a more personalised, individualised approach? A lot of the review's findings relate to the application process and this sort of arbitrary gatekeeping around entitlement to money, when all people are asking for is support to live independent, dignified and productive lives.

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend raises an important and interesting point. Yes, I hope that we will be able to come up with a proposal that will entail greater personalisation. At the moment, for example, the number of different rates of benefit paid out is not very many—it is quite a lumpy system. I think there is a question to be asked about whether something more personalised could do a better job. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

Science Diplomacy

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): 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 time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

2.13 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 from the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee on our report, “Science diplomacy: Sovereignty, strategy and the global race”. I am pleased to see members of the Committee in the Chamber. I want to put on record my thanks to the Committee Clerks and specialists who have supported this inquiry, as well as the many witnesses who gave evidence.

I may have mentioned before that I am proud to be a chartered engineer with over 20 years of experience in industry, and for 16 years, I have been an engineer in the House, but as my friends, family and perhaps too many of my colleagues will attest, I am not a diplomat. In chairing this inquiry, I have learned much about the essential work of our diplomatic service and the international work of so many organisations and institutions, from the Royal Society to our armed forces. I thank them for their contribution. We found—the football analogy I am about to use was in the report even before England’s amazing win over Mexico—that the UK is in the premier league when it comes to scientific strengths and our global diplomatic network, but we do not know where we stand when it comes to science diplomacy. We launched our inquiry in April last year to examine how the UK Government should leverage scientific research and innovation to support its diplomatic goals, growth missions and national security. We held five public sessions and received over 50 written submissions. As the topic is so broad, we chose to look at the issues through three lenses: health and life sciences, quantum, and space. We also chose to focus on the UK Government’s strategy for science diplomacy, and its implications for sovereignty and research security, as part of the wider topic.

First of all, we found that the UK has failed to adapt to the pace of geopolitics. The geopolitical landscape has been turned upside down in recent years. Alongside rapid technological advancement, this has made science diplomacy more important than ever. I will give three quick examples to illustrate this. First, the global talent fund was the UK’s attempt to capitalise on the US retreat from science funding, but as it does not address the huge up-front costs faced by researchers, it is unlikely to have the impact that the Government desired. As of

June this year, just 18 researchers had been announced as taking up new roles through the fund. That is not going to move any dials.

Secondly, while the Committee recognises that overseas development assistance spending has been reduced to allow the defence budget to be increased, our report highlights the short-sighted nature of some of the cuts that followed, and the impact on ODA for research and development.

Thirdly, the UK-US pharmaceutical agreement has secured benefits—notably, exemptions from tariffs—but it also appears to have involved significant commitments affecting core elements of UK domestic policy. Although the global nature of the pharmaceuticals sector means that trade negotiations will inevitably have an impact on it, surely decisions about NHS spending, pricing and access to medicines should primarily be driven by the needs of UK patients, and balanced with the sustainability of the life sciences sector.

Our second key finding was that there is a lack of overarching strategy. Witnesses consistently cited the strengths of the UK’s research base. Though we have less than 1% of the worldwide population, we have 6% of global publications and receive one 12th of global citations. We found that the Government have not articulated a coherent strategic framework for science diplomacy, despite those strengths. Such a framework should set out priority partners and technologies, and the intended outcomes of partnerships.

For the six frontier technologies in the digital and technologies sector plan, and for space, the Government should bring forward detailed cross-governmental strategies, accompanied by clear delivery plans. The forthcoming plan for space provides an important opportunity to do that. The report also describes the Government’s approach to international scientific agreements and science diplomacy as “opportunistic”.

Thirdly, we found that in a geopolitical landscape that, as I said, has been turned upside down, the UK is in a global race for sovereign capability, whether it acknowledges it or not. The US’s decision to ban foreigners’ access to Anthropic’s most powerful artificial intelligence models was a watershed moment that proved—to mix metaphors, perhaps—that there is actually a kill switch. The Government must reflect on this when considering our ambitions for secure sovereign capability.

Although the own-collaborate-access framework provides a useful foundation for prioritising the UK’s approaches to critical technology, it is applied at too high a level to actually influence and guide decision making. There are so many definitions of “sovereignty” circulating. That impedes our ability to give our international stakeholders clear signals, and prevents businesses from getting the signals that they need to apply their resources—skills, investment, research and development—to the technologies that the Government will procure on a sovereign basis.

The UK is highly successful at generating world-leading research and innovation, but less so in turning that strength into the growth of high-tech domestic companies. Too many UK-developed technologies are forced to look abroad to scale. The private sector needs clearer investment signals. Yesterday at the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee’s evidence session, the Secretary of State emphasised frontier models, computer chips

[*Dame Chi Onwurah*]

and compute as parts of the AI tech stacks that she would like to have sovereign capability in. We need more clarity like that.

To finish, we have four areas of recommendation. On global policy, our report calls on the Government to strengthen the UK's international science and technology position through a clearer strategy, greater investment and improved resilience. On strategy, we call on the Government to publish a coherent science diplomacy strategy, with clear criteria for decisions on science partnerships, and with explicit strategies for engagement with the US and the EU, Commonwealth partners, other middle powers and competitors such as Russia and China. On sovereignty, the Government should define what "technological sovereignty" means when it comes to critical technologies and particularly AI, identify key dependencies in supply chains, and use that analysis to guide investment and procurement decisions. To support innovation, we recommend improving scale-up capital, expanding specialist investment funds and using public procurement more strategically to help UK technology firms grow. Finally, on research security, and with the recent Biobank leak in mind, our report calls for stronger research security guidance, improved information sharing between Government and institutions such as universities, and a cross-Government plan to develop a sustainable domestic skills pipeline in critical scientific and technological fields.

The UK's excellence in research and innovation is a distinct strategic advantage. To sustain it, we urge the Government to outline a science diplomacy strategy. Through such a strategy, we can ensure that science diplomacy remains a driver of progress, as well as a pillar of soft power.

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

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I start by thanking the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and its entire membership for the publication of a very interesting and timely report. Business, academia and the whole tech sector needs clarity, in some ways more than anything else. Does the Chair share my concerns, which are stated quite well in the report, that

"The government has repeatedly outlined that building sovereign capability is a 'critical priority' for the UK but has not been clear on exactly what this means or how it might be measured"?

There are lots of different definitions of sovereignty being bandied around, which mean lots of different things in different contexts. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need some clarity on what exactly it means in this sector when we use the word "sovereignty"?

Dame Chi Onwurah: It is one of the thrusts of the report that we need greater clarity on sovereignty. This is not an academic debate—we do not need philosophical discussions on what sovereignty may or may not mean—but as the shadow Minister indicated, on tech stacks, particular technologies and their supply chains, we need to understand what we are trying to achieve, so that business, academia and Government, and particularly Government procurement, can move in that direction.

It is interesting, because it was almost implicit that we did not want to say where we were looking for sovereignty, or where we did not have it, as that might alert our competitors to weaknesses. I think China and Russia probably know our weaknesses quite well, and it is our tech start-ups and our great businesses and scale-ups that need to better understand our intended strengths, so that they can support them.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I welcome this very interesting and timely report, and I particularly welcome the recognition that one of the barriers to developing or strengthening our sovereignty is the lack of access to deep capital markets at the later stages of start-ups' development. Will the Chair tell the House a little bit more about what the Committee found on that, and how she thinks the Government can help make sure that companies that want to rapidly grow in the UK can get resource in the UK, rather than in the United States?

Dame Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend highlights an important point in the report on investment and access to it, particularly for sovereign capabilities. That may be for what we call deep tech, which is tech that requires a long-term investment and that will not yield a return tomorrow, or even next year. We recommend supporting the setting up of funds that are dedicated to that, because it takes particular skills and particular access to investment vehicles to support that kind of long-term funding.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the report, and for all the hard work her Committee has put into it. I was very interested in the section about space. Does she share my pleasure in the announcement today that the SaxaVord space station is likely to have a launch of a rocket within the next three weeks?

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): I think it is brilliant. SaxaVord got some investment from the UK Government.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): In addition to acknowledging the investment from the UK Government, may I ask whether my hon. Friend's Committee agrees with the recommendation of the Scottish Affairs Committee, which I chair, that we should have a Minister for space in Government? That is because we recognise the cross-cutting nature of many of the issues that face companies that want to be involved in space, and the very many jurisdictions with which they have to negotiate. I think of maritime agencies, as well as Government Departments, local jurisdictions and planning. It would be helpful to have an indication of her view.

Dame Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend and Select Committee Chair for that excellent question, and congratulate Scotland on the proposed launch. The Committee chose space as one of the lenses through which to look at science diplomacy and all the issues associated with it. Though we did not recommend a Minister for space per se, evidence to the Committee highlighted the confusion about where the responsibility for space lies. Space is increasingly important in defence, and it is an area in which we already see covert, and sometimes explicit, conflict. There is a huge defence programme to consider. It is economically incredibly

important as well; we see the role of Starlink and other private sector providers in Ukraine in supporting communications, and the roll-out here. This issue is also important when it comes to negotiations on space debris and all sorts of matters, and it relates to planning permission and domestic issues as well. My hon. Friend is certainly right to advocate for greater clarity on the responsibilities for space.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud to represent Shoreditch, which has a lot of tech start-ups, so I welcome my hon. Friend's report. Following on from the question from, and answer to, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee), will she expand on how we can get that money into tech businesses, so that they can grow and develop? A lot of my businesses find that the machinery of Whitehall is slow and clunky, and they can get better investment quicker from other jurisdictions and sources. What does my hon. Friend hope that the Government can do, in relation to setting up the new fund that her Committee proposes? Does she have any faith that the Government will be able to move at the pace needed for those tech companies to grow, and to stay in the UK?

Dame Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend and Chair of the Treasury Committee for her question. She highlights one of the principal concerns regarding technology-driven growth, which we reported on in our report "Flying blind: innovation, growth and the regions": the access to capital, particularly for the kind of tech start-ups that we are discussing, which require long-term investment.

One thing we should regret most is DeepMind going to the US to form Google's excellent AI base, rather than remaining as a UK-owned company.

How can we get better long-term investment? I recommend encouraging the growth of specialist funds with deep sectorial expertise. In achieving investment

goals, we cannot get around the need to have technological knowledge and to attract international talent and technology leaders. The Government should also use their procurement of UK start-ups and scale-ups, because nothing is so valuable to a company as an actual contract signed with the Government, who are generally known to pay on time.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I am very happy to complete this hat trick of Scottish colleagues. I thank my hon. Friend for this excellent report, and I agree about the need to focus on science diplomacy, which is an opportunity for the UK; we should be much more ambitious about what we do.

As a former member of a science and innovation network overseas, running a team that wonderfully created the UK's first trilateral water research project in the middle east, I put on record the great work that our science teams are doing around the world. Will she say more about opportunities to increase or prioritise work between science, technology and innovation network staff in embassies?

Dame Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, because it gives me the opportunity to put on record how much the work of the SINs, which I now think are called the SATs, or something—

Alan Gemmell: SAINTs, maybe.

Dame Chi Onwurah: Yes, the SINs and the SAINTs. The name may have changed, and there are concerns about the level of support they are receiving from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, but there was unanimous support for the work they did. There are countless examples of that support having enabled tech companies to invest in the UK, and UK tech companies to identify and address attractive markets across the world. The SINs, under whatever name, are a successful example of our science diplomacy network.

Point of Order

2.32 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance following remarks made outside this House by the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) that have caused profound offence to the community I represent. To describe the Dunblane tragedy as “one murder” diminishes what happened to 16 children and their teacher and the suffering of everyone whose lives were changed forever in March 1996.

The people of Dunblane responded not with division but with dignity, compassion and a determination that no other community should endure such horror. It is because of their courage, and the united action of this House, that this country has some of the strongest firearms laws in the world and an ongoing cross-party approach to ensuring that those protections will not be weakened. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise how this House can ensure that the victims of Dunblane are always remembered with the accuracy, respect and compassion they deserve, and that Members reflect on their conduct in this matter?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter and for confirming that he has informed the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth. The Chair is not responsible for what Members say in the Chamber or outside it, but he has put his point on the record.

BILL PRESENTED

EARLY RELEASE OF PRISONERS (RESTRICTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Nick Timothy, supported by Mrs Kemi Badenoch, Rebecca Harris, Dr Kieran Mullan, Robbie Moore, Matt Vickers, Mike Wood, Katie Lam, Alicia Kearns and Chris Philp presented a Bill to make provision to restrict the early release of prisoners convicted of specified offences; to require the Secretary of State to consult on such restrictions in respect of certain other offences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 115).

Backbench Business

Israeli Settlements: Trade Ban

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Abtisam Mohamed, who will speak for up to 15 minutes.

2.34 pm

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a ban on trade with illegal Israeli settlements.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, the Government for allocating time for it, Members from across the House for supporting the application, and 32,000 constituents for writing to their MPs and asking them to attend and speak on this important issue.

Two embattled generations have grown up in the ashes of the collapse of the Oslo accords. What little hope was cultivated then—the promise of two states, of dignity and of democratic rights for all—has been replaced with abject misery. This is how injustice survives: not through one dramatic moment, but through gradual acceptance, the lowering of expectations and the repetition of the same statements while the reality on the ground continues to change.

For years, successive British Governments have said that Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are illegal under international law, that settlements undermine peace and that they threaten the viability of a two-state solution, yet the settlements continue to expand. I pose to the Government the simple question that sits at the heart of this debate: if settlements are illegal, why have we not banned trade with them outright? What exactly is it that we are waiting for? Why do we continue to maintain a status quo that has rewarded Israeli expansionism while punishing Palestinian aspiration—a status quo that has expected Palestinians to quietly accept that their humanity, rights and self-determination must always play second fiddle?

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making such a powerful speech; she always holds up a moral compass to us all in this place. Does she agree that those who deny access to medical treatment to children as young as four—who, while waiting for medical treatment, get to the point of near-fatal dehydration—and those who deny cancer patients in their thousands access to medical care in these settlements, are and should be defined as terrorists? If these settlers should be defined as terrorists, is it not incumbent on us and this Government to strain every diplomatic and every technological sinew to ensure that not one single pound of our money is spent enabling this behaviour?

Abtisam Mohamed: I agree with my hon. Friend; he makes a powerful point.

Some time ago, the Palestinian ambassador, Dr Husam Zomlot, reminded parliamentarians that Gaza, East Jerusalem and the west bank are not separate issues, but all parts of the same national story. They may be separated, occupied and besieged, but they are all connected by the same struggle for freedom. Together,

they are the beating heart of one state of Palestine—a state that the UK, our Government, has quite rightly taken a historic step to recognise. Yet, although we have recognised Palestine in its entirety, we have failed to make that recognition a meaningful reality through any follow-up action.

The expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the west bank has seen almost 500,000 acres of Palestinian land appropriated since 1967. In the last year alone, more than 120 checkpoints and obstacles have been installed to control Palestinian movement. More recently, the E1 settlement plan, which was approved by the Israeli Government, includes just short of 3,500 housing units. It includes the construction of a new neighbourhood, a new employment and commercial zone, and a new bypass road, which is for Palestinians only.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. She points out that Conservative and Labour Governments have for decades recognised these settlements as illegal, and now things are worse than ever. We have recognised Palestine, which is a good thing, but with the expansion plan and the promised further occupation, it is surely inconsistent for us not to have a complete ban on illegal settlement goods. If not now, when?

Abtisam Mohamed: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

The new bypass road, which is for Palestinians only, will reroute Palestinians and seal off the E1 corridor permanently. This is a state-wide strategy that uses every civilian and military means to appropriate land, isolate Palestinians and make a Palestinian state impossible to realise.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. As somebody who first voted in this place to recognise Palestine in 2014, I think it is absolutely imperative that we realise a two-state solution if we are ever to see peace and prosperity for either Israel or Palestine. Does she agree that the very conduct she is talking about puts that two-state dream at risk, and that that is why it must stop?

Abtisam Mohamed: I agree with my hon. Friend, and that is why it is essential that we are having this debate and that there must be a ban on trade. I will not take further interventions now because I have to make progress.

The annexation has accelerated so fast that today 750,000 settlers are believed to be living on occupied Palestinian land. Their presence each year robs the Palestinian economy, which is largely agricultural, of over £38 billion. Water in the west bank is extracted disproportionately to sustain Israel and Israeli settlers. Seventy per cent of grazing land in the occupied territories is systematically denied to Palestinians. Olive orchards are regularly set on fire. Toxic waste is dumped on their crops to destroy their economic future—I could go on.

Between 2009 and 2020, Israeli settlers in area C received 22,000 building permits; for Palestinians, the figure was just 66. When Palestinians build their homes, their presence is rendered illegal and they are often slapped with demolition orders. Settlers, however, can have their illegal outposts given full legal status by the

Israeli Government. In the last two years alone, 3,500 Palestinians have been displaced in the west bank. That is over 80 communities. This is an Israeli Government-backed policy reaching far and wide across the west bank.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Abtisam Mohamed: I will, and it will be my final intervention.

Andrew George: I am grateful to the hon. Lady; I did give her advance notice that because of the rescheduling of the debate, I would seek to intervene on her. As she knows, I visited the area a year ago, and the whole situation is unacceptable; in fact, the Foreign Secretary has already referred to the current circumstances as “settlement terrorism”. Does she agree that taking action on this is about not just cast-iron sanctions on trade but financial services and visas, including visas of British citizens who serve in the Israel Defence Forces?

Abtisam Mohamed: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. The first act should be that we seek to stem trade from the settlements; the other points are valid ones that must be explored.

Let us imagine two children born in the same land: one is born in an Israeli settlement; the other is born in a Palestinian community—perhaps one of the 58 refugee camps scattered across the nearby region. They may be separated by only a few miles, but they will grow up under entirely different systems. One will enjoy unrestricted freedom of movement, infrastructure investment, dependable access to healthcare, free-flowing water, the right to be educated, legal protections and state support. The other may face military restrictions, checkpoints, demolitions, land seizures and profound uncertainty about their future. They will both have the same dreams, the same hopes, the same potential, yet one will grow up benefiting from a system of privilege while the other experiences the consequences of occupation. These two children will be governed by two different sets of laws, one civilian and one military. I am sure everyone will be able to guess which child is which. These waves of injustice will keep flowing, over families, over communities, over generations. How is it possible that two children in the west bank can have such different experiences, yet still there is denial that it is apartheid?

Across Europe, action is starting to take shape. Ireland has moved forward towards a ban on settlement goods. Spain has already implemented a ban. The Belgian Council of Ministers is expected to agree the detail of a ban tomorrow and for it to be in place by the end of this year. Belgium has also asked the European Commission to bring proposals to the Foreign Ministers meeting on 13 July. The Netherlands has begun moving beyond a policy of simple discouragement and has tabled a legal instrument to ban settlement trade. These countries have looked at the same legal questions and the same settlement expansions. They have the same international obligations as we do, but they have concluded that words alone are not enough. The UK remains hesitant, which should concern us all because our Government do have the tools to act. The issue is not capability, but political will.

[Abtisam Mohamed]

Some will argue that it is too complex to enforce a ban and that our system of not allowing tariff preferences for settlement goods works perfectly well. It does not work, and it puts us on a collision course with our international legal obligations. Ministers cannot in good faith say that it is impossible to ban settlement trade, not when the UK's current trade agreement with Israel already depends on identifying whether goods qualify as being of Israeli origin.

Complexity is not an excuse to hide from our international obligations. In fact, the complexity is why a ban is needed. Settlement goods are routinely mislabelled, mixed into supply chains and rerouted to obscure their origin. According to a major Global Echo study, 17% of Israeli goods that are either sold, supplied or advertised in the UK are actually from illegal settlements. In the last week alone, my office has identified products from 12 different companies based in the occupied territories being sold online or physically in our shops and markets. Most of them are marked as Israeli products, so the differentiation system we depend on does not stop the goods entering this country; it only allows us to slap a tariff charge on them. Those tariff charges actually mean nothing because the Israeli Government offer incentives to settlers. They give out millions in grants to companies to cover the costs of doing business from an illegal settlement.

I remind the Minister of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion of July 2024. It includes an obligation not to aid or assist the illegal occupation, and to take steps to prevent trade and investment relations that sustain it. When I have written to companies such as Barclays and JCB about their links to Israeli settlements, they offer very little concern, but if our Government were to take stronger action to compel them not to do business in illegal settlements, we would see that action. We would see them sever their links with illegal settlements.

Others say that European countries find it difficult to enforce their bans, and that may make our job even more difficult. However, the question is not about new enforcement powers, but about utilising existing ones. There are enough instruments already to seriously disrupt illegal activity wherever it is happening. I need only point to the successes of legislation such as the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, through which much more complex sanctions have been applied in much tougher circumstances. When Russia invaded Ukraine, the UK did not say that sanctions were too complicated; we relished identifying Russian-linked assets. We did not say that economic pressure was pointless because Russia would just ignore it; we acted because we rightly believed in the principles at stake. What answer does the Minister have to the accusations of double standards that we constantly hear?

If the Government believe that international law has meaning, it should be applied consistently. In years to come, will we have the words to explain that we saw the warning signs, we recognised the damage being done, and still we chose to hesitate? Will we really be able to look back and say that we did enough? There are only so many times that Members can hear the same holding responses repeated at the Dispatch Box by Ministers. The Government say that they support international

law, that settlements are illegal and that they support a viable Palestinian state, so what does it mean if we can identify the problem and yet we refuse to take the necessary steps, and refuse to move beyond discouragement and expressions of concern?

The time to legislate for a ban on trade with illegal settlements was decades ago, and now it may be too late to do anything. We must demonstrate that Britain's commitment to international law is measured not only in what we say, but in what we do, because if settlements are illegal, Britain should not be trading with them.

2.48 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) on the tone of her speech, and I agree with her motion.

I could give a speech on dry, legalistic grounds, which in themselves are completely obvious, to show why we should have a trade ban with illegal settlements—because of the Geneva convention, or because of the fact that these settlements rely on international trade. The case is overwhelming, but I want to be more emotional.

I am a Conservative MP. I am not the sort of person who goes on marches, or who chants about a Palestine from the river to the sea. I am also realistic about the fact that Israel is surrounded by enemies. I am profoundly philosemitic, and profoundly immersed in Jewish culture—I read the Old Testament every day and that sort of thing. I have been to the site of the music festival; I have wept at the appalling pogrom against our Jewish brothers. So I am emotional, and I am entirely in favour of the right of Jewish people to defend themselves.

But this is so different. I have been to the west bank; I have seen what is going on there. This is profoundly wrong. People who have merely tilled their land for 2,000 years are being bullied and forced out. Even when we went there, we were confronted with armed settlers. This is outrageous. The whole House should cry out against it with one voice, and the Government should take action. That is why the motion is so important.

I am appealing to my Jewish friends, and to so many good, honest, reasonable people who detest what is going on at the moment. They are entirely in tune with Jewish culture, but unfortunately the Netanyahu Government are bound by right-wing extremists, and by people who care nothing about human rights and who have this weird and ridiculous notion that because 2,000 years ago that land was perhaps held by Jewish people—we are not even certain of that—they have a right to go in and force out people and destroy their lives. I appeal to moderate Jewish people: this must stop.

The Israeli Government could stop it tomorrow, couldn't they? And if the whole world acted with one voice, I think we could put sufficient pressure on them. But just imagine, dear colleagues, if this stopped tomorrow. I will leave you with this thought: if there were no more illegal settlements, if no existing settlements were expanded, and if the Palestinian people were allowed to live in peace and freedom like everybody else, would not the skies lift? Would not Israeli people feel that they could live in peace? We cannot have endless war. Empires come to an end. The Israeli Government cannot just destroy the Palestinian people with the misguided notion that that will give them security. It will give them no security; there will be endless war, endless hatred. Let us

in the House say that we believe profoundly in a unity of the human spirit. There should be no Muslim, no Jew, no Christian—we are one people, and we demand that the Palestinian people, like all other peoples on Earth, have a right to their own nation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The Father of the House got the timing bang on without my having to put a time limit on him, but I will now put a five-minute limit on speeches.

2.53 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for her powerful speech, and it is an absolute honour to follow the Father of the House.

On the west bank, settlement expansion continues in violation of UN Security Council resolution 2334. That includes the E1 project that aims to cut the west bank in half, and separate East Jerusalem. Last month, Israel approved 2,000 settlement housing units across the west bank, bringing the total approved this year to over 6,000. Those settlements continue to destroy historic Palestinian communities, any chance of long-term peace and a two-state solution. They are also accompanied by staggering levels of violence, and co-ordinated attacks on civilians and religious sites, facilitated by a culture of impunity.

According to the UN, there has been an average of six attacks every day against Palestinians in the west bank since the start of 2026. A recent report from the UN Secretary-General highlighted a steep rise in attacks by settlers on Palestinian children, reportedly often supported by Israeli security forces. It is part of a surge of settler aggression across the west bank, driven by the dynamics of Israeli politics.

We know that elections in Israel must be held by the end of October at the latest, and as things stand, Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right bloc is facing the prospect of defeat. The radical settler elements in the coalition are scrambling to impose facts on the ground in the west bank before the elections. Throughout 2025 and the first half of this year, the creeping de facto annexation of the west bank has increased greatly, driven primarily by farm outposts, which require none of the planning and construction work of older settlements. According to a report published on Monday by Kerem Navot, and its fellow activist organisation Peace Now, farm outposts now control more than 100,000 hectares, which is 18% of the entire west bank. Nearly one third of that wholesale seizure took place in 2025.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for laying out her remarks so clearly—much better than I could have done—and to the Father of the House. Emotion rightly comes into this debate. We are not just legislators, and we need to bring that sense of feeling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) is right to highlight not just that the settlements are happening, but that the aggression, backed up by the Israeli Government, exacerbates the issue. Does she have any hope that, realistically, any election in Israel will change that, and does she agree with me and my

hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central that we need to act internationally to resolve this? I do not have faith that an election in Israel will stop this happening.

Harpreet Uppal: I agree, and I will come on to that point in a moment.

Recourse to the law has been cut off almost entirely for Palestinians, particularly since another settler extremist, Ben-Gvir, was made National Security Minister. The violence is horrific, and it must end. The Government have been clear that we oppose the expansion of the settlements, which are a violation of international law, and I welcome the sanctions on individual settlers and settler networks that the Foreign Secretary announced last month. However, my constituents have been clear that we must go further.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): As well as the ban on trade with settlements that we are debating, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government now need to spell out exactly how they will seek to dissuade those who might engage in the E1 project, which would be so damaging to the prospects of a two-state solution?

Harpreet Uppal: I agree. We must hold Israel to account for its actions, and we must end all trade with the illegal settlements. Those settlements do not build themselves; they require money and trade, and they are backed by the Israeli Government. That is the only way we can ensure that we are not financially legitimising violations of international law.

I understand that there are complexities in banning that trade, but I share the belief of many of my constituents, and other Members, that the violence has continued at a rate that demands a proportionate response from the international community. Will the Minister update the House on what discussions the Government have had with international partners to better understand their plans to ban trade with illegal settlements? As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central mentioned, bans are in the process of being introduced in the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland and Spain. No law is perfect—absolutely not—but that does not mean we should not work on banning trade with the illegal settlements.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I thank the hon. Lady for her powerful speech. She talks about international law; does she agree with me on the importance of applying it consistently? In particular, given that the UK has rightly imposed sanctions and trade restrictions elsewhere—notably on Russia—does she agree that the same measures need to be applied to the Israeli Government's illegal settlements on Palestinian territory?

Harpreet Uppal: I do agree.

The statistics that I referred to must remain in our minds as we focus on illegal settlements, which are rapidly eroding the prospects for peaceful co-existence and a viable independent Palestinian state. Finally, I say to the Minister that it is imperative that we avoid the real prospect of doing too little, too late.

2.59 pm

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): In the interests of time, I will focus my speech on four key areas, having waited nearly 10 months for a response to a letter that I sent to the Minister in which he neglected to answer the questions posed.

[Chris Law]

First is the issue of complexity. The Government argue that it is just too complex to differentiate between goods produced in green-line Israel, legitimate Palestinian goods and those from illegal settlements. However, the Minister is acutely aware that the UK free trade agreement with Israel already requires settlement goods and those from green-line Israel to be differentiated. At the same time, the UK's trade agreement with the Palestinian Authority means that Palestinian goods have completely different import codes, so the UK should already be distinguishing between goods. Therefore, why is it too complex to implement a ban on illegal settlement goods when, as was mentioned, the Government can apply complex trade sanctions relating to territory in Ukraine illegally occupied by Russia, including an outright ban on goods imported from Crimea?

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for making those points. I, too, have engaged in written parliamentary questions and oral questions to try to understand why it is apparently so difficult to distinguish between goods from the illegal settlements, which the Minister for the middle east—the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer)—said quite clearly should not be traded, and goods from Israel proper. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that as long as that differentiation is not made effectively, there is no incentive for Israel to differentiate its goods and to stop hiding settlement goods behind those from Israel proper?

Chris Law: I completely agree with the hon. Member. That point could be made the other way round: if Israel cannot differentiate its goods—or it is hiding goods among others—why do we not just ban all goods until Israel proves otherwise? That would be a way to deal with it.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way, and I assure the Father of the House that the passion he feels finds a strong echo in my part of the world, where the cultural memory of being driven off the land is still very strong.

The Father of the House said that he would avoid dry, legalistic points, but I agree with the hon. Member that that is what the UK Government are doing: using dry, legalistic points. Does the hon. Member agree that the UK Government should do as other countries have done, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) pointed out, and go all-out by imposing a complete ban and then dealing with the legalities afterwards?

Chris Law: I agree with the hon. Member, who pre-empted a point that I am about to come to. Again, the options are there. The Government are either unwilling or unable to deliver what other countries are already preparing to do—including bans—and to look at legalities later.

Secondly, touching on the point made by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton), the Government repeatedly claim that other countries have been unable to bring forward a ban. That, too, is nonsense. For example, Spain is implementing a ban, and the Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland are enacting

legislation to do similar. Again, are the Government either unable or simply unwilling to abide by their own obligations under international law?

Thirdly, I welcome the UK Government's position—after having been dragged by their own Back Benchers—on recognising the state of Palestine, but we all know that that is utterly meaningless if there is not a viable state where the Palestinians can live.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing this very important debate. May I put on record my constituents' disgust at the actions of Israel in these settlements? Does the hon. Member agree with the Foreign Secretary's use of the term "settler terrorism", and that, if that is what we are seeing, we need a much more robust response by Government? If settlements are illegal, the goods are illegal, and we should not see them in this country.

Chris Law: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I represent the city of Dundee, which is twinned with the city of Nablus in the west bank—I am also a member of that twinning association—and I have had thousands of constituents write of their disgust at the continued trade we do with illegal settlements and their continued expansion.

Thirdly, as I said, I welcome recognition of the state of Palestine, but that is meaningless unless there is a land to live in. While the Government permit the existence of illegal settlements and continue to trade with them, they must acknowledge that that makes their stated policy of a two-state solution unachievable. After all, in case there were any doubt, Israel's Defence Minister Katz stated that settlement expansion was

"a strategic move that prevents the establishment of a Palestinian state".

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The International Court of Justice ruled two years ago that Israel must end its occupation of Palestine, yet that occupation is increasing before our very eyes. Given that the UK is still supplying arms to Israel and has not introduced sanctions similar to those imposed on Russia, we are obviously not doing enough, so what else can the Government do to give the Palestinian people their land back?

Chris Law: I welcome my Celtic cousin's remarks and I agree with her. On arms sales, one suggestion would be a recommitment to the Committees on Arms Export Controls that we once had and that I served on for seven years, which were dissolved two or three years ago. Such a Committee needs to be reinstated and what better opportunity than now, when we really need to scrutinise and examine what is being exported and in whose name.

Returning to the two-state solution, Prime Minister Netanyahu declared that as a result of the E1 settlement expansion plan

"there will be no Palestinian state."

No need for clues, no need for second-guessing. I put it to the Minister yet again: are the Government unable or unwilling to take action? Their inaction only emboldens further settlement expansion and makes the UK complicit in Israel's criminal behaviour against the Palestinian people.

My fourth and final point is that it is all very well for the Minister to issue his condemnation, for the UK to “call on the Government to reverse these decisions”

and for the Foreign Secretary to be “very clear” with Israeli Ministers, but without actions, as a result of the Israeli Government repeatedly ignoring these words, nothing will ever be achieved. Dithering must end and action must begin. What we are witnessing is the trading in misery, mayhem and murder of Palestinians, and their homeland continuously being stolen from them. When we do nothing, we are telling Israel that we support it wholeheartedly, and it shows how little we value Palestinian life. That is unconscionable and it is certainly not in my name or my party’s name, or those of the many thousands—indeed, millions—across these islands.

3.6 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing the debate and speaking with so much passion about an issue that concerns us all.

The ever-increasing number of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are illegal—each and every one of them. Their purpose is clear: they are a means by which the Israeli Government can encourage land grabs, separate one Palestinian village from another, prevent the villagers accessing water and other utilities, and make it more difficult to map out a contiguous Palestinian state. They are also a way of intimidating Palestinians who find themselves surrounded by these fast growing and well-defended settlements.

The level of violence instigated by the settlers has increased; more than 1,700 settler attacks causing casualties or property damage have been recorded across 270 Palestinian communities in the west bank in 2025 alone. On a recent visit to Israel and Palestine, our delegation saw the scale of the encroachment, the plans for further, larger settlements, and heard about examples of violence and intimidation for ourselves.

We visited the village of Umm al-Khair, where Awdah Hathaleen was shot and killed last summer. Eyewitnesses and bodycam footage suggests that the perpetrator, who has never been charged, was a settler already sanctioned by the UK Government. While we sat in the open, speaking with villagers and playing football with the children, an IDF vehicle stopped outside our meeting and two, fully armed soldiers got out, had a casual look as they passed and slowly walked on, before returning the way they came. That was a minor incident, but let us imagine that it was our life, and we knew that the people living at the end of the street wanted our house and our land, and would do whatever it took to get it, with the full backing of their Government.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Having been to the west bank many years ago, I know that that is not a new thing. Does the hon. Lady agree that the use by the IDF of artificial intelligence machine guns, which are trained on people using sponge-tipped bullets and tear gas, is a way of dehumanising Palestinian people as an attempt to make people abandon their homes? We should be working with international colleagues to stop these new technologies being used in civilian spaces.

Patricia Ferguson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. I know that there have been such examples in Gaza, too. I raised that in a Westminster Hall debate almost two years ago, and I was reassured by the Minister that none of those drones are being produced in this country, which is at least a start.

It is also clear that sexual violence is being used as a method of intimidating and humiliating women and girls in Palestinian villages. Some 70% of displaced families cite sexualised violence as the decisive reason for leaving their homes. Some 41 new settlements in the west bank were approved in 2025, and smaller unauthorised outposts are becoming an increasing feature on the landscape. Let us be clear: the settlements we are talking about are an integral part of the Israeli economic system. European imports of settlement products outweigh imports from Palestine, and we cannot as a country allow that situation to continue.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My hon. Friend is setting out very clearly the illegality of the settlements on the west bank, and the Geneva convention is very clear on this point. There are reports that properties on the west bank are now being advertised for sale, which is absolutely despicable. Does she share my outrage that the Advertising Standards Authority has been silent on this point until now?

Patricia Ferguson: I absolutely share that outrage, and I will mention it later in my contribution.

We cannot as a country allow this situation to continue. We are out of step with so many of our European partners. We have declared Palestinian statehood, which is great, but we owe it to the people of that state to ensure, in whatever ways we can, that it can function as a state. Increasingly, we are seeing the economy of these settlements moving from agriculture into tourism, real estate, financial services, construction, transport, digital platforms and logistics. Any action we take must be applicable across the entire range of goods and services, and must cover any goods and services that facilitate, support or benefit economically these illegal settlements. A ban that simply covered agricultural products, for example, would just encourage the movement of activity into those other areas.

We know that existing restrictions on trade have been neutralised, in effect. The Israeli Government operate a reimbursement scheme in respect of EU customs duties, and settlement goods are often being routed through Israel for repacking. As colleagues have said, what we need is an outright ban on the importation of settlement goods and on advertising such goods, too. If we cannot do that, we should ban Israeli goods until they can prove that they do not come from settlements. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central said, if not now, when?

3.13 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), and it is always a pleasure to hear the gentle Yorkshire accent of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) raised in fierce defence of peace, justice and international law.

Colleagues, let us make no mistake: while this country does need to rebuild its physical defences, in the end our defence lies in international law and the set of rules that

[*Kit Malthouse*]

we created after the second world war to decide how countries should peaceably settle their disputes. At the heart of the problem of international law at the moment sits the plight of the Palestinians, and if they sit at the heart of the problem, so do we. This debate is so important today because it is not just about the Palestinians; it is also about we Britons, the world we live in and the way we want the world to operate when it is in dispute.

As has been illustrated in the debate so far, nobody in this Chamber believes that the way the Palestinians have to live at the moment is acceptable. Nobody who has stood in the middle of Hebron and seen Palestinians living in cages or watched them being dragged from their homes, their olive trees uprooted, run over with cars and detained without charge; nobody who has seen the guns, the checkpoints, the walls, the UN signs saying where people can and cannot go or the enormous so-called settlements—that makes them seem somehow quaint, like “Little House on the Prairie”, but they are fortresses, forcibly invading and stealing other people’s land; and more recently, nobody who has watched these psychopathic settlers, though they are more like terrorists, roaming across the west bank, terrorising innocent Palestinian families on a daily basis and setting ablaze entire villages, can think that this is acceptable. Yet our country still sells them bulldozers, buys their goods and sells them financial services, and by those means, we financially support and help sustain this appalling situation, while hiding behind the fig leaf of complexity.

Therein lies a mystery that, I must confess, I have not been able to understand over the last couple of years. A third of the Labour party has put its name to a letter calling for a ban on trade with the settlements, yet the Government still do not move on this. Other countries across the world are instituting, or have instituted, bans. As the hon. Member for Sheffield Central said, the complexity argument falls away when we look at Crimea. A ban is not too complex for Spain, Ireland or other countries. Presumably, it was not too complicated for the civil servants who drafted the ban on trade with Crimea, or any of the other trade bans we have used, with effect, over the years.

As the Trade Minister will know, for other reasons to do with trade, we have insisted on the labelling of goods. We have even gently warned businesses off goods from settlements. We heard stentorian words in the last statement—“Take care in trading; there may be legal risk”—but the Government have done everything except the obvious, which is to just ban that trade. The question I am left asking is: why? Why the reluctance? Why the hesitation? Nobody is buying the complexity argument; we do not buy it in any other circumstance of trade. If we want to ban modern slavery, or goods produced by forced labour, we oblige businesses that are importing to prove that they have not acquired goods produced in that way.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for his speech. Maybe I can answer his question. Perhaps it is because of a nostalgia for an Israel that no longer exists—an Israel that made the desert bloom. We now have a state of Israel that routinely breaks human rights law, busts human law, and creates a situation in which it is accused of genocide before the ICJ. This is not a state that anyone in this House, let

alone on the Labour Benches, should have any sympathy for, because it undermines our ability to hold up international law. When we think about it, the state that now exists is ultimately one that everyone in this House should be able to condemn wholeheartedly.

Kit Malthouse: Strangely enough, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. This is probably the first time in our political careers that we have agreed. He puts his finger on the point that I am trying to make. This dispute involves our own security. We do not have to be pro-Palestine or pro-Israel to take that view, just pro-British, which everybody in this House should be, first and foremost. That involves being pro-international law, pro-peace and pro-justice; the dispute goes to the heart of that. He put his finger on the point that I was coming to. Nobody is buying the idea that the argument is practical, Minister.

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): I have not made any argument!

Kit Malthouse: I know, but I ask the Minister not to patronise us all by standing up at the end of the debate and pretending that this is all too complicated, which I am afraid is what his ministerial colleagues have said to us before.

We know that the argument against a ban is not a legal one; that has been proven time and again. Indeed, we have supported resolutions at the UN and used our position on the Security Council to say that it is not a legal issue. I am left with the only other option, which is that the decision must be political with a capital “P”. I am afraid that is the most appalling thing to contemplate. Either we fear consequences from other countries, such as the United States or whoever it might be, or we believe it is in our national interest to recognise that Palestinian self-determination and Palestinian lives are disposable in the face of that political decision.

Even worse, it may be that we just do not care. It may be that at the higher echelons of political command, whether it is in No. 10 or the Foreign Office, they really just do not care. They think, “If we squint a bit, make some statements from the Front Bench and have a couple of sanctions here and there, in the end, the caravan will move on, and nobody will care.” I am afraid that until Ministers realise that this is not some kind of complicated chess game across the world, but a matter of our security, our interests and our morality, we will not make any progress.

3.19 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing today’s debate, and thank Members from all parties for the powerful speeches we have heard. There is clearly cross-party support for the proposition we are debating. I recognise the work that the Government have done, supporting the Palestinians, whether it is targeted sanctions, aid, or recognition of the state of Palestine. However, we must be clear that the UK already recognises that Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are illegal under international law. We would oppose the illegal occupation by force of any country, and we must do so in Palestine, too. As in Russian-occupied Ukraine, so too here.

More than 750,000 Israeli settlers now live in settlements on the west bank and in East Jerusalem, and there is continued expansion every week, supported by the Israeli Government. That means the demolition of Palestinian homes, the forced displacement of communities, restrictions on movement and the annexation of territory. Save the Children, a charity I worked for before being elected, warns that settler violence has reached “unprecedented” levels, with 1,600 attacks on Palestinians in 2025, attacks on schools, and children facing physical violence on their way to and from school. I remember visiting Palestinian refugee camps and meeting children displaced by Israeli settlers. Those children are the victims of terrorism. The Government’s recent sanctions against a limited number of settlers are a welcome step, but they are insufficient, given the scale of expansion we see. Be in no doubt: the objective of establishing these illegal settlements is to render an independent Palestinian state unviable. The method is terrorism, expropriation, violence and intimidation, and the outcome will be that the two-state solution that this House has long called for will be impossible.

I will make two final points. First, trade is important, and bans should not be undertaken lightly or as a gesture. We all recognise the value of deep and complex trade relationships with other countries, both for our economy and prosperity, and so that our societies engage with and understand each other. However, trade relies on rules that are respected—on a system that is rules-based. Our constituents are consumers, and in a free market, they rely on the Government to ensure that trade rules are observed and that their purchases are not making terrorism and instability profitable.

Vikki Slade: Has the hon. Member seen today’s news that the EU is now considering a trade ban, and does he have a comment on it? If it is good enough for other countries, and if it is now good enough for the EU, it should definitely be good enough for the UK.

Chris Murray: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. It is not just in the UK that people are recognising that Israel is crossing multiple lines; it is across the world, so we must act. As others have said, countries such as Ireland and Spain are taking the decision to ban trade with illegal Israeli settlements. We must too, and now is the time to do so.

Secondly, it would be impossible for me to overstate the importance of this issue to my constituents in Edinburgh East and Musselburgh. In my two years as an MP, I have never been asked by constituents to speak in a debate as many times as I have been asked to speak in today’s debate, so I make this speech in their name. The time is long overdue for a ban on trade with illegal Israeli settlements. The UK must comprehensively ban all trade in goods and services with settlements in the occupied territories.

3.24 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I warmly thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing this much-needed debate. It is much-needed, because despite the fact that we have discussed the need for a ban on settlement trade on numerous occasions in this Chamber, and despite the fact that colleagues from all parts of the House have

repeatedly called on the Government to ban settlement trade, for the past two years we have heard nothing from this Government except excuses. That is simply unacceptable, because we in this country are complicit in what is happening. Failing to ban settlement trade means that money from Britain is actively supporting the perpetuation of the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands, and the clock is ticking. We debated just last week the E1 settlement expansion, which will put to death any prospect of a two-state solution and any prospect of lasting peace in Israel and Palestine if it is not stopped.

The Government have an obligation to do everything in their power to pressure the Israeli Government to stop the illegal expansion of illegal settlements and the violence that goes along with it. There is a moral obligation. There is an international legal obligation, too. Two years ago, the International Court of Justice issued an opinion stating that very clearly. One of the excuses we repeatedly hear from the Government is that the opinion is only advisory, but we have UN resolutions and UN commissions of inquiry that state that there is a clear legal obligation on the UK Government to do everything possible to not provide material support to illegal occupation. There is a clear moral obligation, too.

We hear two excuses repeated by this Government. One is that we cannot do this alone, and have to work in concert. We heard that yet again last week from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer). We heard it in June last year, when I raised this precise issue with him in a debate that I led on tackling Israeli genocide in Gaza. He said:

“at the moment no European power bans settlement trade in the way that she describes. It is something that we talk to our partners and allies about.”—[*Official Report*, 17 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 66WH.]

Since then, as we have heard, Spain has implemented a ban, as have the Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland, and it is possible that the entire EU will. Our neighbours and partners are moving far faster than us, yet the UK bears a specific historical responsibility for this situation. How is it that our Government are abdicating that responsibility and enabling the perpetuation of a situation that will actively counteract their declaration last year of their recognition of the state of Palestine? One excuse from the Government is that we need to work together, yet others are way ahead of us. Is it not time for the UK at least to catch up, even if we cannot bring ourselves to show leadership?

The other excuse we hear is that a ban is too difficult, but as colleagues across the Chamber have already pointed out, it was not too difficult when it came to Russia or Crimea. We have the legislation in place, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. We could put the provisions in place now.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The hon. Member is doing an excellent job of expressing the moral outrage shared by constituents from Herefordshire to Sunderland to Sheffield, but does she agree that if it is possible for international groups to find origin fraud relating to goods that originate from illegal settlements on the west bank, but are incorrectly labelled as being from within Israel, it is entirely possible for the British Government to do the same? There is no valid reason there for our not implementing sanctions.

Dr Chowns: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. One of the other excuses we hear from the Government is that settlement goods do not benefit from the preferential trade agreement that we have with Israel. That implies that it is already possible to distinguish between settlement goods and non-settlement goods, under existing provisions that we should be enforcing. Fundamentally, as has been pointed out, the shoe should be on the other foot. If Israeli exporters cannot prove that their exports do not come from illegal settlements, they should not be able to export to us. We should be absolutely certain. We must make it clear that it is unacceptable for British money to be at any risk of supporting the continuation of these illegal settlements. There is no excuse.

We do not have the excuse that we have to wait for other countries to move, because they have moved ahead of us; and we do not have the excuse that this is too technically difficult, because the legal framework already exists, so what are the Government waiting for? Why will they not take this step? Will the Minister recognise the absolute imperative on the UK to take this step now, or will we hear yet more excuses from him when he sums up?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I will have no choice but to reduce the time limit to four minutes after the next speaker.

3.29 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): For my constituents in West Dunbartonshire, a community geographically far removed from Palestine, the horrific injustice being inflicted on the Palestinian people resonates deeply. They look at the systematic confiscation of Palestinian land, the draining of Palestinian water resources and the suffocating restrictions on movement, and they quite rightly see an intolerable violation of human dignity via the illegal Israeli settlements.

In 2009, when I was a councillor, my West Dunbartonshire local authority became the first council in Scotland to pass a unanimous trade ban on anything made or grown in Israel. The ban was extended in 2010, and again in 2011, to discourage investment and trade with illegal Israeli settlements, and it remains in place today.

Later, as provost during the 2014 Gaza war, I made the decision to fly the Palestinian flag from Dumbarton town hall—the municipal buildings. We were the first council in Scotland to do so. Yes, that was met with a backlash, but it sent a message of hope. It raised awareness of the suffering and deaths of people in Gaza and the west bank, and it showed that they were not forgotten. We must not forget them here in this place either, 12 years on. It was a simple act of solidarity from a small local authority thousands of miles away from the occupied territories, but a combination of acts can make a real difference. That is why I support today's call for a ban on trade with illegal Israeli settlements.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My hon. Friend just mentioned small acts. Last week, three of my constituents, Mike, Fiona and Mary, travelled to Parliament and green-carded me so that they could talk to me about the situation in Gaza. They join about 40 constituents who have written to me ahead of today's debate, and over 800 constituents who have emailed me on the issue since

I was elected. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when so many constituents are moved to act, the least that we can do is make progress on ending trade with illegal settlements?

Douglas McAllister: Yes, I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. I think all hon. Members in the House have had the same volume of correspondence from our constituents, emphasising the strength of feeling up and down the United Kingdom.

Today, the situation in the west bank and East Jerusalem is at breaking point. Settler violence has reached an all-time high, displacing entire villages in a blatant abuse of human rights. Yet as the crisis rages on, the UK is not doing enough. I appreciate that we have finally recognised the state of Palestine, but we need to go beyond that and take decisive action.

The Charity Commission is being urged to investigate 32 British charities that have funnelled at least £28 million into these illegal territories—a figure that has been boosted even more by the British taxpayer through gift aid. We are inadvertently helping to fund infrastructure on stolen land. We should be funding peace, not obstacles to peace, and not apartheid.

Furthermore, the settlement enterprises know exactly what they are doing and they know that it is wrong. We know that because they routinely mislabel Palestinian products as being produced in Israel to sneak them into international trade markets and bolster the settler economy. Any goods or money obtained via trade with these illegal settlements are tainted by criminality, which is not something that our country should be associated with. They are the proceeds of crime that underpin Israel's illegal occupation.

I welcome the actions that our UK Labour Government have taken so far. We have sanctioned extremist Ministers and violent settler networks, and we have updated the business risk guidance. In May last year, we also rightly suspended negotiations on a free trade agreement with Israel. But guidance and warnings are no longer enough. We must ensure that the illegal settlements have no viable economic future.

On 7 June, I proudly signed the letter co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) calling on the Foreign Secretary to introduce a ban on trade with illegal settlements. By delaying, we are falling behind our international allies: Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland and even, we hear, the EU.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I want to place on record that my constituents feel as strongly as my hon. Friend's constituents in Dumbarton about this: we have to ban trade with illegal settlements. Does he agree that although the Government have taken welcome steps, as he referenced, they must go further to ensure this trade is not allowed?

Douglas McAllister: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I am sure his point has not been lost on the Minister, and we await with great anticipation what he will say from the Dispatch Box.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will conclude. Trade with these settlements is fundamentally incompatible with international law. It is time to turn our solidarity into decisive action, cut off the economic lifelines of this illegal occupation and implement a total trade ban.

3.35 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank my Yorkshire colleague the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing this debate, and for introducing it with the passion and power she did.

Every single pound that goes from Britain to Israel is in one way or another helping Israel perpetuate its illegal occupation and apartheid system against the Palestinian people. Just this week, *Haaretz* reported that Israeli nationalist crime in the west bank is up by 560% since 2019, according to official police data. We know that the vast majority of the crimes by these terrorist settlers go unreported and unpunished, so if the percentage increase is officially 500-plus, it will actually be in the thousands given the crimes that will have gone unreported.

These settlements are illegal colonies. For years, Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box and rightly described these “settlements” as illegal under international law—this Government have done so more times than I can count—yet the condemnation rings hollow. If settlements are illegal, why are we still treating their products as legitimate? Every shipment from a settlement carries a human cost in the displacement, deprivation of income and death that it constitutes. It is the economic bedrock of a system of apartheid.

Up to 110,000 Palestinian families rely on the olive harvest as their source of income. For generations, olive trees have sustained communities economically and culturally. There has been settler violence for many decades, but during last year’s harvest it reached unprecedented levels, all against the backdrop of a genocide in Gaza. A Palestinian farmer named Jamal Daraghmeah was beaten alongside his sons as Israeli settlers tried to harvest olives from the land his family had cultivated for generations. That is how settlements expand: families are terrorised, livelihoods are destroyed and communities are driven from their land, creating the single greatest obstacle to Palestinian economic development and self-determination.

These injustices are accelerating before our eyes. As we have heard, since the genocide in Gaza began, settlement expansion has surged, with 165 new settlement outposts established. That is an average of 47 every year, up from just over five between 1996 and 2022. The consequences are also measured in the number of lives taken. According to B’Tselem, Israeli forces or civilians have killed 4,000 Palestinians since 2000. In the past year and a half, 70 Palestinian children have been murdered in the west bank, at an average of almost one every week.

Just last week, Smotrich celebrated what he called the “revolution” in settlement expansion. That a sanctioned Minister is publicly boasting about accelerating annexation while settlements continue to grow unabated shows that this Government’s approach is having zero meaningful impact.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Does my hon. Friend agree that any debate on Palestine is incomplete if it fails to confront the elephant in the room, which is the allegation of genocide? I wonder whether he can help with this question; I suspect he will not be able to. What threshold of civilian suffering or alleged violence would cause the Government to reconsider their policy of maintaining normal economic and diplomatic relations with a state accused of genocide?

Iqbal Mohamed: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. As a barrister, he knows, as do many across the House who are not in that profession, that it is incumbent—an obligation—on the UK Government to take any and all practical steps to prevent and stop a genocide happening anywhere to any people, and that includes the Palestinians.

To conclude, history will not remember how many times this Government have condemned illegal settlements. It will remember that Britain, for decades, has chosen to keep trading with Israel and the settlements anyway. Condemnation without consequence is nothing less than complicity. Israeli settlers, aided and abetted by the IDF and the Israeli Government, have taken away the rights of the Palestinians to live. Instead of sanctioning the settlers, successive British Governments have actively facilitated and allowed goods and services from the settlements to be sold in the UK. Why do the British Government despise Palestinian life so much?

3.40 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester Withington) (Lab): It is not often that I agree with both the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) and the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). The Father of the House said that the whole House should cry out against the situation in the west bank. He is right and, as I look around, I think that is what is happening in the Chamber. I am not sure that anybody, apart from possibly the Front Benchers, is going to disagree with the motion, so brilliantly moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed).

I support a two-state solution, but every day, as the result of illegal settlement expansion, driven by violence and supported by the Netanyahu Government, that only real hope for a sustainable peace in the middle east gets less likely. Every day there are violent attacks on Palestinians in the west bank: homes demolished, farmland seized and roads blocked. Every day Palestinians are blocked from accessing healthcare, water, employment and education—the basics of life—as a result of their inability to move freely across their land. The settlements make the situation more intolerable and intractable every day.

Of course the settlements are a breach of the fourth Geneva convention. They are condemned as illegal by the ICJ, the UN Security Council and the vast majority of member states, including the UK. If we accept that settlements are illegal, we cannot just stop there. Many of my constituents in Manchester Withington have contacted me, calling for the UK to do what international law requires of us: to ensure that our trade policy reflects both our values and our legal obligations, and to do everything we can to stop the Israeli Government’s actions in supporting settler violence. That means, as a bare minimum, a ban on trade with illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

I am not naive enough to think that what the UK does alone will change the Netanyahu Government’s policy, but the international community, working together, has to use every lever we have in this situation. Last year, the ICJ set out its advisory opinion on the situation in the OPT. Governments who are committed to the rule of law should take its conclusions seriously. The court

[Jeff Smith]

said that states should take steps to prevent trade and investment relations that assist in maintaining the illegal situation created by the occupation and by the settlement enterprise.

Iqbal Mohamed: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this issue is not just about products coming from settlements to the UK, but companies in the UK trading in goods and services in the settlements? Airbnb, Booking.com and Expedia are all selling tourism services in the occupied territories.

Jeff Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point and we should not overlook the role of services—it is not just about goods.

The Government will say, and have said, that it is difficult to enact in practice, but just because something is difficult does not mean we should not attempt to fulfil our obligations. Yes, there will be practical complications about enforcement, but complications are no reason to do nothing. They do not stop us committing to the principle. Then we can work out how we make it work. We have heard a number of examples of how we can make the situation work.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is making a very powerful and informed speech, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed). I just want to press him on that point. Is not the important thing now for the Government to commit in principle to a ban on settlement trade? We can agree with our international partners that we should work out the technicalities when possible, but such a commitment would give the public the moral clarity that we are prepared to act in line with our values.

Jeff Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and puts it better than I did. We can figure out how to make a ban work once we have committed to the principle, and there are ways of doing it. As we have heard today, the Government already have processes in place to distinguish between goods coming from Israel and the OPT as a result of the processes on preferential access for Israeli goods, and we can build on that experience. We have heard that other countries are already instigating such measures, and we can learn from their experience.

A settlement trade ban is no longer a marginal or unrealistic demand; it is becoming a mainstream response. A ban on trade with settlements would not, on its own, bring peace to Israelis and Palestinians, but it would ensure that Britain is not contributing to an unlawful situation that the world's highest court has concluded all states have a duty not to support. It would demonstrate that our principles are reflected not only in our words, but in our actions.

3.45 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I congratulate the Government on recognising the state of Palestine. That recognition was long overdue, but a state needs territory, and its citizens need safety and security. The state of Palestine and its citizens do not have either.

Gaza has been devastated by Prime Minister Netanyahu's military action, which has widely been called out as genocide. Many of Gaza's residents have been killed or injured, and the survivors have lost family and friends, homes, health services, businesses and jobs. Meanwhile, in East Jerusalem and on the west bank, so-called settlers, who are better described as terrorists, are threatening, injuring and even killing people to take Palestinian land. The Israeli Government take no action to prevent this; indeed, they openly encourage the settlements. Members of the Israeli Security Cabinet have even stated that their goal is to make a sovereign Palestine unviable. We have to prevent that, because a two-state solution is the only way to achieve peace in that part of the world.

The Government have confirmed that the settlements are illegal, so now they have to go further. Like many Members here today, I have had reams and reams of emails about this issue, and my constituents have called on me to ask the Government to take more action. As well as using diplomacy, which I am sure we are doing, we must make the settlements economically unviable, so I call on the Minister to ban all trade in goods and services with these illegal Israeli settlements.

3.47 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) on securing this very important debate.

Somewhere in the UK today, a shopper will put a box of dates or a bottle of wine in their basket. A fraction of what they pay at the till will travel back to a hilltop settlement built on stolen land, which illegal settlers have bulldozed, fenced off and armed against the families who have farmed it for generations. Let me be clear: settler violence is not the work of a lawless fringe group; it is very much supported by the Israeli Government, the state, the army and Israeli Ministers. Israel's basic law declares that settlement developments are of national value.

We heard Prime Minister Netanyahu declare last year that there would be no Palestinian state. He was describing the Israeli Government's E1 plan, which cuts the west bank into two parts, and his Finance Minister has published plans for annexation of the west bank. Many Israeli leaders have said that they do not want two states, and we have seen that the terrorists torching olive groves and the Ministers signing annexation maps are not separate problems. This year alone, two communities, Khirbet Yanun and Ras Ein al-Auja, have ceased to exist. More than 1,100 Palestinians have been killed, settler violence is at a record high, and 350 Palestinian children remain in Israeli military detention. The illegal settlers have swimming pools, but the neighbouring Palestinians cannot even get water. The International Court of Justice looked at the situation and said that there has been an international violation, and that it is racial segregation and apartheid, yet nothing has been done.

We in this Government recognised the state of Palestine and restored the UN funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. We have also said that we would accept the decisions of the International Criminal Court, which has said that we should honour the International

Court of Justice's ruling that the occupation is unlawful and states must not help to sustain it. By not banning trade, we are effectively not abiding by what the International Criminal Court has said. I say to the Minister: please, promise us that those illegal goods will be stopped from coming to this country.

I also ask the Minister to recognise that over a number of years we have seen devastation, destruction and genocide in Gaza, we have seen what has been happening in the west bank—what has been mentioned is only part of what has been happening—where old and young people have been terrorised from their homes, and it is about time that we stopped overlooking what the Israeli Government have been doing. It is ironic that, when it is a country that we are supposed to be allied with, nobody criticises their actions or does anything, but when it comes to other countries, we are happy to impose sanctions, make armed interventions and everything else.

3.51 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): I welcome this debate and say a huge thank you to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing it, for what she said and for the enormous amount of work she has done for the Palestinian people since she was elected two years ago. It is much appreciated across the whole country.

The issue is basically one of international law. The ICJ landmark advisory opinion of 19 July 2024 says that states must not recognise, aid or assist the unlawful situation arising from Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. The ICJ made it clear that all states have an obligation to

“abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings with Israel concerning the Occupied Palestinian Territory or parts thereof which may entrench its unlawful presence in the territory”.

Furthermore, the ICJ calls on states to

“take steps to prevent trade or investment relations that assist in the maintenance of the illegal situation created by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”.

It could not be clearer, so why, as a country, do we still support Israel diplomatically in many ways? Why do we still provide weapons and security information to Israel, which have been used in the destruction of Gaza and other places? I would like to know exactly what information is passed on, given the increasing military presence of Israel in the west bank in support of the settlers.

I have many good friends in the west bank and Gaza, one of whom is Mustafa Barghouti, the president of the Palestine National Initiative. He frequently sends me messages describing what has happened in the past 24 hours. The messages he sends are heartbreaking. I would like to share with the House the message he sent yesterday. He pointed out that the US is now building its embassy in Jerusalem on land that it has been given by the state of Israel for \$1. The land itself was stolen from Palestinians by using the absentee owner law that Israel created for the occupied territories. It is not Israel's land to give to the United States for a dollar; it is Palestinian land that should belong to the Palestinian people.

I will give the House an example of the day-to-day horror story of the behaviour of the settlers, strongly supported by the state of Israel, the IDF and the Israeli police. A school in Masafer Yatta was told that it had 14 days to vacate the building and disappear, because it

was going to be demolished to make way for yet another settlement that had been “authorised” by the state of Israel. We see the destruction of ordinary life all across the west bank.

I have visited Gaza, the west bank and Israel many times. I have seen the horror story of what the occupation does; I have seen the theft of land, the destruction of water systems and the inability for anyone to get around in a normal way. Surely to goodness the very least we can do is support what has been said today, end all trade whatsoever that helps to support the illegal occupation of the west bank and show our solidarity with the people of Palestine.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I will implement a three-minute time limit after the next speaker.

3.55 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) on securing this debate. Like her, I support a complete legal ban on all British trade with Israeli settlements in the occupied west bank.

These settlements are illegal under international law, and Britain should not permit trade that helps to sustain or profit from activity that is clearly unlawful under international law. We have both a legal and a moral obligation to act. The settlements form part of a broader pattern of land confiscation, home demolitions, movement restrictions, settler violence and the denial of basic human rights. These policies are being actively encouraged by the Netanyahu Government and are intended, at least in part, to extinguish any realistic prospect of a future Palestinian state. If we genuinely support a two-state solution, want to respect our obligations under international law and recognise our common humanity, then Britain must act.

Palestinian children in the west bank are among those suffering most from the escalating levels of settler violence. According to UNICEF, 70 Palestinian children were killed in the west bank between January last year and May this year, which is roughly one child every week. The wider trend is equally alarming. According to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March this year saw the highest number of Palestinians injured in settler attacks for two decades.

Illegal settlements now physically occupy nearly 10% of the west bank, while settlement regional councils exercise control over approximately 40% of the territory. This has dramatically reduced the land available for Palestinian housing, infrastructure and economic development. The World Bank has repeatedly highlighted how restrictions on Palestinian access to land undermine economic growth and development. Without meaningful action to curb settlement expansion, poverty will deepen in the west bank, and the prospects for peace will recede further still.

Large areas of Palestinian agricultural land have been confiscated for the direct benefit of settlers. It is clear that this is not accidental or incidental, but a deliberate

[Gareth Thomas]

policy that enjoys the active support of the Israeli Government. Last September, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated,

“there will be no Palestinian state”,

while advancing the E1 settlement expansion plan, which would effectively split the west bank in two.

In its 2024 advisory opinion, the International Court of Justice concluded that Israel’s policies and practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are contrary to international law and stated that other countries, clearly including us, have obligations not to support or assist in the maintenance of the unlawful situation created by the settlements. A comprehensive ban on settlement trade would therefore be a practical and necessary step towards meeting those obligations and challenging continued settlement expansion.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gareth Thomas: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not, just because of time.

Britain would not be acting alone. Spain has already introduced a ban, while Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands have either committed to or are advancing similar measures. If they are willing to act, why are we not? Others have already identified the fact that there is a comparable restriction on goods originating from illegally occupied Crimea and other Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine, so the principle of a ban is neither novel nor unprecedented, and, with the appropriate care and consultation, could take place here in the UK.

We have the means to act and the responsibility to do so. A ban on trade with illegal settlements is both justified and overdue.

3.59 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I want to start by putting on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for bringing forward this important debate. I congratulate her on her tremendous, very passionate speech.

I am grateful to all Members who have outlined the legal position. We know that Ireland has passed a Bill banning products from illegal settlements, as has Spain, and Belgium is pushing to do the same. I am going to bring Members right back to the common-sense argument. The case put forward this week by the Irish Parliament was clear: goods should not enter freely into commercial markets, as doing so would allow illegal goods and services to be transformed into legal entities in Ireland. That is the crux of it for me, and it is that premise that has been highlighted in expert legal opinions by Richard Fisher KC and Rabah Kherbane of Doughty Street Chambers. They say that there is a legal basis under domestic UK law for prosecuting the trade of goods from Israeli illegal settlements into the UK and that it amounts to production under part 7 of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

The decision not to ban these products seems driven less by genuine legal application than by how such a position might be politically received by Israel. Fundamentally,

the question is not about trade with Israel but about trade with illegal settlements in illegal occupied territories and a matter of international law.

Mr Hussain: Does the hon. Member agree that the ICJ advisory opinion leaves the decision not as a political one but as a legal one? In respect of domestic law, we know that the Government accept the illegal settlements. Therefore, under the Proceeds of Crime Act, if the Government do not make a firm decision, are they not putting our financial institutions at risk?

Naz Shah: I thank the hon. Member for his comment. I was going to come to that in my speech, but I am having to miss lots out because of the time limit.

Currently, the UK Government strongly advise against conducting any economic and financial activities in illegal Israeli settlements, including financial transactions, investments, procurement and other economic activities. The Government confirm that that has legal and economic risks according to international law.

Here is the thing: so long as consumers are aware that goods originate from Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestinian land—according to international law, illegal settlements amount to war crimes—and are illegal produce, they can choose whether they want to buy the goods or not. Let me spell this out. If something is grown on stolen land, which is recognised as illegal by our Government and recognised to pose legal risks as proceeds from stolen land, so long as those goods are clearly and correctly labelled as “stolen goods”, they can legally be sold in Asda, Morrisons, Tesco or even Marks & Spencer.

Imagine if we were to apply the same principle in the UK to ordinary citizens. It would suggest that so long as a product or good is labelled, even if the product is linked to criminal property, it is fine. In fact, one could go even further and argue that if Asda, Morrisons, Tesco or any other supermarket were to sell stolen TVs, for example, so long as they labelled them “possibly stolen”, and businesses were warned of the legal and economic risks, it would be fine to buy one from the local supermarket. That is the bottom line: the consumer has the knowledge, and the authorities are happy to turn a blind eye.

We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the annexation and terrorism that the Palestinians are facing from terrorist settlers. Make no mistake, this is a state-sanctioned occupation and annexation of Palestinian territory. We cannot and must not stand by, because history will not be kind to us.

4.3 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) on leading this debate today.

The Government rightly say that Israel’s settlements in the OPT are illegal under international law. If that is the Government’s position, I welcome that recognition, but there is an obvious question: why does Britain still permit trade and financial activity that helps sustain those illegal settlements?

In a matter of days, it will be two years since the ICJ advisory opinion was given, which people have commented on. Two years on, the Government are yet to explain

how they intend to give effect to those obligations in UK law and policy. In a statement on 9 June, the Foreign Secretary said:

"I have strengthened our business risk guidance to make it clear and unambiguous".—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 162.]

I had a look at that guidance this morning. It goes no further than advising against economic and financial activity in the settlements. It does not say that trading with settlements is unlawful, and it does not say that such trade, financial services or investment are prohibited.

That contradiction was exposed during the Great Israeli Real Estate Event in London, where property in illegal settlements was marketed to British buyers. The Government referred the organisers to the Advertising Standards Authority. With respect, this is not principally an advertising issue; it is a question of whether commercial activity linked to illegal settlements should be taking place at all. If such activity is taking place through Britain's financial system, Britain's regulators should be asking whether it is facilitating activity connected to settlements that this Government accept are unlawful. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and I, as co-chairs of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group, have written to Britain's anti-money laundering supervisory bodies—but they bounce the matter straight back to the Government.

Ministers point to travel bans, sanctions on two Israeli Ministers and updated guidance. Those are all welcome, but they do not answer the wider question of whether Britain is using every available tool to uphold international law. The Government say they lack the powers—we have heard today that they do not. They cannot occupy two positions at once; they cannot say that settlements are illegal while allowing British commerce to help sustain them. They cannot condemn them in speeches and maintain those positions.

Today's motion cannot change the law, but it can tell the Government that Parliament expects the law to reflect its own state's position. This country has a history of having betrayed the Palestinian people since 1915, with the betrayal of the Sharif of Mecca in 1917, the 1936 put down of the uprising, and the facilitation of the Nakba. It is about time we discharged our legal and moral responsibilities to the Palestinian people.

4.7 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The continued expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied west bank and East Jerusalem is having a profound impact on Palestinian communities, where military violence and attacks by extremist ideologues are spiralling. Poverty is pervasive and economic development is almost non-existent thanks to Israel's systemic abuse and seizure of Palestinian land and resources.

Palestinians are being forced out of their homes, while road closures and checkpoints prevent them from accessing the services they require. Israel has committed ethnic cleansing and war crimes, as well as genocide, in Gaza. Children have been targeted, maimed and killed. It is right that the Government have recognised the state of Palestine, introduced sanctions on certain individuals and groups, and suspended some arms licences, but that is nowhere near enough. The time for expressing concerns and taking limited action was over decades ago. To

continue with the strategy when Israel has committed and continues to commit genocide beggars belief. We must stop looking the other way; we must not allow financial support for Israel's crimes.

There have long been calls to ban trade with illegal Israeli settlements and the Government must heed those calls now. Spain has already implemented a package of import restrictions on Israeli settlement goods, and earlier this week the Irish Parliament approved legislation banning imports from settlements. The proposed law states that it is designed to abide by Ireland's

"international legal obligation, as identified by the International Court of Justice in its advisory opinion",

and it specifically includes taking steps

"to prevent trade relations that assist in the maintenance of the illegal situation created by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory".

The Government agree that Israel's control of the west bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza amounts to occupation under international law, so why are we refusing to comply with international law by failing to ban trade with illegal settlements? That is the bare minimum—I would argue we should be implementing much broader economic sanctions against Israel—but it would at least be a start. By failing to do so, we are contributing to the systemic abuse of human rights and international law on which the settlements rely.

History will remember the way that the international community stood by and allowed Israel to commit crimes against humanity. I am afraid to say that the Government are on the wrong side of history, but they do not have to stay there. They could and should pull every lever at their disposal to pressure Israel to comply with international law. A ban on trade with illegal settlements is a lever that we should have pulled long ago.

4.10 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of a UK ban on trade in goods and services from illegal Israeli settlements. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing the debate and for all her work on the issue.

Last month I organised a letter to the Foreign Secretary, which was co-signed by more than 140 Labour colleagues, to call for such a ban. The strength of feeling among Labour Members, and across the House, is clear. I hope that the Minister has heard that.

The existence and expansion of Israeli settlements is an impediment to peace and to a two-state solution. Some Israeli Government Ministers are now helpfully clear that that is their purpose. In response, British Jewish organisation Yachad has a letter from British Jews in support of a settlement trade ban, with almost 1,000 signatures so far. As they know, Israeli settlements are not normal places, and we should not deal with them as if they were. Instead, we must follow through both on our historic recognition of the state of Palestine and on the ICJ advisory opinion. A trade ban would be one way of properly delineating between the state of Israel and the state of Palestine.

Settlements are an affront not only to international law, but to human decency. In 2013, I had the life-changing experience of serving as a human rights observer in Hebron, in the west bank. In this Palestinian city, day after day,

[Melanie Ward]

I witnessed the routine violence against and humiliation of Palestinian civilians by Israeli settlers and soldiers alike. I do not have time to share with hon. Members all the events that I witnessed, day after day, but they included a man being harassed and held at a checkpoint for hours because he took some biscuits to a kindergarten; a family with a young child and a disabled son being attacked by settlers, who called on others to “come and attack the Arabs”; and Palestinians being barred from entering their home by neighbouring Israeli settlers while Israeli soldiers stood and watched, as we asked them to help, before attacking us—internationals who were observing the situation—and arresting one of the internationals, with settlers cheering as they took him away in a van. We also witnessed daily, on the school run, Palestinian children being tear-gassed and having stun grenades thrown at them by Israeli soldiers. The Palestinian children were terrified. And so it went on.

Which other population would we expect to put up with that day after day? Every time I have returned since, the situation has worsened. Year after year, Governments issue statements about the situation. It is time we got on with a ban on settlement trade. It is no use the Government’s dragging their feet. We have had that on too many issues. Can we please just get on with it?

4.13 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am honoured to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) on securing the debate.

Earlier this year, I travelled to Israel and the occupied west bank as part of a cross-party delegation organised by Yachad. I met survivors of the 7 October attack and Palestinian families driven from their homes and living under daily intimidation from settlers. Let us be clear: illegal settlements are not simply an obstacle to peace; they are a deliberate strategy to make a viable Palestinian state impossible.

I welcome the Government’s decision to recognise the state of Palestine, but recognition must not be simply symbolic. We have a responsibility to make that state viable, and that starts with banning trade with illegal settlements. The UK should not allow goods produced on occupied land to enter our markets, and nor should British businesses profit from activity that our own Government say is illegal. We should also suspend trade concessions and sanction any company bidding for contracts to design, finance or construct illegal settlements, such as those in E1.

There needs to be far greater scrutiny of British money flowing into settlements. No UK charities should retain charitable status while facilitating settlements, and no British financial institutions should be investing in companies sustaining settlement expansion. There must be accountability when British-funded infrastructure is destroyed. In Khirbet Zanuta, I saw the remains of a school partly funded by UK aid. It was destroyed by sustained settler attacks, which forced the community

to flee. The British Government should seek compensation from the Israeli Government for the destruction of infrastructure funded by UK taxpayers.

Finally, we must support the institutions of the Palestinian state. Representatives of the Palestinian Authority described to me the financial crisis caused by Israel’s withholding of Palestinian tax and tariff revenues. Its continued withholding weakens the institutions that any future Palestinian state will depend on. If we are serious about nation building, the UK must apply renewed pressure for the release of those revenues in full, without delay.

None of these measures are anti-Israel; they are pro-peace. They are about defending international law, supporting those on both sides working for co-existence, and preserving any realistic prospect of a negotiated two-state solution. My hon. Friend the Minister is a man of principle, and of strong values and determination, and he will resist excuses for not acting. I urge him to apply those principles and that determination to this problem. The world watches us, and we must act.

4.16 pm

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): For over half a century, successive Governments of every political persuasion have affirmed to this House that Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are unlawful. This is not a matter of personal interpretation, but a consistent and well-established legal consensus—consensus that is shared by the Foreign Office, codified in resolutions of the United Nations Security Council and, since July 2024, articulated with exceptional clarity by the International Court of Justice. Yet the stain on our moral fabric is that despite recognition of that, those same settlement goods are sold in British shops, and just last month, settler properties were marketed at a fair in London.

When settlement expansion threatens to extinguish the very two-state solution that this Government are committed to, we must ask ourselves what purpose is served by delaying the upholding of moral and legal obligations that some of our European allies have already begun to uphold. Put simply, when Spain has banned all settlement trade, why cannot we?

Across the House, there is consensus among Members on our position that this expansion is illegal under international law, yet through our continued delay in banning trade with these settlements, we risk in practice, if not in principle, giving legitimacy to Israel’s claim to sovereignty over occupied territory. If we are not prepared to match our rhetoric with action, our condemnation of settlement expansion amounts to lip service.

In January, many of us took to these Benches to stress the importance of the rules-based order when the President of the United States threatened to take Greenland. We have time and again championed that same order in condemning Putin and rightly standing with Ukraine. We risk losing credibility for having made those correct calls the moment we permit commerce with what we, and everyone around us, deem an illegal enterprise.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the hon. Member give way?

Naushabah Khan: I will not, in the interests of time, thank you.

Nor is it only Israel's sovereignty over occupied land that we risk legitimising; it is also the violent means by which these territories are being occupied. The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs documented over 1,700 settler attacks on Palestinian communities across the west bank just last year. Not taking action now is to underwrite, however indirectly, the conditions in which violence is inflicted on Palestinian men, women and children by Israeli settlers, and the military force that stands behind it. I therefore urge the Minister not to delay any further, and to take action today.

4.19 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) not just on the power of her words, but on her extensive work, day in, day out, on this issue. When discussing this issue, we should start from a clear principle: if we support a two-state solution, we cannot trade with those who, through illegal activities, make that less achievable with every passing day. This is about life on the west bank, and whether we are prepared to acknowledge realities that impede the everyday life of Palestinians. Prosperity and dignity depend on very ordinary things that we all take for granted—getting to work on time; children being able to see their grandparents; and accessing water, services and opportunities—but those things are simply not possible for an increasing number of Palestinian communities.

I am fortunate to know the Antonine Friendship Link, a humanitarian group in the Falkirk area that advocates for the human rights of Palestinians in Jayyous on the west bank, creating friendships and solidarity across communities and borders. Those long-standing connections gave me the opportunity to hear directly from Sharif, an olive farmer in the village. He gave deeply moving testimony about life at a time when there are extraordinary constraints on people's liberty, freedom and agency. Sharif spoke to me about regular obstructions that he faced in getting to his land and place of work, intimidation from nearby settlers, and the frustration of lawlessness. He has taken on multiple legal cases, including in the Supreme Court of Israel, and he has won. However, those decisions are not meaningfully upheld in practice, and obstacle after obstacle has been placed, often literally, in his way. His olive groves, his livelihood, and his community remain isolated.

Sharif's account is like much of the evidence available to us, and the only conclusion I feel able to draw is that communities such as Jayyous are being increasingly and purposefully squeezed, isolated and made less viable. For people like Sharif and communities like Jayyous, and for their peace, security and chance to lead normal lives, we must be prepared to examine seriously whether trade with illegal settlements is compatible and consistent with the values and objectives of our overall goal of a two-state solution. In my view it is not.

4.21 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I think the Minister has got the message—[*Laughter.*] No, I am being serious. We cannot go on like this. We cannot keep on turning up and debating like this, and taking no action. The Minister is effective and has got the message, and I think that over the next few weeks we might see some action. I desperately hope so.

We have all been talking about physical infrastructure and the annexation of the west bank, but I also want to talk about what the Israelis are doing to civil society, and mention two cases that I have been raising over the last few weeks. About two weeks ago, the house in Ramallah of Dr Mazen al-Rantisi, known on the west bank as the doctor of the poor, was raided and he was arrested. We have not seen or heard from him since, and we do not even know where he is detained. He is chair of the Union of Health Work Committees on the west bank. It is registered with the Palestinian Authority, but it has been declared illegal by the Israelis. We do not know why, as no grounds have been put forward. Will the Minister convey to the Foreign Office that we need information about where Dr al-Rantisi is, and how we can get him some independent access and assessment?

The second case is more worrying for me. Dr Hussam Abu Safiya has now been in solitary confinement for 18 months. His lawyer visited him last week—we all got the message, didn't we? His lawyer saw him. It looked as though he had been interrogated again, and tortured, and his lawyer said that he could not sit up straight and was falling over. In addition, his lawyer said, "I actually think his life is now at risk." I raised the issue in the House 10 days ago, and directly with the Foreign Office Minister, and we got an assurance that it would be raised by the FCDO.

I have been here long enough to know that, in other such instances, the country's ambassador has been brought in and given a clear view of the Government's position. With regard to Dr Safiya, all we are asking for is access to an independent medical assessment, so that he can be assessed and receive some treatment, rather than being tortured in the way he is being. I raise that because I have fear that if we do not take some action, within a few weeks, he may no longer be alive.

4.24 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests with regard to my visit to Palestine with Yachad. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for securing the debate and for her exemplary argument, among the many given by colleagues.

I have always supported a Palestinian state in the west bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. Israeli settlement land grabs and control of Palestinian territory are illegal under international law, and I consider them an occupation of Palestinian land. We do not recognise the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, and we do not recognise the Israeli-occupied territories of Palestine. We do not trade with the Russian occupied territories, and we must apply the same principle here: no trade with the Israeli occupied territories of Palestine.

Violence and harassment by Israeli settlers has reached unprecedented levels. According to the UN, in 2025, more than 1,700 settler attacks causing casualties and property damage were recorded across more than 217 Palestinian communities in the west bank. I witnessed that myself in the south Hebron hills in 2024.

The international trend is moving towards prohibiting settlement trade outright, rather than relying solely on differentiation, as the Government do. Spain has enacted legislation prohibiting settlement trade, and the Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium and Norway have advanced legislation

[Alex Sobel]

or Government proposals. Bills have been introduced in the French and Italian Parliaments. I therefore support the call for a total ban on trade with illegal Israeli settlements, in line with our European counterparts.

I will use my remaining time to raise the need to free Marwan Barghouti. Marwan has been illegally held by Israel for 24 years, two months and 22 days. He has been unjustly imprisoned by Israel for over two decades, convicted in a trial by a court he did not recognise. The Inter-Parliamentary Union has declared multiple breaches in his case, starting with his illegal arrest and transfer to Israel. Despite his imprisonment, poll after poll shows that he is Palestine's most popular leader. He is a powerful symbol of unity and a long-time advocate for freedom and dignity for the people of Palestine. In the words of Nelson Mandela in 2002,

"What is happening to Barghouti is exactly the same as what happened to me."

We must free Marwan and end the occupation.

4.26 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): Many people across the country will be watching the debate with real interest. I welcome the thoughtful contributions of colleagues across the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed), who I thank for securing the debate.

From the outset, I express my solidarity with both Palestinians and Israelis who want to secure a lasting peace that will ensure that generations to come do not grow up under the shadow of war. There is one angle that I would like to examine more closely in my remarks: the critical impact on the lives and livelihoods of women and children among these illegal settlements. Their rapid expansion has helped to push the Palestinian economy into its worst decline since records began. That means that many women within the west bank are forced to seek employment in these settlements, where the work is exploitative and dangerous. Ninety-three per cent of workers report hazardous conditions, and 94% are without a written contract between them and their employers. The propensity for sexual and gender-based violence is spiralling and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) said, 70% of displaced Palestinian families identify the risk of sexual violence as a key factor in leaving their home.

Such appalling treatment is designed to humiliate and punish Palestinian communities, and it is being conducted with impunity. To compound that, the expansion of checkpoints and roadblocks is precluding women and girls, as well as men and boys, from accessing health care, education, legitimate employment and connection to their communities. Nearly 350 children from the west bank are held in military detention for alleged security-related offences. That is children being held in military detention—we cannot countenance that.

More broadly, the daily exposure to settlers and settler violence has changed Palestinian children. Save the Children reports that years of warfare, violence, arbitrary attacks and curtailed freedoms have led to hyper-vigilance, anxiety and trauma among children across the west bank, born from a pure desire to survive. One cannot qualify the suffering of the Palestinian people. What they

have endured is beyond our comprehension. Contemplating what children in Gaza and the west bank have gone through fills me, a relatively new mother, with sheer horror.

I would appreciate clarity on whether a complete ban on trade and investment in illegal settlements will be implemented. There has obviously been considerable delay in moving forward in this area, and strongly advising against trade is clearly not enough. Advising against trade with the settlements and an outright ban are two different things entirely. What conversations have taken place between the Minister and his Israeli counterparts pertaining to the treatment of civilians—especially women and children—in the west bank? What was the outcome of those conversations?

We cannot control Israel, but we can control our own standards of trade and commerce, especially on the enduring issue of illegal settlement. The diplomatic tide is with us, and the will of the House is clear. I urge the Minister to reflect on that and fortify his words with action.

4.29 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): One year ago this month, Awdah Hathaleen, a resident of Umm al-Khair, who was a consultant on Oscar-winning documentary "No Other Land" and who I and others in this House met during his visit to Parliament in 2024, was murdered by the settler Yinon Levi. Awdah is desperately missed by his community in the village of Umm al-Khair, who are under severe threat of settler attacks and from the Israeli military. Only this week, it has been reported that over 30 armed settlers under military protection rampaged through Umm al-Khair to attack Palestinians.

I raise this case to point out how weak the UK's west bank policy is in practice. Yinon Levi runs an earthworks and construction company that enables the construction of new illegal settlement outposts and uses its heavy machinery to destroy Palestinian infrastructure, including pipes and powerlines. Even though Levi is sanctioned, it is entirely legal for UK firms to do business with him and to sell his firm diggers or spare parts, concrete for new outposts or anything else. The limits of these sanctions are simply a travel ban and an asset freeze—weak.

The point is that this designation means nothing in practice if trade sanctions are not brought in to stymie support for illegal settlements. As hon. Members have said, these "complexities" are not fit to hide behind. When we see the action quite rightly taken on Russia and we see that many countries have already made a commitment to banning settlement trade, complexity comes across as a lazy excuse. The UK is being left behind internationally on this front and the Government appear to be farcically weak to the public, their MPs, the Palestinian people and even the Israeli Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.31 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) for bringing such an important debate to the House. I appreciate all the speeches that have been given with such force. The issue is enormously important to many of my constituents in Witney.

A disaster is happening in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Some 2,000 people have been killed just in the west bank since October 2023, but that is just the tip of an iceberg of settler violence and state-sponsored violence that is carving up land and putting in barriers. Between half and three quarters of a million Israelis now live in settlements in the west bank that are illegal under international law. The Israeli Government have doubled down on this with their active plans for a massive further expansion in the E1 zone, while the UK Government look on passively.

We need to introduce a legislative ban on all UK trade in goods and services with illegal Israeli settlements. That should include a package of sanctions including large fines for any UK firms that bid for tenders relating to illegal settlement construction in the E1 area or elsewhere in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. These sanctions should extend to include any financial institutions here in the UK that through the provision of finance directly facilitate UK companies' involvement in construction or other service provision for illegal settlements—and yes, we are all thinking about you, JCB.

Various hon. Members talked about the contrast with the speed at which the Government introduced sanctions on Russian-occupied Crimea and other illegally occupied parts of Ukraine, so I will not rehash those arguments, but the Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs play key roles in those sanctions, which they are not being asked to play in relation to these sanctions. Members also talked about how other countries, including Spain, the Netherlands, Ireland and Belgium, are implementing bans or legislating to implement bans. If we do not know how to do it, why do we not ask them how they did it? We might learn something.

I want to stress the important subject of services. Compared with the value of goods, the value of services is unknown, but it is almost certainly large, perhaps much larger than goods. Whatever that value is, we want services to be included in the sanctions. I am looking for a commitment from the Minister to a ban that includes services, and to the enforcement of that.

On the Government's non-enforcement of their own labelling measures, the Business and Trade Select Committee, of which I am a member, has written to the Government twice, most recently in April 2026 following a meeting with Palestinian delegates on 4 February and a Sub-Committee session with the Minister for Trade—I thank the Minister—on 25 February. The Government, however, have since refused the Committee's request for evidence on enforcement of their current labelling measures. Will the Minister give us that evidence? These commitments matter, because we made them, along with Israel, under the UK-Israel free trade agreement, which requires the UK and Israel to differentiate goods produced within green-line Israel—within the pre-1967 borders—and goods produced in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That is a key point.

At the moment, I think many Members of this House share the overall impression that the Government's inaction means that they are talking the talk about protecting human rights and upholding international law, but not walking the walk. This is a Labour Government; bluntly, I expect more from them, so I really hope we will see something today on this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

4.35 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): I thank Members from across the House for their contributions today, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) on securing this debate on trade—granted, of course, by the Backbench Business Committee.

Before I turn to the specifics of what we are debating today, it is important to be clear from the outset that Conservative Members, like all Members who have spoken, want to see an end to violence and conflict in the west bank and in Gaza. Israelis, Palestinians and people across the region deserve to live in peace with security, and it is my party's long-held position that this can be best achieved through a two-state solution. We also want to see the Abraham accords expanded and wider regional barriers to peace overcome. At the same time, the official Opposition's view is that settlements are not conducive to achieving long-term peace. We believe that the Israeli Government should firmly clamp down on settler violence, and we are against the expansion of settlements.

Yasmin Qureshi: The shadow Minister says that the Israeli Government should stop these settlements, but as he knows, the Israeli Government have put their full weight behind them. The IDF are there when the settlers are doing these things, so on what basis does he say that the Israeli Government should be doing something about it? They are behind it.

Gareth Davies: I am very grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention. I will address the point that she raises later in my speech, but our shared aim across this House, which is peace in the region, cannot be achieved without Britain maintaining an enduring relationship with Israel and with our allies in the region. It is through engagement that we will be able to achieve the resolution we all want. Engagement is vital to achieving the peace that unites the House today.

That is why I regret that, in my view and the view of the official Opposition, Britain's influence has been diminished to such a degree due to a series of misjudged decisions. These include the decision to cancel trade talks while Hamas were still holding hostages after the 7 October attacks; the decision to impose export licence suspensions while Israel was burying hostages so barbarically taken from their loved ones; and the decision to recognise a Palestinian state when no formal peace process had been agreed. Of course we support a two-state solution, and it is right that we would recognise a Palestinian state, but recognition of a Palestinian state is only meaningful if it is part of a formal peace process. As my shadow ministerial colleagues have pointed out, the Government's actions to date have left our relations with Israel in a deep freeze, with our ability to influence the situation in the region severely diminished.

Melanie Ward: The shadow Minister has been talking about the views of our allies in the region. I wonder when he last met or spoke to our allies across the Arab world, because they have been crying out for many of the actions that our Government have taken. They have

[Melanie Ward]

been calling on us to act in support of a two-state solution, and to avoid dithering and doing nothing, which is what he is suggesting his party supports.

Gareth Davies: The hon. Lady is wrong to suggest that we are saying we should do nothing. If Members remember, it was a Conservative Foreign Secretary in 2024 who imposed sanctions on the settlements. The House has heard me say from this Dispatch Box that the expansion of settlements is wrong. She is being unfair. What I am talking about is a point of execution. We have to engage with our allies—Israel is a critical ally of the United Kingdom—and that is not done by banning trade with Israel.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The shadow Minister says that Israel is a critical ally. Is it not possible ever to be critical of one's allies in return?

Gareth Davies: We can be critical of our allies and we can be critical friends—of course we can—but what I am saying is that disengagement is not a solution to achieving what the House wants, which is peace in the middle east.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gareth Davies: I will make a little progress in the interests of time, because I know that Members will want to hear from the Minister. It is the official Opposition's view that a proposed ban on the trade of Israeli settlement goods and services will bring about the same result as I have been talking about and will prove counterproductive and ineffective.

Secondly, aside from the ineffectiveness of the policy, it is not even clear that it could be implemented, according to the Labour Government. The Government have repeatedly pointed out, as have many Members today, that a ban on settlement goods would be difficult to enforce. At the Dispatch Box last week, the Minister for the Middle East, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), said that countries imposing such a ban are encountering "technical difficulties". Will the Trade Minister address that point when he responds to the debate, and confirm that the Government still hold these concerns about practicality? Labour Members have been questioning that. It is all well and good making a point and arguing for an action, but the Government say that it cannot be executed, and it needs to be explained.

I realise that many anti-Israel campaigners will not be concerned with the answers to these questions that I am posing of the Minister. They may not care whether a ban is effective or having an impact, but only that it should be in place. By the way, I have heard nobody in this debate mention that one in seven medicines dispensed by the NHS comes from Israel. Those who have suggested that we should have an outright ban on Israeli trade have offered no solution to that point. I am sure that the Minister agrees that it is vital that the Government take the full impact of any policy into consideration.

Melanie Ward: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Gareth Davies: Not right now, and I have already taken an intervention from the hon. Lady.

Finally, and more broadly, we worry that the campaigners ultimately want this ban to become a gateway to a wider ban on trade with Israel. If that is the case, they simply do not accept the importance of the relationship that we have with Israel. On trade and the economy, Israel is a technology and health superpower, with the UK-Israel trading relationship worth £6 billion. When the last Government launched bilateral trade talks in 2022, we estimated that the reduction in trade barriers could benefit almost 7,000 UK businesses in all Labour Members' constituencies, including 5,600 SMEs employing 1.7 million people. I would be grateful if the Minister updated the House on the status of the trade agreement discussions. [Interruption.]

I see that you are asking me to conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker. We firmly believe that the proposed trade embargo would have no practical effect whatever on the situation in the region. We are concerned that it is part of a broader push by Israel's opponents to isolate the Jewish state politically and economically. The ban would be legally and administratively complex, it would have limited economic effect, and it would hinder diplomatic efforts to find a sustainable, long-term peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. No matter what Members might say or shout, the ban would not bring about peace in the middle east. We have already seen Britain's voice marginalised and Britain's ability to influence Israel diminished. To go further down this path would not serve British, Israeli or Palestinian interests at all, so we cannot support the proposed ban.

4.45 pm

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed), who has raised many of these issues not just today, but on other days. It is important that we are having this debate.

I hope that hon. Members do not mind, but I will not go through each individual Member's contribution; I will just try to answer the single voice—well, the nearly single voice—that I have heard in the Chamber today. I will try to do so in the most straightforward and up-front way possible.

The hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Hussain) said that we should not avoid the elephant in the room—the humanitarian situation in Gaza. He is absolutely right. It is appalling, disgraceful and despicable. There are so many starving; so many thirsty for clean drinking water; so many lacking shelter and shade; so many lacking daily medicine and emergency care; so many children without teachers, without parents, without brothers and sisters or uncles and aunts, and without friends to join in the playground; so many orphans; so many homeless; so many injured; so many disabled; so many frightened and angry; so many grieving; so many dead. It does shame us all. The Israeli Government must immediately allow all humanitarian aid in so that the people of Gaza can breathe and live. The ceasefire must be abided by.

The settlements are morally wrong, legally indefensible and completely counterproductive when it comes to achieving a two-state solution—many hon. Members have said that that may be the deliberate intention of some—or for that matter, I would argue, when it comes to achieving an Israel that is safe and secure within its borders.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will in a moment.

The violence is criminal too. We are grossly alarmed at the expansion, including the proposed E1 settlement bloc, and at the Israeli's Government's legislative changes to entrench Government control.

I know that not everything we have done has pleased everybody, and that we have not gone as far as many would like, but it is important to say that we have taken action. We have recognised Palestinian statehood, although I note that some people do not support that. We have stopped negotiations on a free trade agreement, although I know that some people do not support that, as we have just heard. We have strengthened the enforcement of tariff differentials between green-line Israel and the illegal settlements, but to be honest, I do not think it is as effective as we would like it to be. That is one of the significant problems both for what we are doing now and for what we might want to do in the future.

We have also suspended and blocked military and dual-use licences for equipment that could be used, or is being used, in humanitarian abuse in Gaza. We have sanctioned individuals and organisations linked to the settler movement. We have recently pushed the Charity Commission to look into UK charities that are linked to activities in the illegal settlements.

Let me be absolutely clear: of course we support Israel's right to exist. I do not think that any hon. Member who has taken part in the debate, certainly not on the Government side of the House, is anti-Israel, as the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies) suggested. It is perfectly legitimate to criticise the activities of the Israeli Government without wanting to undermine the existence of the Israeli state. That is a really important distinction to make.

The hon. Gentleman is right, however, that many UK businesses are engaged in perfectly legitimate trade in green-line Israel, which is a powerhouse in many sectors including high tech, pharmaceuticals and so on. I pay tribute to those who have established strong economic relations between Israel and the UK, and, for that matter, between Palestine and the UK—I would like to strengthen that latter connection more. I would like to name UK companies that engage in trade in medicines, food and beverages, and financial services completely legitimately, and in a way that will be supported by everybody in this Chamber, in green-line Israel. Frankly, however, I will not do so for fear of reprisals against those companies, and that in itself tells a tale about the toxicity of this debate.

As I have said, the settlements are illegal. There is therefore a legal obligation on us as a Government not to aid or assist the occupation. The immediate corollary of that is that we need to stop UK businesses providing economic support and legitimacy to illegal settlements. Of course, we want to design measures to stop trade with settlements in a way that balances that with enabling British businesses and citizens to benefit from a strong trading relationship with Israel and with Palestine. That is one of the tricks we have to pull off.

There are four key things that we could do and are seriously considering. First, we could ban imports to the UK of goods from the illegal settlements. I think all

UK consumers would want us to do this effectively, and lots of supermarkets and other chains have been looking to do it in their own way. The challenge is—and this is not an excuse, to respond to the question from the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse); it is just a fact—that there is no properly verifiable means of determining the real source. *[Interruption.]* No, if the right hon. Gentleman will allow me to make the argument, he can criticise me afterwards if he wants to. This situation is very different from Ukraine, because in Ukraine there is a verifiable process to determine whether something is from occupied Crimea or from Ukraine. That is a significant difference. This is not an insurmountable difficulty, but it is a challenge.

Andy McDonald: If that is a problem and we want to implement the ban, the issue of distinguishing the goods is Israel's problem; it should not be ours. We should not be held over a barrel by being told that distinguishing goods is a problem for us. It is Israel's problem to distinguish which goods to prevent, and we should ban those goods in totality.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly legitimate point, but the danger is that, if we end up banning all trade with Israel, we fall foul of the other problems I have mentioned.

Ms Billington: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I will make a little bit more progress, and then I will give way.

The second thing we could do and are seriously considering is banning exports of UK goods to the illegal settlements. Members have talked, for instance, of banning the sale of UK machinery. The hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, referred to one particular company. Here, too, the challenge is that goods move in and out very freely between the illegal settlements and green-line Israel, and that poses a challenge for us. It is not insurmountable, but it is a challenge.

Andy Slaughter: I really do appreciate the steps the Government have taken. I particularly appreciate the recognition of the state of Palestine, because the embassy is in my constituency, and I was very proud to be there to see the flag raised. I want the Minister to be part of the almost total consensus here today, but that does mean being unambiguous. The problem with saying, "There are these problems," or, "We can advise and encourage companies, but we cannot force them," is that it is saying it is a bit legal or a bit illegal. We want a decisive view on this: we want settlement goods to be banned.

Chris Bryant: I think my hon. Friend must have misheard, or maybe I misspoke in some way, because I am saying very clearly that there are four things we could do and are seriously considering doing. The important thing is that, where there are challenges, we need to overcome them. It is not that they become an excuse for inaction.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will just go through the third and fourth points, because they are important.

The third thing we could do and are seriously considering is banning exports of UK services to the illegal settlements. To my mind, it must be completely wrong for a UK business to enable the construction of a block of flats or a road, for instance, in the settlements, by providing finance, insurance, architectural services, logistical support or, as has been referred to in the debate, selling properties in the illegal settlements. All of that is a perfectly legitimate area where we should consider banning exports of UK services to the settlements. Likewise, the fourth area we are considering taking action on is banning imports to the UK of services from the settlements.

Matt Western: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Bryant: Just one more moment, and I then I think my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) would like to intervene first.

Members are absolutely right that other countries are either considering or are in the process of introducing a variety of different bans. As the Middle East Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has said, we have had conversations with some of them. Some are expressing concerns about whether what they are going to do will actually be effective. Sometimes I am all for declaratory legislation, but I am much more in favour of doing things that actually take effect. That is one of the key considerations for us.

Let me be absolutely clear: I do not think that any of the legal or logistical problems is insurmountable. We are actively considering what a trade ban that directly targets illegal settlements would look like.

Chris Murray: What does “actively considering” mean? Is there anything active about it? Can the Minister refer to meetings, instructions or deadlines that would manifest as active consideration?

Chris Bryant: Yes, I have asked officials to produce advice on how we might proceed.

Kit Malthouse: By when?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman asks, from a sedentary position, by when? I think my timeline may be rather limited in this post, but as Tagore said:

“The one who plants trees, knowing that he will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life.”

I have been trying to progress some of this work. We have not got to a place where we are able to announce anything yet, but that is why I am saying we are actively considering it.

Matt Western: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I do want to leave some time for my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central.

I just have a couple more points to make. Any measures must be enforceable, effective and not have unintended consequences on our legitimate trade, for instance in medicines, with green-line Israel. The worst of all possible

outcomes would be measures that are morally declaratory but ineffective or ineffectual, and that are not capable of being implemented.

There are several routes we could go down. Members have mentioned the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. There was a set of suggestions, not all that different from some of the ideas that have come up to us already, from the hon. Gentleman who speaks for the Liberal Democrats. That is an option available to us, but there are other routes we might want to explore.

I really wish that I were able to say more today, but it really is not words that are needed. I fully understand and have heard very clearly, as have the whole of the Government, that it is action that is needed. I am tempted to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) because he is very keen, but he will have to be very quick.

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend, while he is still in post. Very briefly, he will be aware of the mockery that is the situation with dual-use goods between Israel and the Palestinian territories. Surely we can have some sort of ban on the products we are supplying that are essentially enabling civilisational erasure in Palestine?

Chris Bryant: I will write to my hon. Friend in answer to that point, as I am very keen to let my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central speak.

As I said, it is not words that are needed on this issue, but actions. I very much hope those might be imminent.

4.58 pm

Abtisam Mohamed: I will be as brief as possible, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank everybody for their excellent contributions: those who are here with us now in the Chamber and those who were not able to make a contribution—I know many colleagues have left now but wanted to make interventions. I thank the Minister for his action and the work that will be taken forward. If he is willing, while he is still in position, to meet the many of us who are really keen to ensure that we do have tangible action, it would be greatly appreciated.

I say to the shadow Minister that I think he may have misunderstood. This issue is about the west bank. The west bank is occupied territory. That is recognised. Governments of all shades in the past have recognised that it is occupied territory. The debate is specifically about banning trade in that particular area, so I am not sure whether there was confusion about what we are actually proposing or indeed debating today.

I thank the Minister for his contribution, and please let us arrange a meeting so that we can take this forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a ban on trade with illegal Israeli settlements.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last Friday, a number of Conservative MPs visited my constituency. That is entirely understandable, as we have fantastic event spaces and hospitality. Most of those Conservative MPs notified me in advance that they would be attending,

with one notable exception: the Leader of the Opposition. Surely we should expect the Leader of the Opposition to set the standards, adhere to them, and make sure that we all know about the leadership that she wants to instil. Can you advise me on how we can make sure that those in positions of leadership meet the expectations and demonstrate the standards that we all agree to in this place?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order, and for informing the right hon. Member to whom he has referred. The document entitled “Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons” deals with this matter. When a Member visits another Member’s constituency, except on a purely private visit, they should take reasonable steps in advance to tell the Member in whose constituency the visit is taking place. The guidance states that a

“failure to do so is rightly regarded by colleagues as very discourteous.”

A party political activity is not a purely private visit, and I hope that by stating this very clearly from the Chair, it will reduce the frequency of such discourtesies in future.

Adam Joggie (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, constituents from Newcastle-under-Lyme visited this mother of all Parliaments. We went down to the Terrace, where I was informed that the ever-charming and hospitable Richard Pengelly, the long-term linchpin of Strangers, will be retiring next Thursday after almost 40 years of service to this House and to Members of all parties, from all four nations of our United Kingdom of varying degrees and lengths of service. I know that you think very fondly of Richard, as do I and colleagues on both sides of the House. As we give thanks for Richard’s decades of service to Parliament, can you advise me on the best way for this House to place on the record our collective thanks to Richard Pengelly? What secrets he must have!

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. Let us not dwell on the secrets of the barmen. However, he will know that this is not a matter for the Chair, even though this occupant of the Chair might have a keen interest. I am sure we all wish Richard well for his retirement.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

British Industry Supercharger: Ceramics

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

5.2 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): At the outset of this Adjournment debate on ceramics, I declare my interest as a member of the GMB trade union and chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ceramics, for which the secretariat is provided by Ceramics UK. I also want to place on the record the support that has recently been given to the sector under the stewardship of my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary. The £120 million that has been provided is a massive boost to a sector that had all but been forgotten and was worried that it was on a managed decline towards the end of a ceramics manufacturing base in the UK.

We know that there is work to do with that money. The sector and the unions are coming together as we speak, and they are working with the Business Secretary’s officials to make sure that every penny of the money that he and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have been able to find for us goes towards protecting jobs, safeguarding manufacturing and making sure that the sector has a viable future, as it is so important to the constituency that I represent.

Adam Joggie: And to mine!

Gareth Snell: The sector is also important to my hon. Friends’ constituencies in other parts of Staffordshire.

I will rehearse some of the figures, Madam Deputy Speaker. Of course, given that I am a proud MP who represents a brickworks, you will be aware that ceramics offer a multitude of benefits to our economy. The sector employs 20,000 people, generates around £2 billion for our economy, and is responsible for £600 million-worth of exports. One can walk around pretty much any part of the country and come across a ceramic product that is made in the UK, be it bricks, tiles, tableware, or steel that is made using refractory-grade ceramics. I say this often, but I will say it again: we cannot make steel in this country without ceramics, so everything that the sector does contributes towards the greater good of UK plc.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): What strikes me about the support we give to the ceramics sector as a Government is that, while we are making a big commitment—and the right commitment—to give British people homes by delivering 1.5 million houses, we could simultaneously support our bricks industry, and the building sector more widely. Does my hon. Friend agree that while we are backing British, building British and buying British, it is important that we ensure that that sector support comes through from Government?

Gareth Snell: I agree with my hon. Friend, who has been pursuing that for a long time. The ceramics industry is a great example of where procurement rules could be geared more towards supporting domestic manufacturing, not least in bricks. If we are going to use Homes England money to subsidise, at cost to the British taxpayer, the building of the homes we need in this country, we should insist that the companies that build them are

[Gareth Snell]

buying their bricks from British manufacturers. It is a circular economy, it is good for our environment, and bricks have a long-term life of over 150 years—much better than timber and cladding.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour agree that the best way to do what he and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) suggest is for the Government to get behind my 10-minute rule Bill to back British bricks?

Gareth Snell: There are many wonderful 10-minute rule Bills and private Members' Bills that support the ceramics sector, and my hon. Friend's back British bricks Bill is one of them. More to the point, it makes economic and environmental sense, rather than importing bricks from around the world. We have the capacity in the UK to manufacture enough bricks to meet the housing targets that the Government have rightly set. We can also then ensure that the bricks reflect the sorts of build that we want in those communities—Staffordshire blue bricks in Staffordshire, and the sorts of bricks that are proudly made in Hampshire for your constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an important part of who we are, and what places look like, that the materials that houses are built from reflect the materials available.

The Minister will know that ceramics is now a huge part of our defence industry. The air filtration systems in nuclear submarines are made from a ceramic component that is serviced in Stoke-on-Trent. The ceramic coating necessary for small modular reactors, which will hopefully be made in Derby, is required because it can resist the heat that is generated at the speed at which they will revolve. The filtration systems for most metal products in this country go through a small ceramic piece—it looks like a fruit pastel—that filters out the impurities while withstanding the intense temperatures of molten metal.

Without those small technical ceramics, the bigger manufacturing activities that we undertake in this country simply would not be possible, and that is before we get on to the advanced ceramic materials that are available for heat recovery and green technology advancements, and before we think about the biomedical implications. There are ceramic components that can now be used for hip and elbow replacements, which have much less likelihood of being rejected by the body because they are a natural compound and the bone grafting takes easier.

There are countless opportunities for ceramics to play a real-world solution to the challenges we face. They are often hidden in plain sight; we just need to look for them. That is before we get to the beloved tableware and giftware that made my city so famous, and that we see across this place and in the tiles on our floors.

Adam Jogee: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gareth Snell: One last time.

Adam Jogee: I may seek another intervention, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He raises an important point. He will know, as will my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, that my cousin got married in New York relatively recently. My wife and I went, and we went to

an exhibition where we came across a Staffordshire plate made in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). I shrieked with delight; my wife thought I was being weird. The amazing thing was that I told my Staffordshire colleagues, and we got a history lesson from my hon. Friend. That just shows that in every corner of our globe, British ceramics, and particularly Staffordshire ceramics, are flying the flag for team GB.

Gareth Snell: I believe my hon. Friend is referring to the Copeland plate that he saw, which was made in the old Copeland factory not far from my current constituency office. Again, that demonstrates the soft power that we have in the export market. Mr Speaker himself commissions ceramic products from Stoke-on-Trent as part of the giftware he hands out when he receives dignitaries from around the world. I am proud that things made in Stoke-on-Trent find themselves gracing palaces around the world.

The Minister will know, however, that it has been a tough time for ceramics. Ceramics is predominantly a gas-based industry, and the cost of gas power is almost three times what it was in 2019. In 2019, we were looking at about 40p per therm; today, it is 116p per therm. I genuinely appreciate that the Minister does not control the international wholesale gas price and, as I have on occasions disagreed with the Opposition, drilling will not necessarily bring down that price. However, it is nevertheless a fact that it costs three times as much today to fire a product, whether it be a brick or a plate, as it did in 2019.

It has been estimated by the TUC and GMB through their "Save British ceramics" policy document that 78% of the heat capacity needed to meet the ceramics manufacturing base in this country could come from electrification. It is not impossible to electrify. However, the Minister will also know that electricity prices in this country are significantly higher than in our European counterparts.

That is all before we get on to the issue of the illegal dumping in this country of products that are made using subsidised Russian gas through non-EU countries. We do have a genuine problem with the competitive nature of the products that we make based on the energy that they consume. That is where we have been talking to the Secretary of State and the Minister for Industry about the supercharger scheme. We were disappointed that ceramics in their entirety were not included in the British industrial competitiveness scheme. We welcome the fact that small technical ceramics have been included—that step has been genuinely welcomed across the sector. The pitch we want to continue to make today is for the rest of the sector to be considered for the supercharger scheme as part of the ongoing consideration that the Department is running.

There is a perversity to the supercharger scheme. Industries that are part of it receive all the benefits of being in it, receiving discounts on some of the policy costs and some of the transmission costs; industries that are not in it not only do not receive those benefits, but actually pay towards those that are part of it. Being out of the scheme therefore means paying for the industries that are in it. We have the perverse nature of energy-intensive industries like ceramics subsidising the energy costs of energy-intensive industries such as steel, some of the chemical sector and some of the metal sector.

That is not something the Government have done by design; it is just the way the system has developed over time, by trying to make it cost neutral to the Government and passing those costs on to higher energy users. That is unfair—it is. It means that the costs of the electricity that could be used in factories around Stoke-on-Trent and around the UK are higher because organisations that use as much energy as we do are getting a subsidy and a discount. That needs to be changed.

The sector does want to move towards electrification. We really welcome the fact that part of the £120 million secured by the Secretary of State was for capital costs to allow factories to move towards heat recovery technology and towards electrification of processes, where possible. However, the challenge is that while the electrification process may be covered in some of the capital costs, the running costs of the electric process, compared with the gas process, means that the savings are marginal and, in some cases, it is more expensive. I know that the Secretary of State is working as quickly as he can, and I know that the Government say they are working at pace on trying to bring down those industrial electricity costs, but at the moment that is an impediment to realising some of the good work that we could do as a result of the investment that the Secretary of State has brought forward.

I would just ask the Secretary of State to think about which of the SIC codes he would consider including in the supercharger scheme. Given that we have an ambition in this country to build 1.5 million houses, ensuring that every community has homes that my constituents and the constituents of my colleagues can move into must be part of that. If product code 23320—bricks and tiles in baked clay—could be included, that would benefit manufacturers in your constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker, and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee). Manufacturers in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack), home to Ibstock, would also benefit from that. Given that we want to try to encourage house building, this seems like an absolute no-brainer.

There are also issues around product code 23200, which are refractory products. As I have said, to make steel in this country, refractory-grade ceramics that can withstand the intense heat of that process are needed. At the moment, we are becoming dependent on potentially importing those sorts of ceramics into the UK in order to make steel. Given that we are putting a significant amount of money into being able to increase the production of steel in this country because of our sovereign capability demands, it makes absolute sense that we insulate the supply chain for that process, which includes refractory-grade ceramics. Again, including those manufacturers in the supercharger scheme would be a huge benefit to them and make us less dependent upon imports. Given the geopolitical instability that we face, being able to do this by ourselves in our own country makes absolute sense.

On house building, every house needs some form of bathroom. If my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) were here, he would talk about Armitage Shanks and the famous sanitaryware that it makes. Product code 23420 is ceramics and sanitaryware. Before my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme tries to make a further intervention, I acknowledge that

in his constituency, he has Silverdale Bathrooms, which makes sanitaryware. We should be supporting domestic manufacturers in this country to build the houses that we need. Without that support, we become dependent on imports.

Finally, a product code that is close to my heart: 23410—the ceramic household and ornamental object. I appreciate that including it in the scheme is a harder sell because of the strategic importance of those products to the country, but I say to the Secretary of State that one of the programmes that this Government have quite rightly introduced is *Pride in Place*, which is about saying to communities, “We know who you are, and we are proud of what you do.” When he visited Emma Bridgewater, he saw the pride on the faces of the workers who make the mugs, plates and tableware—and he had a go himself, and was very good.

There is a sense of identity in having an industry reflected in a community, and it being supported and helped. While there may not be an immediate economic argument for the inclusion of tableware and giftware in the supercharger scheme, there is undoubtedly an argument about community identity and pride in place. This is about protecting jobs in communities like mine, which have lost so much over many years of de-industrialisation, while simultaneously saying to the thousands of workers who make the things that we eat off, give to our friends, and buy for weddings and birthdays, “We recognise the important social value of what you make and your contribution to the colour and joy of our lives.” I think that is a powerful argument that shows that ceramics should included in the supercharger.

This is not a case of the sector simply asking for a handout. I think the Secretary of State would accept that the sector is doing what it can to decarbonise, and recognises that decarbonisation does not mean deindustrialisation. It recognises that it has to do more on heat recovery, and to ensure that it can sustain itself.

The funding we have received has been an incredible benefit to the sector. The next step, to ensure that we go from surviving to thriving, is including the sector in the supercharger. I hope when the Secretary of State is able to make announcements about the review, which we hope is coming soon, he will lift the hearts of all the workers he met at Emma Bridgewater by saying, “You’re in the scheme, and we’ve got your back.”

5.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle):

It is a real pleasure to be here. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) has made an outstanding case. I can reassure him that when we make decisions, they go beyond the sheer economics of investment, and into considerations about communities and sectors. The societal impact, should more ceramics companies fail in the cities that he and his colleagues represent, was very much in my mind. People of my age and generation remember very well that de-industrialisation was an active decision made by the Government in the 1980s in parts of the country, particularly the north-east, east midlands and elsewhere. It left a scarring impact that has crossed generations. I would not allow that to happen again on my watch.

My hon. Friend makes his case very eloquently. Going up to Emma Bridgewater the day after I announced the package was a very memorable occasion. It shows his

[Peter Kyle]

graciousness that he would say that my handiwork on that day was anything other than basic. His contribution shows the importance of the ceramics industry to many communities around the country, particularly in Stoke-on-Trent and other manufacturing heartlands. Ceramics is a sector with a proud history and heritage, a highly skilled workforce and an important role in local economies and the wider economy and supply chains around the country.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Peter Kyle: I will, in just a moment. My hon. Friend was not here to hear his colleagues' contributions earlier. He will regret that, because they were Churchillian.

The Government recognise the importance of and understand the challenges that the sector has faced in recent years. The British industry supercharger was designed to support the industries most prone to carbon leakage due to high electricity costs faced by UK businesses. The supercharger supports the most electricity and trade-intensive industries by reducing their policy and network costs. Some electricity-intensive ceramics firms do receive the supercharger, and they make up around 10% of the industry.

Dave Robertson: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way, and I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for not quite being able to get here for the kick-off. The Secretary of State talks about the importance of the ceramics industry, both in economic and heritage terms. Does he agree that ceramics firms offer us a huge amount of soft power around the world? The "Made in Stoke-on-Trent" and the "Made in England" marks are so important, and in my constituency, we have Armitage Shanks, a name known all around the world for the products that it provides. Does he agree with that point?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's contribution. Of course, he is completely correct. The impact that these brands have around the world has not been made recently, and is not to be taken lightly; it has come on the back of generations of extraordinarily hard work, precision and success. That is why the industry has the global recognition that it does. We celebrate the success of the past, and the impact and importance the industry has for communities, but I recognise the contribution that it should and will make in the future as well.

The businesses I mentioned will have benefited from the recent uplift to the network charging compensation scheme, which now saves eligible ceramics businesses 90% on their electricity network charges. However, the reality is that much of the sector is gas-intensive, rather than electricity-intensive, and UK gas prices are more internationally competitive than electricity prices, notwithstanding the important point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central made.

The Department for Business and Trade intends to review eligibility for the supercharger this year, and I encourage—in fact, I implore—the ceramics sector to

engage with that process. Any changes to eligibility will be subject to consultation and ministerial approval, and the Government must always bear in mind the cost of potential changes and who would pay for them. The Government are also taking wider action to support over 10,000 manufacturing businesses in the industrial strategy growth sectors, and in foundational industries that provide key inputs for those sectors, through the British industrial competitiveness scheme. Some advanced and technical ceramics will be eligible to receive that support from 2027, and it will reduce their electricity bills by up to £40 per megawatt hour. Members should not forget the announcement I made earlier this year: qualifying businesses may get a bonus covering the costs of this year, too.

The Government recognise that ceramics manufacturers are still under pressure, and I have been saddened to learn of the closure of, and job losses at, iconic ceramic manufacturers in recent years, most notably at Denby Pottery. Unfortunately, manufacturing ceased there, as administrators were unable to find a buyer for the business. Officials in my Department are working with the administrators as they take their statutory process forward, and I pass on my very sincere and heartfelt sympathies to all the workers, families and local communities that have been impacted by the closure. Our priority now is to support those who have been affected. We are working across Government and with local partners and relevant agencies to ensure that support is in place for workers who have been made redundant, and for those in the wider area impacted by Denby's administration. That includes ensuring a joined-up, local response, and ensuring that employees can access the help and assistance that is and should be available to them.

It is clear that the ceramics industry faces significant challenges, but despite those, the industry has great potential to be forward-facing as we transition towards a decarbonised economy. To unlock the industry's potential and help support ceramics firms, the Government have recently announced a £120 million ceramics industry support scheme. That is a substantial intervention, focused on the needs of the ceramics sector. The scheme will back capital investment, and energy efficiency and decarbonisation projects, as well as providing operational support for successful applicants to the fund who require additional help to manage any increased ongoing costs. Ceramics are crucial for our modern way of living, from house building to smartphone screens, from plates to planes, and from engines to mugs and space shuttles, as well as all the other products that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central mentioned.

This funding will support the industry right across the United Kingdom, including in my hon. Friend's home city of Stoke-on-Trent. The scheme will help to modernise an industry with a proud heritage, and the Government are working closely with the industry on its design. Officials in the Department for Business and Trade are engaging broadly, including with the sector's main trade association, Ceramics UK, and individual businesses, to ensure that the scheme truly helps the sector in the long term and secures its long-term competitiveness. We want a thriving ceramics industry that continues to provide skilled employment, supports local communities, drives innovation and remains globally competitive.

Adam Jogee: Before the Secretary of State concludes, I thank him for his engagement, his respect towards me, as the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, and my Staffordshire colleagues, and for his support on this important issue. We would not have that £120 million package without his tenacity, and his encouragement to our colleagues in His Majesty's Treasury. For that, we are very grateful.

Peter Kyle: That was a very gracious intervention—I am glad I took it. I had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency in the run-up to the general election, and I saw how much hard work and dedication he put into his campaign; I have also seen the clear-sighted representation, and heard the voice, that he has provided since coming to this place.

Announcing these schemes is never easy. When we are minded to provide support, is difficult to go through the process without setting hares running or setting expectations too high. When there is ambiguity in the process, we appreciate, when we get to the other side, just how sincere everyone is at moments like this. In this Government and in me, hon. Members have a Government and a Secretary of State who strive, and put great store by the heritage and importance of certain

businesses and sectors—not just the economic wellbeing of communities, but the social and cultural wellbeing of communities. Those are all interlinked, and we fail to recognise that at our peril.

The ceramics industry deserves support, and this Government have demonstrated that through the £120 million package. We have chosen to deliver support through the ceramics industry support scheme to enable the industry to modernise, decarbonise and optimise, protecting the long-term competitiveness of the sector in the most efficient way. I thank all my parliamentary colleagues who advocated for that support. The Department, other Ministers and I look forward to continuing to work with Members as we develop the scheme and get it ready for deployment.

Despite a difficult business environment, the ceramics sector continues to demonstrate resilience and innovation, and I remain confident in the future of this important industry. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central once again for securing this debate, and other Members for their interventions.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 July 2026

[CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Conflicts: Impact on Older People

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the humanitarian impact of conflicts on older people.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts; thank you for chairing this debate for us. I have been asking for a debate on this subject for some time. The subject is close to my heart, and not merely as a matter of policy—it is a matter of conscience, human dignity and our shared responsibility for the most vulnerable in our world. I thank hon. Members for attending. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. He is always very jovial and friendly and tries to give the answers that we hope for.

I want to start by referring to a constituent named Margaret. She is 83 years old and lives in the Ards peninsula, where I live in my constituency of Strangford. She still keeps a photograph on her mantelpiece of the street where she grew up, which was not in the Ards peninsula. It was in Belfast on a street that no longer exists because it was destroyed—a casualty of the troubles that we had in Northern Ireland. Margaret speaks about the cold, the fear, and the long, painful shadow of conflict. She speaks from experience because it is her story. As an 83-year-old, she can remember it very well.

Across Northern Ireland are thousands upon thousands of older people who carry with them a lived memory of trauma. My family lives with the trauma of the death of my cousin Kenneth; my aunt, uncle and family were never the same. Across Northern Ireland, many thousands of families are affected by the troubles. As the title of the debate states, this is about the impact of conflicts on older people. I will refer to conflicts across the world, but the Northern Ireland one is the one that we can draw experience from and illustrate.

That experience, alongside my role in addressing health policy for the Democratic Unionist Party, means I understand viscerally what conflict does to older people—maybe because I am older now myself. I am more conscious of those who are just ahead of me, which makes me very aware of their vulnerability. I think of my mother who is 94—95 next Tuesday, if God spares her. Again, I think of older people and what they have lived through.

A wound does not simply wound the body, although it does that profoundly and permanently. It fractures community and destroys the very networks of care and support on which older people depend. It strips away the intrinsic dignity that every human being deserves, regardless of age, faith and nationality. My own community of the veterans of the Ulster Defence Regiment, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Prison Service and their families fully understand the lasting impact of trauma.

Apologies—I should have thanked the Backbench Business Committee at the beginning for allowing this debate.

The global picture is incredibly worrying. The scale of the crisis is mammoth. The United Nations estimates that approximately 200 million people aged 60 and over are living in fragile or conflict-affected settings. Let us take a few moments to let that number sink in: 200 million older people are living in fear, without adequate healthcare and shelter, and too often without any recognition that their needs are specific, urgent and distinct from those of younger people in the same crisis zone.

I wanted this debate because I have felt for some time that we look at the wars and see the young people, the deaths and the lack of education and healthcare. But in the middle of that are people of an older generation with incredible problems.

We see that with devastating clarity in Ukraine. Whenever I read the stories about Ukraine, they move me significantly. Who is left in the villages that are destroyed? Who is left among the ruins? Usually it is the older people, living in the basements. I want to focus on them for a few moments. I have stood consistently with the Ukrainian people in their hour of need, as has the House, the Minister and every hon. Member. Ukraine has the highest proportion of older people affected by conflict anywhere in the world; one in four Ukrainians is aged over 60.

In eastern and southern Ukraine, near the frontline, the situation is even more acute: one in three people who need assistance is over 60 years of age. The families fled, of course, to get away from the violence, the attacks and the Russian aggression. Only 5.4% of the Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Europe were over 65 because elderly people have been left behind, either due to their choosing to remain in their homes because it is the only place they have, usually with their pets—their cats or dogs—or because of severe health conditions that make fleeing conflict zones more difficult, even though the Ukrainians always try to give such people the choice to leave.

The situation has left older people facing acute challenges. Shockingly, around 50% of documented civilian deaths in Ukraine have been of people older than 60 years of age. They have faced severe disruptions to their support systems as family members, friends or carers have left. Some 90% of older people in Ukraine are unable to pay for even their basic medical needs to be met. They are probably in the conflict zones and often their medications, or the medical help that they need, cannot get to them.

Some 43% of older people in Ukraine have at least one disability. I know, from my position as health spokesperson for my party, that when someone gets to a certain age, they do not just have one thing wrong with them but half a dozen things. Complex needs are incredibly common among many elderly people. That makes evacuations and displacement even more challenging. There are barriers of mobility, digital exclusion and bureaucratic complexity that become insurmountable for an 80-year-old person who has lost just about everything they ever had, including their family.

I speak as one who has spent considerable time examining the collapse of health systems under the pressure of conflict. I want to underline this point with some force: older people have healthcare needs that are complex, chronic and ongoing. They need orthopaedic care. Many old people

[*Jim Shannon*]

will struggle to get about at all; being in a warzone, under attack, makes that even more difficult. They also need cardiac monitoring and management of long-term conditions, such as diabetes—I am a recipient of management for that—and respiratory disease, hypertension and dementia. Those are not luxuries; they are the basic requirements of survival.

When a conflict destroys a hospital, a medical centre or a GP surgery; when it displaces a medical team; or when it cuts off a supply chain of medicines, it is the older people who suffer first and most. Long-term conditions are worsened by food insecurity, income insecurity, and the pressures of displacement and living in conflict situations. There are no shops and only the smallest means of cooking—it may be only a wee Calor gas thing, or even only a wood fire. The waiting lists that I have seen grow to crisis point here in Northern Ireland even in peacetime are as nothing compared with what older people face when the infrastructure of healthcare is obliterated by war.

Let us look at some of the harrowing theatres of war across the world. In Lebanon, older people face compounding risks from the escalation of hostilities, rising displacement, economic collapse and pressure on a weakened health system. A 2025 HelpAge assessment of 670 older women and men across five regions of Lebanon found that they were frequently excluded from assistance and recovery planning because they are at an age, they are probably still in the danger zones and little or no effort is made to help them. Some 61% received no humanitarian aid after the conflict and 39% reported being completely left out of the response, even during active hostilities. Only 12% of those who received aid said that it met their needs. Many have been unwilling or unable to leave their homes despite evacuation orders, while those who have fled found shelters that were poorly equipped for mobility, care and dignity, all three of which are so important.

Lebanon illustrates a wider failure. Aid might be provided, but if it is not designed around older people's access needs, including their outreach, transport support, continuity of medication, assistive devices, home-based care and mental health support, it will not reach those most at risk. Who is at the back of the queue? It is the elderly.

Sudan is the second place that I will focus on. Today in business questions, Sudan was asked about; there was also a question about South Sudan in the questions about NATO, which the Secretary of State for Defence replied to earlier. I secured a Westminster Hall debate on Sudan—four weeks ago today, I think—in which I highlighted the issues in the country. What is happening there is absolutely tragic.

Since fighting erupted in April 2023, Sudan has seen repeated waves of displacement. Over 20 million people need health assistance and around 1 million of them are older people. Civilians face worsening conflict in the Kordofan region and risk escalating violence, confinement and starvation. UN figures provide an evidential base, showing that older men and women each make up about 4% of the population living in displacement camps, while around 3% live in refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Older people remain one of the least supported groups in Sudan. Human rights monitors report that they are often left out of aid programmes, especially in remote areas. It is a massive task to get aid to remote areas; I understand that. But some consideration must be given to it. At the end of my speech, I will set out some ideas, which I hope the Minister will give me some encouragement about.

Due to limited mobility, many older people struggle to flee explosions or attacks. I am 71. I cannot run a marathon any more; I could probably walk it, but I could not run it. Older people who are on mobility aids cannot walk or run at any speed whatever, so they cannot get away from the destruction coming their way. Older people also face high rates of depression and post-traumatic stress. As we get older—maybe you and I both recognise this particular trait, Mr Betts—things may worry us more than they did when we were younger. I say that in jest, but the fact is that older people sometimes dwell on things longer than they should.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member should not take my views for granted in this sort of debate—he can speak for himself, I am sure.

Jim Shannon: I speak for myself, but I think you are not too far off my years, Mr Betts, although I know that I am older than you.

In Sudan, the health sector has been destroyed and medicines are in short supply. Even those with manageable health conditions are at grave risk. In parts of Darfur, dozens of older people are among those who have died of hunger in recent months, after armed groups blocked food deliveries. Who cannot get to the aid centres or food centres, because of their disabilities or their particular needs? Older people.

Why is that allowed to happen? It is because older people are invisible in the data. We often come back to data when it comes to debates—especially health debates, but perhaps debates on anything—because data collection and analysis fail to capture the realities of older people's lives, with data collection often stopping before people are 60. If someone is over 60, their time in this world, according to those who collect data, is limited.

Where older people's data is included in data collection, they are often lumped together as a single group—those over 60—but that obscures diversity and hinders effective policy making. Evidence shows that age inclusion specialists can change humanitarian assistance by improving assessments, data collection, training and programme design. To give just one example, the data collection tools used by HelpAge Ethiopia showed that there were six times more older people in one region of Tigray than had been previously thought. The data had not been there before so the number of older people had been unknown.

In Venezuela, age inclusion specialists supported humanitarian actors through adjusted food basket guidance to better meet nutritional needs. They use the data for the betterment of services. Unfortunately, there has been a double earthquake in Venezuela and many people are missing—the country is dealing with some incredible problems.

A 2025 systematic review found that the barriers to age-inclusive healthcare include inaccessible health services, shortage of medication and equipment, limited geriatric

expertise, age discrimination, low mobility and dependence on others—more often than not, elderly people do depend on others. Funding reform is desperately needed. A 2025 analysis by HelpAge found that older people are rarely named in humanitarian funding databases. How can we deliver enough aid, medication, food and support to elderly people if we do not know how many there are? In funding databases, only 6.5% of descriptions and 0.1% of project titles mention older people.

I must raise the question—you would expect me to, Mr Betts, because I always do—of freedom of religion or belief. It is intrinsic to this debate in ways that are not always acknowledged. In many conflict zones, such as in Myanmar, Nigeria, Syria and Ethiopia, older people are targeted not merely because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, but because they are the custodians of their communities' faith and culture. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and I share this concern, and I look forward to her contribution.

As custodians, older people hold the memory of worship, tradition and identity. They are the heartbeat of the congregation and the lifeblood of the community, and they are targeted because of that. They are driven from their homes because of their faith and denied the right to practice a faith that has sustained them across a lifetime. That is not simply a humanitarian failure; it is a moral outrage. Does the Minister agree that the protection of older people in conflict zones must explicitly include the protection of their right to freedom of religion or belief? I know the Minister's answer to that, but perhaps we could have it on the record in *Hansard*.

I do not want to be churlish about the progress that has been made in international humanitarian law. There are frameworks and conventions, as well as the "Sphere Handbook" and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's work on inclusion, but let me be direct in a respectful way. The gap between the frameworks that exist on paper and the reality experienced by an 80-year-old woman sheltering in a basement in Kharkiv or a 75-year-old pastor driven from his church in Kaduna state in Nigeria is vast and unconscionable.

I have a number of questions for the Minister—seven, to be precise. We need to make humanitarian aid age-inclusive by default. Will the Minister commit to requiring UK-funded programmes to explicitly and systemically identify and reach older people, including those living alone, those with disabilities and chronic illness, and those unable to travel to distribution points?

To protect older people's health, care and wellbeing, will the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office prioritise continuity of medication, accessible health services, assistive devices, safe evacuation, accessible shelters, home-based care, if possible, and mental health support in active conflicts? Will the Government support universal social pensions, inclusive cash assistance and shock-responsive systems that enable older people to meet their own priorities with dignity? That will ensure age-inclusive access to cash and social protection.

Will the Department include older women in protection and its responses? Pre-existing patterns of discrimination are exacerbated during conflict, and extreme levels of violence against women and girls are a recurring theme. Older women are particularly at risk due to their age, gender, disability, caring responsibilities, widowhood or financial dependence. The UK international strategic framework on women and girls fails to consider how

older women are affected, but there must be a focus on older women in particular. Will the Government ensure that its implementation includes explicit reference to older women's humanitarian protection and safeguarding, and programmes to tackle gender-based violence through a life course approach? Russian army personnel have carried out horrendous sexual attacks on girls as young as eight and women as old as 80. We need to protect women of all ages.

We must count older people properly. Will the Minister require age, sex and disability to be included in disaggregated data, including specific age cohorts over 60? The age of 60 is where it seems to stop. If someone is over 60, we do not know about them for the purposes of all humanitarian assistance that the UK Government provide or support.

We must recognise older people as rights holders. Will the UK support the creation of a UN convention on the rights of older persons to recognise the agency and contributions of older people and to facilitate their participation in humanitarian planning, peace building and monitoring, and local decision making?

Last, there must be engagement with devolved Administrations. Will the Minister engage directly with the relevant Ministers in the devolved Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where we have hard-won knowledge of what conflict does to older people across generations, so that the lived experience of communities like mine can inform and enrich our international humanitarian policy?

I opened my speech with Margaret, so I will close it with Margaret. She once told me something that I cannot forget—that the worst thing about conflict is not the noise of it but the silence that comes after, when the world moves on and forgets that you are still carrying all that pain, memory and trauma. The older people of Ukraine, Sudan, Lebanon, the Sahel and every conflict zone across the world are still carrying that. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—these great four nations together as one—has both the capacity and the moral duty to ensure that they are not forgotten.

I commend this debate to the House. I thank Members for turning up, and I look forward to their contributions, particularly those of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), and the Minister. I look forward to engagement with the Minister and to ensuring that older people in conflict are not forgotten about. There are ways of doing it better; let us start now.

1.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. I also wish his mother a very happy birthday for next Tuesday.

In many areas of deep conflict, the population rarely reaches our definition of older people. In Gaza, life expectancy has plummeted from 73 years to just 40.5 years. In Sudan, life expectancy is 66 years, and in Nigeria and Chad, it is 55 years. Compare those numbers with the UK life expectancy of 81.3 years or the life expectancy in Japan of 84.7 years. It is a privilege that our nation is safe, secure and conflict-free. Those figures show that conflict shortens lives by decades through poor access to healthcare and pharmaceuticals; disability, disruption

[*Rachael Maskell*]

and displacement; prevalence of disease and hastened frailty; and an environment of climate change, floods and famine.

Gender-based violence scars the lives of its survivors. I am so proud that our Foreign Secretary has rightly placed tackling the prevalence of the use of gender-based violence as a weapon of war at the heart of her work. Access to healthcare, an issue that I particularly look at in my work in the House, is significantly reduced, with the targeting of health facilities and health professionals now central in many conflicts. We have seen that in Gaza and in Sudan. Health professionals working there run these risks in the work that they do and because they are targeted by weapons. That breaks the rules of just wars, but these wars, of course, are never just.

We have also seen the shrinking capacity of healthcare against the increased demand, whether from the wounds of war or the poor mental health sustained from the sharp rise of sexual violence against women. As a result, the ability to access healthcare is reduced, and that, of course, will always impact older people the most. Often in war, we look at the wounds and we understand why, but it is the chronic conditions—the cancers, the diabetes and other illnesses—that often get forgotten; it is the drugs not getting through, the treatments not available, the clinicians simply diverted to acute care. Our hearts beat when we know that a child has been rescued or a life has been saved, but although the life of an older person is of equal value, often the resources are not there to save or sustain that life.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, it is often the elderly who stay behind in conflict zones because they cannot move—they cannot be displaced, and they stay in those areas. We have seen that in Ukraine and in many other areas. Our research shows that moving an elderly person has other impacts; it can cause much confusion and have a real impact on mental wellbeing. We need to take on board why so many older people die in conflict; it is because they are in the direct firing line, or because the facilities and infrastructure that keep them going are removed.

This is not just about healthcare. It is about social care and the social infrastructure when family is no longer available to provide support. State provision can be disrupted, and pensions no longer available. Food supplies are diverted into emergency and humanitarian aid. It is so important that we put older people at the front of all agendas. I say that as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ageing and older people; I take this matter very seriously.

Now, with severe cuts to international aid, a humanitarian response is more challenging. I urge the Government to return to 0.7% as a matter of urgency and to provide leadership once again, to ensure that we can provide aid. Not everyone will be able to receive that, but we should provide it to as many people as possible. Older lives matter, too.

When infrastructure breaks down, resilience plummets and that is particularly stark among older people. The Government must be mindful of that when appraising their priorities. Without financial resilience, even the basics become barriers, especially for women in conflict zones. Aid must ensure provision of food, care, medicines and support. It needs to be a lifeline.

This is not just about the physical impact of destitution and the health consequences. The psychological trauma must be recognised, too. Elders play such a pivotal role in communities and families. If their resilience is broken, so is that of their societies. In many societies to this day, women are at particular risk of violence and abuse, including sexual violence. It has been a taboo subject, not least among the older generation, yet it is so traumatic. Last Ukraine day, an event was held in my constituency where I heard from a Ukrainian woman and saw a film about the sexual violence being perpetrated against women in Ukraine, and the horrors and the scars that it has left them with. They did not speak, because of the shame it brought them and the trauma that they were going through, but, when they started to share their stories, it brought healing between them.

Without the proper support and psychological care wrapped around individuals, that healing does not come. That is why I am so proud that our Foreign Secretary has recognised that and has put resources into it, particularly in the Sudan region. We need to make sure that women there access the support.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and important speech, particularly on women in Ukraine who have suffered sexual violence during war. Does she agree that having proper support for those women, and an ability to record what they have experienced, is important, not just to support them, but to make sure that when the war in Ukraine ends, justice, as much as it can be done, is done for those people?

Rachael Maskell: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point, as it is so important to make a catalogue of war crimes. Whether they are committed against the elderly, or they consist of any other form of violence, including sexual violence, it is crucial that we keep good records so that we can hold perpetrators to account when the opportunity arises.

We know that if older people do not get the right nutrition, it has a massive impact on their ability to function. They can have greater episodes of confusion, making life much more challenging; they can become frailer; and they can rapidly lose their mobility, meaning that they have more complex needs. Good distribution of humanitarian aid is vital for the vulnerable, and we must always ensure that we factor in access to targeted support. It is not only about ensuring that people have the ability to reach that food; it must also be prepared for them in the right way.

We have been talking about some of the challenges that we have seen in Sudan as of late. It is a horrendous and complex war, so I am glad that it was discussed at the NATO summit recently and remains at the forefront of our Government's mind. It is very much a forgotten war in so many respects. Evidence has also shown that the elderly in Sudan have been in the direct line of violence. It is important that we do not forget that either.

Older people—not least women—play a crucial role in the home and in the community, which often ripples out far beyond. Often, they are the ones who build the bridges, build the civil society, create the pathways to peace and organise communities at their most challenged. It is often the older women who can use their wisdom to bring co-ordination and build a way to the future.

Indeed, I have been inspired by many older women leaders who have led the charge out of conflict, into a more resilient future.

However, we must also recognise that there are significant challenges. First, what are the Government doing to provide better protections for older people and their rights? We in the all-party parliamentary group undertook an inquiry into the human rights of older people, which looked at the frameworks and mechanisms that we can deploy to enhance and protect those rights, and to ensure that people can uphold them.

The work of the UN convention on the rights of older people has been inspiring, and it very much follows the lines along which other rights have been established, including the rights of the child or disabled people, to ensure that the protected characteristic of older people is upheld. Of course, it falls on the Foreign Office to advance that work and ensure that the UK plays a full role. We must bring our experience into that space so that older people's identity can be seen, and so that their needs, in particular, can be supported. I ask the minister: what exactly are we doing to lead that work? Will the UK adopt the UN convention, once it has been established, to ensure that women, men and older people across the piece have their value recognised and their rights upheld?

Having a rights-based framework will move the agenda; it will enable us to focus on that protected characteristic—for example, age-inclusive specialists can help to reprioritise the humanitarian response, particularly in health or care. We must also ensure that we have good data to accompany that work, so that we know exactly how to focus our humanitarian response. Of course, when it comes to healthcare insurance, we can then ensure that pharmaceuticals and equipment are available in conflict areas to meet the needs of the demographic that we are debating today. When only 0.1% of humanitarian funding databases mention older people, we know we have a problem.

Can the Minister assure me that the Foreign Office will write older people into all its work, and will spread that good practice to agencies and other nations? Will the Government ensure that their humanitarian response is always age-inclusive, with an understanding of the risks that older people face when social infrastructure is destroyed by conflict? Will they also ensure that distribution is targeted to reach elderly people who have both chronic and acute health needs, wherever that focus is required?

Will the Government promote opportunities for social protections, such as social security and pensions, among older people in conflict zones to ensure that they can access the resources that they need? Of course, it is important in many countries, as it is in this one, that people can use more traditional ways to access those services. Will the Government ensure that they crunch the numbers for conflict areas and use the data to design humanitarian responses, recognising the prevalence of older people and the focus that they need?

Finally, I again make the point that the pivotal game changer for the issue is to have a UN convention on the rights of older people. That is about giving agency to older people in conflict zones, to better facilitate their participation in humanitarian planning, peace building, monitoring and decision taking. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, and to contributions from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Fylde

(Mr Snowden), and the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne). I trust that we can rebuild our humanitarian response with good data, programmes and rights to support older people in conflict zones.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We now move to the Front-Bench spokespeople. They are entitled to speak for at least 10 minutes each, but given that we are not particularly time-constrained, I will leave it with them to make a judgment on that.

2.7 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate to shine a light on an important but often overlooked issue. It is strange that many of the voices who mourn Britain's declining influence are the first to say that we should spend nothing on issues beyond our own shores, and that the 0.7% commitment to development spending was a national indulgence that we can no longer afford. However, our influence never relied on hard power alone. Our leverage in the world comes from working with others and leading by example.

That is what internationalism means, and that is why the Liberal Democrats believe that the commitment to international aid is not merely sentimental, but fundamental and strategic. It rests on the simple principle of equality: that we help those who need help most. I will not create a league table of suffering, but some groups bear a heavier burden in humanitarian crises. Older people, especially those who are disabled, are almost always among the most affected. When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, 75% of those who died were over 60, despite older people making up only 16% of the local population. When the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami struck in 2011, 56% of those who lost their lives were aged 65 or over.

The world today is less stable than it has been in a generation. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights found that since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, older people have accounted for almost half of civilian deaths, where age could be verified. Older people, especially older women, remain at disproportionate risk, particularly in frontline areas.

Given that we know all that, it is extraordinary that the FCDO confirmed cuts to precisely the funds that support the most vulnerable groups in humanitarian responses. The International Development Committee found that FCDO equality impact assessments expect ODA reductions to programmes with a strong focus on equalities to be severe. The Committee also heard that work on disability and inclusion in South Sudan specifically will cease altogether, which will have a direct impact on elderly people.

UN figures show that more than 46% of people aged 60 or over live with a disability, and more than 250 million older people worldwide experience moderate to severe disability. In the UK, the House of Commons Library's analysis shows that disability prevalence rises from 23% among working-age adults in the UK to 45% among adults over the state pension age, and 58% among those aged 80 and over.

[John Milne]

Therefore, when disability inclusion funding is cut in a humanitarian response, older people will be hit twice over. It is not an unfortunate side effect; it is a foreseeable and measurable consequence. I want to press the Government on the false choice they keep presenting between defence and development, particularly in the context of Ukraine. Official development assistance budgets are part of defending Ukraine. For example, they partly fund accessible bomb shelters and healthcare adaptations for people with mobility needs or age-related conditions. If we are serious about supporting Ukraine, are the lives of its oldest citizens not part of that commitment?

Liberal Democrats reject the idea that we must choose. We have set out how defence spending can rise to 2.5% of GDP and beyond, through mechanisms such as defence bonds and a higher digital services tax on the largest technology firms—that is without hollowing out our aid budget. We advocate for the immediate restoration of ODA to 0.5% of gross national income, with a clear roadmap back to 0.7%.

The American example in this is not one to follow. USAID has been gutted by an Administration that treats development spending as something somehow unpatriotic. Within the older age group, the situation of women reveals a heightened danger. Amnesty International's submission to the UN independent expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons documents this starkly. In north-east Nigeria, older women displaced by Boko Haram faced particularly severe discrimination and invisibility. They were often unsuccessful when they tried to petition simply to be added to food distribution lists. In Ukraine, women's pensions are on average 30% lower than men's, which is a consequence of shorter careers and interrupted employment caused by caregiving responsibilities. Older women also experience higher rates of disabling conditions than men of the same age, such as arthritis, osteoporosis and frailty.

As a result, older women are disproportionately exposed to poverty when displaced. The social role played by women as caregivers, as mentioned by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), means that if they suffer, the impact is felt by the whole extended family. If they are left without income, accessible health care or a place in the food queue, the people who depend on their care feel it also. If the Government want to talk about return on investment in their development spending, this is exactly where that return is the greatest. Supporting older women is not a niche ask; it is a multiplier for entire households and communities.

I am speaking for the Liberal Democrats, but of course it is not just us. Amnesty International has set out practical and deliverable recommendations. We must disaggregate humanitarian data by age, gender and disability, so that we can see who is being missed out. We must ensure that older people are not systematically excluded from livelihood and cash assistance programmes on the discriminatory assumption that they cannot work. The humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities, developed by the sector's own age and disability inclusion consortium, already exist and are freely available. Will the Minister confirm whether the FCDO is using them, and if it is not, why not?

To conclude, the Liberal Democrats believe that this Government do not need new evidence to act; they need to start listening to the evidence that they already have. They need to listen to their own equality impact assessments rather than commissioning them and then quietly setting them aside, as has happened all too often in previous rounds of cuts. They need to make use of the evidence-based inclusion standards that the humanitarian sector has already built, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel—or, indeed, ignoring them altogether. They also need to restore ODA, first to 0.5% of GNI, but with a published roadmap back to 0.7%, so that the targeted programmes reaching older people, and older women in particular, are not the first thing to be sacrificed when budgets tighten. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.14 pm

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve once again with you in the chair, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate—the last debate of his that I contributed to was a few weeks ago on stoma care, when we managed to get some rather interesting entries into *Hansard* on the names that people give to their stomas, some of them quite inappropriate.

An interesting point from that debate, which connects through to this issue, is the way conditions affect older people in different ways. Translating the very specific care needs that older people with stomas have, for example, into the context of a war zone or refugee camp gives an example of how that suffering would be heightened. As always, through referencing his constituent Margaret, the hon. Member brings to life the fact that, while we often talk in broad terms about statistics and facts in these debates, each of those represents a person with their own story to tell and their own suffering.

I thank the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for her contribution and for her long-standing commitment. I have been in a number of debates where she has spoken, and while I have a different view from her on aid spending and I support the Government's position, I recognise that she has long-standing and very sincerely held views on this subject. Debates such as this are where those views can be exchanged, and she has remained consistent in her views and advocated for them over time.

I shall break the jolly consensus just to respond to one little point. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne), brought forward the idea that we can use defence bonds as a magic answer for defence spending, and that that would avoid having to make any cuts whatsoever to the aid budget and get us back up to 0.7% without worrying. Borrowing costs are at their highest levels in decades, and the bond market is not a great place at the moment—and bonds still have to be paid back. We have not yet seen any understanding from the Liberal Democrats about how those bonds would be paid back, and how those ever-increasing borrowing costs would be factored in. The solution is not as simple as taking out a few extra bonds and then all will be fine with the international aid budget.

John Milne: There is no easy fix, that is for sure, but the loans are not coming from the bond markets; they are coming from British people. We are not imposing on or demanding on the bond market. That is the difference. Such bonds have been used successfully in the past.

Mr Snowden: I hold Government bonds myself—as I am sure many people do—so I should probably declare an interest. As we know, the interest rate that all bonds are generally driven by is the headline interest rate and the bond markets overall. Otherwise, the Government would just borrow from the public every single time. It is not that simple, and there are knock-on effects of doing that. There is a reason why premium bonds are capped—because they are moving people's money out of taxable savings into non-taxable savings, which hits the Treasury somewhere else. The issue is not as straightforward as it is presented.

To get to the actual subject, it is evident that we are currently living in a more dangerous world than at any time in our recent past. Humanitarian crises in Africa are exacerbated by the actions of Governments; there is war in the middle east, with the terrorist regime in Tehran hellbent on causing chaos and instability; and Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine signalled the end of the post-war peace dividend and brought the realities of war to Europe once again.

Evidence shows that conflict disproportionately affects older people, as the hon. Member for Strangford has highlighted. Almost half the civilian deaths in the conflict in Ukraine are persons older than 60, despite that demographic constituting about one quarter of the population. Older people are more likely to remain in conflict zones because they have strong ties to their homes, lands and territories, or because they are physically more limited. With that in mind, we must seek to ensure that our overseas aid is targeted at those who need it most, with budgets properly scrutinised and value for money sought in every penny spent.

Although many will want to discuss the size of the budget, it is equally important that we consider reforming the existing budget and improving the way it is spent. How can we ensure that every pound we spend overseas delivers the greatest possible benefit for the British people—for our national security, prosperity and health—as well as for the recipients abroad? With approximately 1.9 million pensioners living in the UK in relative poverty, we owe it to them to ensure that the money we send abroad is money well spent. That is why, throughout this debate, we must ask ourselves the best way to deliver for the needs of older people. We also must deliver a message to older people, both at home and in conflict areas overseas, that we see them, we hear them and we are here for them when needed.

We have numerous reminders of older people's vulnerabilities to conflict over recent years. In 2020, elderly Armenians who stayed in Nagorno-Karabakh were subject to summary executions. Indeed, older people made up more than half of all Armenian civilian deaths. We saw that trend again in Myanmar: older Rohingya who stayed in the face of advances were killed and tortured, and some people indicate that the highest rates of Rohingya deaths are among people aged 50 and over.

It is no surprise, though it is never any less shocking, to see the suffering that Putin's illegal invasion has caused to older Ukrainians. As I said, Ukrainians over 60 make up only 25% of their country's population, yet they account for nearly half of civilian deaths and more than a third of injuries in frontline communities. The UN refugee agency polled older Ukrainians who remained in or near Russian-occupied areas last year and found

that many stayed because they lacked an alternative. Indeed, 20% of respondents said that they would not evacuate because they felt helpless and did not know where to get the help they needed. Many felt that they would have nothing left if they evacuated.

There is an opportunity to think outside the box on how we assist older people in conflict areas. For example, we know that many older people's finances prevent them from evacuating. Ukraine and Poland have innovated and agreed a mechanism to allow refugees access to their pensions. Is the Minister discussing similar proposals with counterparts in war-torn countries elsewhere in the world where that could possibly be replicated?

Many older people cited poor health as reasons for not evacuating their homes. After all, older displaced Ukrainians are more likely to report difficulties in accessing healthcare. I therefore ask the Minister how his Department is working with our humanitarian partners to make it clear to older people who want to evacuate how they can access that help. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that internally displaced peoples are able to return home when appropriate, rather than being forced to seek refuge in another country?

Displaced older people in Sudan report difficulties in accessing information on essential services. Many older Syrians remained in war-torn areas in order to continue accessing healthcare. Some older Syrians are now returning to those same war-torn areas in search of more affordable and accessible healthcare. With that in mind, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that best practice on healthcare is shared?

Of course, evacuating older people from conflict zones is only the first step. Those people can be vulnerable at every stage. Many older people are not mobile enough to reach official displacement camps. Some stop at unofficial locations, which are often overcrowded and have inadequate access to essentials. Some older people become separated from their families while evacuating, and they are vulnerable, particularly those with dementia, to becoming lost in institutional systems. Some evacuated older people struggle to register their presence at displacement camps. They often lack official documents, and registration points can be inaccessible. As a result, they may miss out on aid distribution and medical care.

The international landscape is, sadly, defined by conflict and instability. Older people in conflict-threatened zones continue to be vulnerable. Problems accessing help, healthcare and finances persist. The Government have an opportunity to support older people affected by conflict. That will involve working with our partners to find new solutions and address the specific needs that older people have, as part of a wider programme of meaningful reform.

I hope the Minister will explain how his Department is meeting the realities of our most dangerous world. I look forward to his response to my questions and the very detailed requests—as we would expect—from the hon. Member for Strangford.

2.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. As if the House needed any

[Chris Elmore]

more confirmation that he comes from good stock, I wish his mother a very happy birthday for next week. I think anyone reaching their 90s is a great achievement, and it is no surprise to me that the hon. Gentleman's mum will be reaching that great milestone in age.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for her contribution. Having worked with her over many years, I know how much she cares about these issues. She has always been steadfast and utterly consistent in her views about supporting older people, not just in the UK, but internationally.

As the Minister with responsibility for multilateral affairs, I often speak in international fora about peace building and conflict resolution, and I often talk about Northern Ireland. It is sometimes forgotten that we have had conflict on our own shores that lasted for decades. Much the peace building that followed was from women, and from older people who lived through the entire period of the troubles. We forget that we have much to celebrate about the work of the peace process in Northern Ireland; but we must also recognise the impact that the conflict has had and still has on many constituents and people across Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to Margaret, the constituent mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford. I am sure that must have been a fascinating conversation for him as her local MP.

The Foreign Secretary has been clear that tackling humanitarian need and reducing the violence caused by conflict and atrocities is a key priority for the Foreign Office. We are committed to delivering the vision for a reformed humanitarian system, set out by the emergency relief co-ordinator, Tom Fletcher, to build a system that is focused on the most vulnerable and prioritises the views of communities affected by crisis. The needs of older people must be central to that work.

When we think about the human cost of war, we often think first of children separated from their families, women and girls facing violence, or communities forced from their homes—and while we should continue to do so, we should also recognise that older people are among those hardest hit by conflict, yet they remain largely invisible. At the same time, older people are not one homogeneous group. Age alone does not make someone vulnerable. Many continue to lead, care for others and support their communities, even in the most difficult of circumstances. That is why we must take three steps to address the humanitarian impact of conflict on older people.

First, we must recognise that older people can be disproportionately affected by conflict. Today, more than 100 armed conflicts are taking place around the world, from Sudan and Ukraine to Myanmar and Gaza. The experiences of older women and men are too often missing from discussions, data and humanitarian planning. Many are unable to flee when violence erupts. Older people are also often hardest hit in a crisis. Many depend on regular medicines and healthcare, as has been mentioned, so disruptions can quickly become life-threatening.

Poor health, disability, limited mobility or caring responsibilities can leave older people trapped in conflict zones long after others have escaped. Others become separated from family members and the support networks on which they rely. Humanitarian assistance is frequently

designed without adequately considering those specific needs, which creates barriers to getting food, water and basic services.

Older people also face greater risk of neglect, abuse and exclusion, with older women in particular often facing additional and intersecting challenges linked to age, disability and gender. That is why the UK consistently presses all parties to conflict to uphold international humanitarian law and allow rapid, unimpeded humanitarian access to all those in need, including older people. But that alone is not enough, as has been mentioned by Members across the House today.

We must work proactively to understand and integrate the needs and perspectives of older people into humanitarian responses. For many years, humanitarian actors have highlighted the lack of systematic data on the needs and experiences of older people during crises. Without data, needs are often overlooked; without visibility, resources are not allocated; and without representation, policies and programmes risk being developed without the participation of those affected.

That is why the UK is taking practical action through our humanitarian programmes and partnerships in order to build the evidence base to inform effective responses. Members from across the House have today raised this point about data, and I hope to provide an answer on that particular concern. We work with UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and other non-governmental organisations to support humanitarian responses that take account of age, disability and other barriers people may face.

We also encourage partners to collect and use age as aggregated data, so that assistance is informed by evidence and reaches those who might otherwise be invisible in humanitarian responses. This is not simply a technical point. As the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, it helps to determine whether food distribution points are accessible, whether healthcare reaches those with chronic conditions, whether shelters are sustainable, and whether protection services are identifying those most at risk. In Gaza, for example, the UK has funded assistive products for people injured in conflicts. Each kit can provide practical, lifechanging support for hundreds of people. For an older person, it can be the difference between being left behind and reaching safety, medical care and essential services.

We cannot just look through the lens of vulnerability and must recognise older people across the world as leaders, caregivers and contributors to community resilience. Many continue to care for grandchildren, support neighbours, maintain community networks and help others to navigate crises. Humanitarian and conflict responses are more effective when older persons are involved in decisions that affect their life and the lives of those in their broader community. Their knowledge and networks can make responses more effective, more trusted and more sustainable.

Let me try to answer some of the more specific points that have been raised by hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central was right to raise Sudan; it is the greatest humanitarian crisis of our age. The Foreign Secretary, the Deputy Prime Minister when he was the Foreign Secretary, and Lord Cameron of the other place have spent the last four years leading the work internationally—multilaterally and bilaterally—to ensure that Sudan remains high on the agenda.

In February of this year, when the UK Government chaired the Security Council, the Foreign Secretary chaired a special session focusing purely on Sudan. The Foreign Secretary gave a statement on the Floor of the House today updating us on the NATO summit, the issues around Sudan and the fact that the UK is leading the conversation on trying to bring a peaceful resolution to the conflict. We always need to do more to highlight and broadcast what is taking place in Sudan, because it is truly important to find a resolution that brings about a ceasefire and takes us back to peaceful stability.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central made a particular point around older women being overlooked in conflict, and the hon. Member for Strangford talked about women in relation to the atrocity of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war. I reassure the House that we support women-led and women's rights projects and organisations, recognising that they are often the most trusted actors in helping to identify the victims of sexual violence and the risks specifically faced by older women, including widows, carers, women with disabilities and women separated from family support.

As the special envoy on preventing sexual violence in conflict, as well as in my role as Minister, I have a wider women, peace and security commitment that focuses on not only younger women and girls but older women as well, and making sure that there is support for survivors. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee), who is no longer in his place, made the point about evidence gathering, justice and retribution for these heinous crimes of sexual violence in conflict. We work as a UK Government to ensure that evidence is gathered and that, in the near future, when we hopefully have peace in Ukraine, Sudan and other conflicts, there is accountability for people who have committed acts of sexual violence in the name of conflict.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response so far. I mentioned those of an older generation who are the custodians of the community's faith and culture. They are the ones who hold the memory of worship, tradition and identity; they are the heartbeat of the congregation and the lifeblood of the community. Can the Minister give us some reassurance in relation to those older women and men who are targeted because of their religious belief—some of them sexually as well? Will the Government help them to retain and protect their religious beliefs?

Chris Elmore: To reassure the hon. Gentleman, he knows that I have a personal commitment to working with our freedom of religion or belief envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith). He never shies away from the particular point the hon. Gentleman is raising and nor will I as Minister.

On the wider point that the hon. Gentleman raises about supporting and working with older people on peacebuilding and resolution, which my hon. Friend the Member for York Central also raised, I reassure him and the House that the Department has an instinctive view that locally led, inclusive peacebuilding needs to include elders—the older women and men who understand many of the challenges in the community. We need that support because they bring trust and knowledge. They are leaders in their communities, whether they are of

any faith or none. It is extremely important that older people are part of that peacebuilding resolution. In many cases, where older people are engaged in peacebuilding, the process actually lasts longer. That is particularly true of women; when women take part in peacebuilding, there is much evidence to show that many years of peace follow. It is extremely important to the Government that that work continues.

A number of Members mentioned Ukraine, including the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne). I reassure the House that the budgets for overseas development and for additional support through the 100-year partnership have been protected, specifically for Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon and Sudan. I reiterate that point because it is extremely important. The House will know that events in Ukraine disproportionately affect older people, as the hon. Member for Strangford said. There is some concerning data that shows disproportionate suffering among civilian casualties, with older people accounting for more than 45% of civilian deaths. Those are real people, not just statistics, and they show the incredible impact that conflict has on older people across Ukraine.

We do specific pieces of work to support older people. A number of colleagues raised the issue of assistance and pensions; let me to try to offer some clarity on that. Through the UK Government's partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF, we are supporting the Government of Ukraine in relation to strengthening national social protection systems. We are also trying to make sure that there is more specific support for winter cash assistance and that older people have more support during power outages. The work that the Government do is focused in many of the areas where there is an adverse impact on older people.

There has been much conversation about data. I reassure the House that FCDO partners should use disaggregated data, including on sex, age and disability, to understand who is being reached and, crucially, who is missing out on support. I wanted to put that on the record because part of the reason for that expectation is that when considering age-related barriers, we are talking about the risks linked to disability, or based on gender, poverty, health, isolation, displacement and other forms of marginalisation. That expectation is very much set out by the Department.

In my time as a Minister, I have never been given a list of questions in advance by the Member leading the debate. I have tried to answer each of them and not miss anything. I have a couple of points to make. One is about the violence against women and girls response. I reassure the hon. Member for Strangford that older women are a part of that work, as I said earlier in my speech. To make that very clear point, it is not about forgetting women who are victims of sexual violence; it is about trying to be as inclusive as we can to offer support to victims in recovery, and to try to prevent sexual violence in conflict.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central and the hon. Member for Strangford raised the UN convention on the rights of older persons to recognise older people and their legacies. I can confirm, as I have done in response to parliamentary questions and to various colleagues who have written to me during my time in this role, that we are supportive of a UN convention on

[Chris Elmore]

older persons. There are many existing support mechanisms for older people in the UN multilateral system, but that does not mean that some form of convention should not come through. The negotiations are ongoing, but when it happens, although I cannot give a cast-iron guarantee in the sense of who the Minister will be, there is genuine support across HMG for the work of that resolution in supporting older people.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful because this is such a fundamental issue that I have focused on for some time. Will the Minister say what steps the Government are taking to expedite the process, and what kind of timescale are we looking at to see that convention in place?

Chris Elmore: On the timescale, I should warn my hon. Friend that the process has been a matter of debate for some years. She probably knows far more about it than I do, so I cannot stand here and say it will be done by x date. What I can say is that we are a part of those conversations. Our contribution is to try to make sure that as the work that might lead to a convention on older people is brought together, we are not stepping away from it. We are a part of the work that is ongoing.

Rachael Maskell: I am really grateful, not least because of the work done in Wales around the rights of older people and having the commission there. Will the Minister ensure that our Government take a real leadership role in moving that work forward and ensuring that other nations contribute and participate, and that we get the rights established? Ultimately, we know that it could be really transformative for establishing a rights-based system for older people across the globe.

Chris Elmore: To reassure my hon. Friend, I frequently meet other Ministers in the UN space in New York, and also in Geneva at the Human Rights Council, where the issues are discussed, and I think there is a willingness for the process to succeed. That work is very much part of the conversation and we are there in the room for much of it. I give her that reassurance.

As the global population ages and as conflicts and humanitarian crises continue around the world, the number of older people affected is likely to increase. That is why the UK is working with humanitarian partners to ensure that older people are not overlooked. At the heart of the debate is a simple principle: no person should become invisible because of their age, and no society should overlook the dignity, rights and contributions of those who have spent a lifetime contributing to their communities. The United Kingdom will continue to champion the protection, inclusion and participation of older people in humanitarian action around the world.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call Jim Shannon, who has a couple of minutes to wind up.

2.43 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank everyone for their contributions. I thank my hon. Friend—she is my friend—the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for her contribution and the work she does on the APPG for ageing and

older people. She does a lot—only in these debates do we realise just how much she does—so I thank her for that. She referred to how conflict shortens lives. She also referred to frailty, gender-based violence and the complex needs that people have. Older people are the ones who usually lose out in conflict. She referred to resilience, food, care and support and also to the sexual violence in Ukraine, and indeed across the world. She mentioned how better distribution of international aid is vital. I thank her for outlining very clearly the way forward and for all that she does.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) referred in an intervention to the need to have data to focus on the issue so that we can know just how many people are suffering. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for his contribution. We do need to look at international aid; the question of where that money comes from cannot be ignored. He referred to how older people suffer more in a humanitarian crisis, and challenged the Government to address the issue of international aid. He also referred to how women and girls suffer disproportionately in many of these crises. Data is needed.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), made an incredible contribution, as he always does. He reminded us of Armenia. Sometimes we forget about places in the world and it is good to remember because it keeps our minds focused on the subject of this debate. Older people were murdered because they were still there, and because they were surplus to the enemy's requirements. He also referred to the executions in Myanmar; we need to remember that as well. Across the world, in many places, those over 60 are tortured and then murdered. He also mentioned the pension issue in Poland for people from Ukraine. To be fair to the Minister, he gave a decent response in relation to it. The shadow Minister also referred to displaced people in Sudan and Syria who cannot access healthcare.

I thank the Minister for his contribution, as always. I never doubted—I say this very respectfully and sincerely—that the Minister would respond to us and give us encouragement. I always give the Minister my points in advance. That is the way I do things, because I would rather have a decent response and not be attacking anybody. That is just me—that is the way I am. I thank him very much for responding on the pension issue and giving us some encouragement around how that will work.

The Minister also referred to not forgetting about any victims, which is really important, and to making sure that we get the data and the willingness to succeed. I noted some of his phrases. He referred to the lack of data and how the Government are responding to ensure that they can collect such data better. He also noted how older people are adversely affected in conflict and the focus on medical aid, and on retention of support for disabilities and trauma. It worries me greatly when I hear that enemies, strong men—they are monsters—use their strength to abuse women and girls. The Minister has grasped that.

The Minister also referred to peacebuilding and revitalisation in Northern Ireland—I know he is acknowledging Northern Ireland; that is not lost on me—and that was primarily driven by women. Very often that is the case. Their persuasion of men, although not always to the fore, is recognised very much by the Minister. I thank him for all his answers to the questions,

his commitment and the commitment of the special envoy, the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), who does a grand job. I thank you, Mr Betts, for your chairship. I thank the civil servants who organised the debate, and the Department civil servants, who keep the Minister right—well done to them. I thank everyone for their contributions. They are much appreciated. Today we start something, and look to help those older people who are often forgotten, though today in this Chamber they were not.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the humanitarian impact of conflicts on older people.

2.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Lobular Breast Cancer: Moon Shot Project

[WERA HOBHOUSE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): We have quite a lot of members of the public in the Gallery; it is lovely to have you. You have been through the experiences and are affected by the topic of the debate. However, as is convention, I encourage Members to speak into the Chamber and through me as Chair and not turn round to the Gallery. That is not to be impolite; it is a convention of this Chamber, so please understand that.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the Lobular Moon Shot Project.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. MPs from across the House are here today to mark the anniversary of the death of my constituent Dr Susan Michaelis, founder of the Lobular Moon Shot Project. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding time at very short notice in the parliamentary schedule for this debate. Unfortunately, that short notice has prevented many MPs who would have liked to have spoken today from joining us. Unfortunately, that was a necessity.

Today is a sad moment because Susan is no longer with us, but it is also a time to celebrate what she has achieved. Susan was a remarkable woman. She was warm but incredibly stoic. At no time was that clearer than on her last trip to Parliament in the summer of last year, oxygen tank in tow. Determined but evidently suffering, Susan stood for 22 minutes in a silent vigil outside No. 10 Downing Street with fellow campaigners and lobular ladies around her. We all understood that Susan was in her last days or weeks, so to watch her husband, campaigners and fellow lobular ladies rallying around her, literally supporting her, was a sight to behold.

In her haste to deliver her petition to No. 10 that day, Susan had forgotten her ID. She was distraught. All that effort would be wasted, as the rules were clear: no ID, no entry. But that, of course, was not Susan's way. Susan, with our support, blagged her way past security. Susan was never one to take no for an answer. Not long after, Susan died—just days after her meeting with the then Health Secretary.

It might seem odd to say, given that I met Susan when she was already very ill with the lobular cancer that she was campaigning to prevent, but I feel that I met her in her prime. It was immediately clear to me that this was a person with an unparalleled commitment to her cause. Despite her illness, Susan never looked for the sympathy vote. She was always calm and matter of fact. She led by example. It is a reminder that her cause, while not yet complete, is a worthy one, and with a champion to match.

Susan's first campaign was in fact not lobular breast cancer; it was aviation safety. She flew commercial aircraft in the Australian outback, one of the few female pilots to take up this challenge, and piloted the first all-female crewed Qantas flight. This was before contaminated cabin air ended her flying career in 1997. She spent the following decades building the evidence base on aircraft cabin air contamination, with a PhD, an MSc, peer-reviewed research and a leading role in

[John Milne]

her home country's Senate inquiry into cabin air quality. Her focus in her final years was on lobular breast cancer, and it is on this endeavour that I was pleased to support her as her local MP.

Susan was diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer in 2013. It was a one millimetre mark—no lump, no pain. Two mammograms and two ultrasounds told her that there was nothing to worry about. An MRI scan found 2.5 cm and surgery then confirmed 7 cm. That gap between what standard imaging can see and what is actually there is the heart of why lobular breast cancer needs its own research programme. It behaves differently. It is missed because it is different and it is currently treated exactly the same as the most common form of the disease, because the underlying biology has never been properly funded.

In May 2023, with her husband Tristan, Susan launched the Lobular Moon Shot Project in Horsham. She built it from nothing into a campaign that has cross-party support in this House, a partnership with the Manchester Breast Centre and a research plan costing £20 million over five years.

In June 2025, Susan travelled to Manchester to help launch the scientific programme that she had spent years fighting for. It was a programme that, of course, she knew she would never benefit from herself. Nine days later, Susan died. She never received a reply from No. 10 and never got a chance to make her case to the then Health Secretary. So today, I will again make the case to the Government on behalf of Susan, the 22 patients a day who are diagnosed with lobular breast cancer, and the 463 MPs who have publicly supported her campaign so far, which I believe is the highest number of MPs to publicly support any individual campaign.

Every day, 22 women in this country are told that they have lobular breast cancer—that is over 8,000 a year. This is not a rare disease; in fact, it is the sixth most prevalent cancer in women.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He has been very vocal on this subject matter and we all support him. I apologise to him, to you, Mrs Hobhouse, and to the ladies in the Public Gallery today, because I have an early flight home so I cannot be here to make a longer contribution to the debate.

This debate is not just about the women the hon. Gentleman has referred to. Alongside Northern Ireland's Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt, I have met women in Northern Ireland who have lobular cancer. Some of them will not have a long time in this world and I was very moved by what they told us. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that now is the time for the Minister and the Government to ensure that the small amount of money that is needed to help to alleviate the health issues for women with lobular breast cancer is made available, as well as the money that is needed for research? If that happens, the ladies who are here today and my constituents in Northern Ireland can get the help they need.

John Milne: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution and I very much agree. I also note that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), who is potentially our next Prime Minister, comes from Manchester, has visited the clinic and is already familiar with the campaign, so I am hopeful.

As I was saying, lobular breast cancer is the sixth most prevalent cancer in women. That puts it ahead of melanoma cancer, ovarian cancer, brain cancer, kidney cancer and pancreatic cancer combined. Incredibly, there is still no specific treatment.

Breast cancer as a whole costs this country over £3 billion a year. It takes around 11,200 lives annually, or the lives of roughly 31 women a day. Many of these are lobular cases, yet lobular breast cancer receives none of the targeted treatment that drives down mortality for other forms of this disease. Every woman who is diagnosed with lobular breast cancer is given the same drugs, the same protocols and the same guidelines as someone with an entirely different cancer. That is because the basic biology of lobular has never been established.

It is this gap that the Lobular Moon Shot Project exists to close. We need £20 million over five years, which is just £4 million a year to crack the biology of this disease. That is not speculative research; it is a certain outcome. Other researchers in the UK and around the world can then take things forward to find targeted treatments, because this is a world problem and the world can find the solutions. Of course, there are many demands on Government funding and the national budget is always under pressure, but I think we would be hard pushed to find another project with such a relatively small need for such a big reward. This is a precise unfunded gap, and we already have a delivery partner in the shape of the Manchester Breast Centre, which is ready to begin this work.

I will conclude by quoting Susan's husband, Tristan, who is sitting behind me in the Gallery—it is strange that I have to speak these words rather than him, but that is the procedure of the House. He said:

"The last overseas holiday Susan and I took together was to Easter Island, one of the most remote places on earth. Like so many people, I had always imagined the island's famous stone statues—the moai—looking out across the Pacific Ocean. But when we arrived, we discovered something rather beautiful. Most of them face inland. We were told that they were positioned that way because they watch over their people rather than looking out to sea. Whether that is history, tradition or simply one interpretation, it touched us both deeply.

Before we left, Susan found a beautifully carved wooden replica of one of the moai. We brought it home together, and today it sits in our house. Every time I look at it, I think of Susan. It reminds me that although she is no longer physically with me, her love, her courage and everything she stood for remain with me every single day. In my heart, I like to think she is still watching over me, just as those remarkable statues have watched over their people for generations.

If Susan could stand in Westminster Hall today, she would not ask Members to remember her. She would instead ask you to remember the thousands of women diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer every year who still have no treatments designed specifically for their disease. That is why this debate matters. That is why the Lobular Moon Shot project matters. And that is why Susan's legacy deserves not only our admiration, but our action.

As Susan's husband, I know she would have been deeply humbled that Members from every corner of this House have come together today to honour her life. She never sought recognition for herself. She simply wanted to leave the world a little safer, a little fairer and a little kinder than she found it. My sincere hope is that history will remember this debate not simply as a tribute to one remarkable woman, but as the day Parliament chose to transform admiration into action for future generations of women diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer. That would have been the greatest tribute we could ever have paid to Dr Susan Michaelis."

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. I intend to call the Front Benchers at 3.58 pm. I am currently not imposing a time limit, but I suggest that Members keep their speeches to a maximum of eight minutes especially if they intervene on others.

3.12 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my friend the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for the initiative to lead this debate. Although she is not present in the debate, I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant), who is a great campaigner on this issue. That really demonstrates the cross-party support for the Lobular Moon Shot Project.

I also pay tribute to one of my constituents, Katie Swinburne. She is a mother of three and a very popular local schoolteacher, and she has lobular breast cancer. I first became aware of Katie through Dehenna Davison, who was the MP for Bishop Auckland before me. She did fantastic work supporting Katie as her constituent at the time, and anybody who knew my predecessor knows that she was a formidable single-issue campaigner. When I was elected, Katie asked to see me, and I was delighted to pick up the baton and support my constituent. In fact, this Saturday she is organising a fair and a tabletop sale in her village of Hilton to raise funds for the Lobular Moon Shot Project.

Through Katie, I was privileged to be introduced to Dr Susan Michaelis and her husband Tristan Loraine. Susan was visiting Katie in her home in County Durham. Through the Lobular Moon Shot Project, I have observed a real sisterhood and solidarity among those who are campaigning together.

I have never been in the position of being told that I have terminal cancer, and I find it difficult to imagine, but I can imagine people facing that have a choice about how they spend their remaining years, months and weeks on this Earth. Do they spend it on holiday? Do they look to enjoy all of life's riches and pleasures? Susan chose to spend it in the service of others, campaigning for the science to be done to develop a cure for lobular breast cancer. She founded the Lobular Moon Shot campaign. Not only is that a campaign for better cancer research funding, but it has also developed a real solidarity among people suffering from this type of cancer. I was privileged to meet Susan and her husband and to learn about the Lobular Moon Shot campaign.

As the hon. Member for Horsham said, this was not Susan's first experience of campaigning. She had success campaigning on aviation safety, in particular on jet fuel and pollution in cabins, a potential cause of her own cancer.

The Lobular Moon Shot Project has been successful so far in raising significant funds, which have been used to develop funding proposals for early work. As we have heard, there is an opportunity to fund significant research at Manchester University. I declare an interest as an alumnus of Manchester.

I was privileged to meet the campaigners and the former Health Secretary. That led to a commitment from the Government to issue a highlight notice, which

demonstrates the importance that they place on this type of research. I respect the Government's approach, which has been to say that while we all want to find a cure and there is a need to do the scientific research, it is important to do that through a peer-reviewed process and through competitive funding rounds, because that is what produces the best science. It is, however, vital that those funding rounds go ahead and that the funding is made available to meet the need.

As we have heard already, the unique aspect of lobular breast cancer is that it is very difficult to discover. It often goes undetected, and only 28% of cases are detected at stage one, compared with 38% of non-lobular breast cancers. There are 8,000 cases a year. The campaign is calling for the discovery science to be done. I appreciate that the Minister today is answering on behalf of the Department for Health and Social Care, but we also need engagement with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, because we need bespoke funding pools from UK Research and Innovation that universities such as Manchester can tap into, to make sure that this vital work gets done. I was privileged to meet Professor Rob Clarke from Manchester and hear about his work.

I urge the Minister to take up this issue. Two years on since I was elected, and three or four years on from when I first heard about this campaign, progress has been made, but it is too slow. So many people are in situations that I cannot even imagine, and they are giving their time to campaign for something so important, not even necessarily for themselves, but for the generations that come after them. I implore the Government to listen to their calls and to do what we can to make sure that the correct funding pools are available so that we can, once and for all, get this research done and answer their pleas.

3.18 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing this important debate. I pay tribute to everyone who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. When I met the Lobular Moon Shot Project team in April, their determination to improve outcomes for patients was unmistakeable.

The debate is also an opportunity to remember Dr Susan Michaelis on the first anniversary of her passing. After being diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer in 2011, Susan devoted her final years to advancing research into this awful disease. In 2023, she founded the Lobular Moon Shot Project, and in December 2024, many colleagues and I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate to echo the project's call for greater investment in lobular breast cancer research. I hope that the Minister this afternoon will be able to give us some idea of whether the Government listened to us all those months ago and whether they are listening today, because very little appears to have changed.

Invasive lobular breast cancer is the second most common type of breast cancer, with between 7,500 and 8,000 people diagnosed every year in the UK. That is around 22 women every day. Despite accounting for around one in seven breast cancer diagnoses, this form of the disease remains under-researched with no specifically designed treatment. As a result, patients are often treated

[Clive Jones]

with therapies known to be less effective for lobular tumours, increasing the risk of metastatic disease, greater toxicity and poorer outcomes.

That is not inevitable. With targeted research, outcomes can improve. The Lobular Moon Shot Project is calling for £20 million over five years to fund lobular-specific research. In the grand scheme of things, £20 million over five years is not a lot of money, and that investment would deepen understanding of the disease, support the development of targeted therapies, and improve diagnosis and treatment for thousands of patients. Without it, progress will remain far too slow.

The project estimates that 3.75 million people worldwide will be diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer over the next decade, making need for action so very urgent. The investment also represents good value. Modelling by the Lobular Moon Shot Project suggests that preventing or delaying metastasis in even a relatively small number of patients would more than offset the proposed £20 million investment through reduced treatment costs. I know that many across the cancer community are eagerly awaiting the Government's workforce plan. Can the Minister update the House on when it might be published?

In closing, I urge the Government to support the Lobular Moon Shot Project and commit £20 million to improve research, diagnosis and treatment for invasive lobular breast cancer. I also once again pay tribute to Dr Susan Michaelis, without whose tireless campaigning, I doubt we would be here today debating this issue or pressing for the change that so many patients and families deserve.

3.23 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing this hugely important debate and for his powerful speech.

Just a few weeks ago, I stood outside Downing Street alongside women living with invasive lobular breast cancer, their families and campaigners for the Lobular Moon Shot Project's 22-minute silence. Those 22 minutes represented the 22 women who lose their lives to lobular breast cancer every day. It was a deeply moving experience. Standing in silence with women who are living with the disease alongside those who have lost loved ones brought home why today's debate really matters. They were not asking for sympathy; they were asking to be seen. They were asking for better research, earlier diagnosis and better outcomes for women diagnosed in the future.

Today, I want to share the story of my constituent, Trish. She has kindly given me permission to share her story because she hopes that by doing so, another woman may recognise the signs of lobular breast cancer sooner. Trish did everything that we ask women to do. Between 2014 and 2025, she attended six mammograms—six opportunities for cancer to be found, and six occasions when she believed that if something was wrong, it would be detected. But none of those mammograms picked up any signs.

Like many women, Trish believed that cancer meant finding a lump. It was not a lump that led to her diagnosis; it was a shadow. After getting out of the shower one morning, while putting her hair up, she noticed a shadow

underneath her breast. She took a photograph and could clearly see dimpling in her skin. Thankfully, her GP listened and referred her urgently under the two-week-wait pathway. I place on the record my thanks to that GP, because despite there being no obvious lump, they recognised that something was not right.

At the breast clinic, Trish underwent mammograms, ultrasounds and biopsies. Initially, she was reassured that there was no lump to feel. She was then told that there was a small area of concern. The plan was for a lumpectomy and a short course of radiotherapy, and she recalls being told that she would likely be back at work in a month. She underwent an MRI, which is when everything changed. It showed that the tumour measured approximately 72 millimetres. Following surgery, it was confirmed to be 75 millimetres. Trish's treatment changed completely: she needed a mastectomy with immediate reconstruction, followed by 15 rounds of radiotherapy. She is currently undergoing 10 years of hormone therapy. She certainly was not back at work after a month.

Trish's experience raises important questions. Lobular breast cancer is the second most common type of breast cancer, yet many women have never even heard of it. Unlike the breast cancers many of us are more familiar with, lobular breast cancer often does not form a distinct lump. Instead, it grows in strand-like tumours, making it much harder to detect on mammograms and feel during examination. That is why women with lobular breast cancer are so often diagnosed later, when tumours are much larger and treatment becomes far more extensive. For Trish, six mammograms over more than a decade failed to detect her cancer.

That is why the work of the Lobular Moon Shot Project matters. Campaigners are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for research into lobular breast cancer that reflects the scale of the challenge. They are asking for earlier diagnosis, better understanding of how the disease behaves, improved imaging and more effective treatments. Above all, they are asking that women with lobular breast cancer are no longer overlooked because their cancer behaves differently. Awareness of lobular breast cancer must improve. For many years, the message has quite rightly been, "Check for lumps," but breast cancer is not always a lump; women also need to know about dimpling, puckering, changes in breast shape, thickening of the breast tissue and changes to the skin. As Trish said to me,

"You should know your breasts as well as you know your face."

I welcome the engagement that Ministers have already had with campaigners and researchers, and I hope that today's debate marks another step forward.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend and other colleagues are making some very powerful points today. Is she going to come on to the important issue of medical training and education for doctors and other medical professionals, and the possible benefits of greater public awareness? The Department of Health and Social Care has historically done very important work leading on public awareness campaigns on illnesses and other issues in the health world. I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to highlight that as well.

Sarah Hall: Trish is a phenomenal campaigner—a lot like Susan—and she wants to work together to create an awareness campaign so that women understand that

there is a difference between types of breast cancer. We are looking to establish a support group for women who have lobular breast cancer; that is in the works. On training, my hon. Friend is absolutely right: recognition and training forms part of research, understanding and detection—what it is and what causes it—but also what we need to do in the training required by people in the profession.

I hope that the Government will continue working with researchers, clinicians and the Lobular Moon Shot Project to improve understanding of lobular breast cancer, support further research and ensure that women receive the earliest and most accurate diagnosis possible. Behind every statistic is someone like Trish, a woman who did everything that she was supposed to and who wants her experience to help somebody else. Next week, many of the women I stood with outside Downing Street will gather once again. My hope is that one day, they will no longer need to, and that through better research, greater awareness and earlier diagnosis, fewer women will hear the words that Trish heard. I hope that colleagues from across will continue to stand with those women until that becomes a reality.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. I encourage Members to speak into their microphones; it is quite difficult even for me to hear the debate, so it must be even more difficult for the people sitting in the Public Gallery. Please direct your remarks into the Chamber. I know there is a great temptation to direct it to our guests—we know they are here and we acknowledge them. I ask Members to speak up and speak into their microphones so that everybody can hear.

3.30 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. Thank you for the reminder. I very sincerely thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for leading the effort to secure this debate and for his incredibly powerful speech. His recounting of Susan's final visit to Parliament and the words of her husband, Tristan, was very moving indeed. He has done Susan, her loved ones and the thousands of supporters of her campaign proud today. I too welcome Tristan, Susan's aunt Sally and her cousin Andrew to Parliament. Tristan kindly shared with us the briefing that he prepared for Members ahead of the debate. I know that many of us have drawn on it this afternoon and absorbed it.

Susan had just one symptom: one tiny millimetre-long mark on her breast. She had no pain and no lump—none of the warning signs that many of us have been told to look out for. But that tiny mark concealed something a lot bigger: 7 cm of invasive lobular breast cancer. There is something profoundly cruel about that. The disease was growing silently while every reassuring scan understandably gave Susan and her family reason to believe that everything was fine.

As we heard, incredibly, nine days before she passed away, Susan launched the scientific programme for the Lobular Moon Shot Project. Even while facing the unimaginable, she was looking beyond herself and fighting to ensure that other families might one day be spared what hers endured. I have no doubt that she would be immensely proud to see her family and her Member of Parliament continuing that work in her memory.

Since I was elected, 14 of my constituents have contacted me about breast cancer. They felt compelled to write to me because this disease touched their lives or the lives of somebody they love. One in particular contacted me in every way she could to command my attention and make sure I signed up to this campaign. If my two years in this House have taught me anything, it is that for every person who writes to us, hundreds more are affected but, for whatever reason, do not write in.

I would be surprised if there is anybody in this Chamber whose life has not been shaped in some way by cancer. My family unexpectedly lost my wonderful aunt during the pandemic, after her cancer was spotted too late. It reaches into every family, every community and every constituency. I am sure most of us know somebody whose chair at the dinner table is empty because of cancer, or someone who is still sitting there because it was found in time. That is the difference that early diagnosis makes. A cancer diagnosis is literally a race against time. Every second of delay gives cancer a head start that it really does not need.

Our NHS can only fight with the tools that we give it. If those tools cannot see a disease or cannot treat it properly, we cannot expect patients to get the outcomes that they deserve. Invasive lobular breast cancer accounts for about 15% of all breast cancer diagnoses, and yet there are still no treatments development specifically for it. Across the world, 1,000 people are diagnosed with the disease every single day, and for them this debate is about far more than statistics; it is about whether future patients hear the words, "We found it early," rather than, "If only we had got it sooner." Cancer is a race against time, and every missed diagnosis gives the disease a head start.

As we have heard, the Lobular Moon Shot Project seeks just £20 million over five years to better understand the biology of the disease and develop targeted treatments. It has already secured the support of hundreds of Members of this House. That level of cross-party support reflects a belief that patients with this horrendous disease deserve to be seen and understood, and to benefit from research that gives them the same hope as every other breast cancer patient. That was Dr Susan Michaelis's mission, and that was her call to us. As the hon. Member for Horsham said, we have a window of opportunity to do that, and I hope that every possible effort is made to seize it.

3.34 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. Like others, I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for introducing the debate and for how he did it.

I want to make a prediction. I think the remaining speakers are going to say that they support this campaign and that they want to see a difference, and they will acknowledge the gap that needs to be filled. Our challenge is making that pledge and those words real. I have been in debates like this before—we all agree that something has to be done, yet we come back and speak about it again and again. Perhaps, if we all carry this campaign forward, this is the time to actually make it happen.

Sam Rushworth: My hon. Friend just made an excellent point. We know the research questions that need to be answered. Does he agree that it should not be beyond

[Sam Rushworth]

UKRI to put out a specific call asking people, through a competitive peer review process, to answer those questions?

Dr Arthur: Exactly. In a former life, I was an academic. UKRI does at times engage with academics to fine-tune such questions. UKRI provides funding to universities, if needed, to bring the very best people to the UK either temporarily or on longer-term contracts to help to make a difference in the UK. Those things are perhaps all part of the solution. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

I am grateful for the opportunity to support this vital debate. It shines much-needed light on a disease that is still under-resourced, as has been said, and it honours the legacy of a woman who dedicated her final years to fighting it: the late Susan Michaelis. I was not fortunate enough to meet her but, as a result of the excellent introduction of the hon. Member for Horsham, I feel I know a little bit about her and her character. I am grateful for that introduction.

Lobular breast cancer, despite being the second most common form of breast cancer, has historically received a mere 1% of breast cancer research funding. Susan refused to accept that disparity and the Lobular Moon Shot Project is her legacy—but it has to be more than a project. Hopefully, progress will be her real legacy. The project demands better treatment for every woman who receives a lobular breast cancer diagnosis. That is why all of us are in the Chamber for this debate.

I recently received an incredibly powerful letter from a leading oncologist, Dr Michie. She is based in Edinburgh, treats patients in Scotland and works closely with the community of those with lobular breast cancer. She expressed deep professional frustration on behalf of her patients, explicitly stating that lobular breast cancer has been neglected for too long. People who meet patients day in, day out and week in, week out still have a real frustration about the lack of progress. Dr Michie's letter also highlighted the fact that lobular breast cancer is different from the more common ductal types of breast cancer, with an entirely unique tumour biology, different responses to drug treatments, and distinct and highly challenging patterns of spread.

The different response to drug treatments is really important because, in the absence of proper treatments, women are often faced with a drug that was not actually designed for the condition that they have. Yet clinical trials rarely even present separate response data for lobular cases: today a grand total of zero lobular-specific clinical trials are actively recruiting patients in the UK. That should shame us, based on what we have discussed already in this debate, and on the scale and breadth of the campaign that has been run.

Additionally, the incidence of lobular breast cancer is rising rapidly, climbing by nearly 3% annually. Because it does not form the typical lump, it is notoriously difficult to detect using classical imaging. That is 3% annual growth in diagnoses of this condition—I know that, as a Government, we are really keen on growth but not that kind. To fix it, we need to improve our pre-clinical understanding of how and why the disease spreads. I believe that the work package plan of the Lobular Moon Shot Project is precisely the kind of ambitious and collaborative plan that can help us to improve

patient outcomes across the board. If people do not believe that, let us have a conversation about how it can be improved.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The hon. Member speaks about the value of research. Some 50 years ago this year, my cousin was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had three years. She left five children under the age of 10. Yesterday I met Lesley, who was diagnosed 20 years ago. Lesley is well. She is still receiving treatment, but that demonstrates the value of the advances that research can make. Does the hon. Member agree that it is absolutely vital that we invest in this area?

Dr Arthur: Absolutely. Yesterday I met with activists from Cancer Research UK just outside Parliament, before they came in. Cancer Research UK had around 100 activists there who had been touched by cancer, in all its shapes and forms, and although that big room was full of people who were full of energy, they were just a tiny part of the footprint of cancer and its impacts across the UK—absolutely tip-of-the-iceberg stuff.

We have to acknowledge the emotional impact on individuals and families, but also the economic impact. We should never be ashamed of talking about that. There is also the economic impact of bringing the best research to the UK so that our laboratories, universities and hospitals can work on this issues. All that is a push in the right direction.

The Government and the bio-sciences sector are notoriously slow-moving. We need to expedite work in this area; a dedicated funding commitment from the Government to launch the Moon Shot Project would help do that. When we talk about housing, we talk about being builders not blockers. Maybe we should use the same narrative and energy for this matter.

On a related note, while the fight for a new funding model is critical, we cannot afford to overlook the importance of immediate and compassionate support for people who have the condition. In my constituency we are incredibly fortunate to have the House of Hope, a wonderful charity that provides a safe space for women navigating a breast cancer diagnosis and for their families, including their husbands and children. As I understand it, they plan to start a support group to focus specifically on lobular breast cancer, which will meet for the first time on 11 August. I wish them well in that endeavour and I am wearing my House of Hope badge today. They actually gave me three badges with different designs, but I went for the glittery one because we all need a bit of glitter in our lives sometimes.

I have always found the House of Hope to be an incredibly inspiring and hospitable place. I encourage any woman with a diagnosis in Edinburgh and the Lothians or further afield to check out the services it provides. I am sure the Minister would be welcome to visit any time and I can guarantee him it will be cooler in Edinburgh than it is in London right now.

I return to Susan and her project. A clear and fundamental shift is needed in how we fund and prioritise research into this condition. I strongly encourage the Minister to actively engage with the project's demands, meet with the campaign and agree a plan going forward for how we can address their concerns. As has been said already, 22 women will be diagnosed with this condition today and we need to give them and their families hope.

I checked *Hansard* this morning: in the 2019 to 2024 Parliament, lobular breast cancer was mentioned 10 times. Just two years into the current Parliament, we have mentioned it 56 times. We need to stop talking about it in this place and actually start getting stuff done.

3.42 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) for leading this important debate on Government support for the Lobular Moon Shot Project.

On the first anniversary of her death, I want to pay tribute to Dr Susan Michaelis and her tireless campaigning. Today's debate celebrates a legacy that continues to inspire researchers, clinicians, patients and parliamentarians alike. While the debate is about her story with lobular breast cancer, I would like to focus on what made her Susan. Although Susan was known for her campaigning on lobular breast cancer, she was so much more than that—something her loved ones, who are here today, know all too well.

Susan was an Australian who grew up in Melbourne before moving to the UK in 2003. As a child, she had dreams of becoming a pilot, but because of the lack of women in the industry at the time she settled on working in the travel industry instead. However, she soon realised that she really did want to become a pilot, so she set about becoming a qualified commercial pilot. Her dream came true and she trailblazed as the co-pilot on the first all-female crewed flight for the Qantas Group.

Susan also obtained a PhD at the University of New South Wales in Sydney in 2010. Her thesis was titled "Health and Flight Safety Implications from Exposure to Contaminated Air in Aircraft". She was a researcher who devoted her career to improving public health and aviation safety, and her contributions towards aircraft cabin air contamination remain recognised today.

In 2007, Susan and her husband raised concerns with the world's leading jet engine oil manufacturers about crew and passenger exposure to engine oil decomposition products. While most ignored the issue, the French company NYCO investigated and confirmed that the fuel additives affected gene expression. As a result, NYCO developed a new, less hazardous jet engine oil, NYCO 940 SE. The oil received SAE approval in 2023 and US military approval for use in all NATO aircrafts in 2024.

However, her legacy undoubtedly remains the Lobular Moon Shot Project and the change that she championed while knowing that she would not live to reap the benefits. Susan was diagnosed with lobular breast cancer in 2013 after a small 1 mm mark was noticed on her left breast. She had no lumps and had experienced no pain. Two mammograms and two ultrasound scans showed no cause for concern. However, an MRI scan suggested the presence of a 2.5 cm area of lobular breast cancer, which was later confirmed by a biopsy.

Susan underwent a double mastectomy, and post-operative pathology revealed that the cancer actually measured 7 cm. That was much larger than what had initially been detected and was missed entirely by mammograms and ultrasounds. Had Susan been given regular MRI scans in the last 10 years before her

diagnosis, her lobular breast cancer would have been detected much earlier. For all cancers, early diagnosis and effective treatment is essential to increase survival.

Susan's story tragically highlights how those challenges continue to be experienced by the millions of patients living with lobular breast cancer. Current NHS imaging techniques can fail to detect the disease accurately, which often leads to diagnosis at a later and more advanced stage. Unlike other breast cancers, lobular breast cancer tends to spread out in straight lines rather than amassing to form a firm lump. A patient is more likely to have a thickened area of breast tissue as a symptom, rather than the expected lump. That is what makes lobular breast cancer so difficult to detect during a physical examination, and when using imaging scans, such as mammograms and ultrasounds.

Research indicates that MRIs, which can produce detailed images of the inside of the breast, offer improved detection and characterisation of lobular breast cancer. If Susan had been given a regular MRI scan in the 10 years prior to her diagnosis, there is a very real chance that her cancer would have been detected sooner. That would have reduced the risk of it metastasising and ultimately claiming her life. Susan also only received generic breast cancer treatments as there is currently no specialised treatment for lobular breast cancer. Susan underwent eight systemic treatments over the span of 12 years. That led to the lobular breast cancer spreading to her spine in 2021. A PET-CT scan was unable to detect the disease progression, but once again, it was detected on an MRI scan—something that is not available on the NHS.

Lobular breast cancer accounts for one in seven—or 15%—of all new breast cancer diagnoses. It is the second most common sub-type of breast cancer. There are approximately 8,400 lobular breast cancer diagnoses in the UK each year. That amounts to 22 people being diagnosed every single day. More women are impacted by lobular breast cancer than cancers of the kidney, brain, pancreas, liver or ovaries. The impact of any cancer for both the patient and their loved ones is always devastating, and lobular breast cancer is no exception. We must better our understanding of this disease to improve treatment and outcomes for all those affected. It is unacceptable that this cancer has no specific treatments and is treated in the same way as the more common types of invasive cancer.

The Lobular Moon Shot Project, created in May 2023 in Horsham by Susan alongside her husband, is striving to change that. The campaign is asking for the Government to invest £20 million over five years to understand the biology of the disease to enable targeted treatments. Alongside all my Liberal Democrat colleagues, I wholeheartedly support and will continue to support this very important project. The Liberal Democrats were the first major party to fully endorse this campaign. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) has written to both the Prime Minister and the former Health Secretary on Susan's behalf, and our Chief Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), has repeatedly raised this issue in the Chamber.

Support for the Lobular Moon Shot Project has grown to 465 Members of Parliament, making it the most widely supported health campaign in Parliament. On 15 July 2025, the then Health Secretary, the right

[*Helen Maguire*]

hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), stated that he had instructed his chief scientific adviser to plan a path forward to understand the biology behind this cancer to make a difference to those affected. One year on, and with a new Health Secretary, this research project has still not got the green light. We cannot allow this to fall through the cracks. I urge the Minister and all Members here today, regardless of their party, to continue to advocate on this issue.

Alongside supporting the work of the Lobular Moon Shot Project, the Liberal Democrats are clear: cancer must be a top priority for any Government, and the UK should be a global leader in cancer research and outcomes. The Liberal Democrats would introduce a guarantee that 100% of patients would be able to start treatment within 62 days from urgent referral. The Liberal Democrats would also recruit more cancer nurses so that every patient has a dedicated specialist supporting them throughout their treatment.

To end, I once again want to honour the legacy of Dr Susan Michaelis and her Lobular Moon Shot Project. The contributions made here today show the continuing impact of her legacy, which inspires me, and everyone in the room and beyond. I once again ask the Minister to play his part in ensuring that Susan's legacy continues for her and all those who have been and continue to be impacted by lobular breast cancer. Will he today commit to finding the £20 million to fund the research so that more people survive lobular breast cancer?

3.50 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Hobhouse. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing today's debate, and to the Members from across the House who have given their voice to this campaign over a number of years. It is entirely right that Parliament should pause today to consider not just the science, the policy and the funding, but the human reality that sits behind all three of those things.

Behind the words "lobular breast cancer" are people who knew something was wrong, but the system could not prove it. That is the point at the heart of today's debate. This is not a call for special treatment or a demand that we place one cancer above another; it is a recognition that different cancers behave differently, present differently and may require different approaches if we are serious about improving outcomes.

Today, we are also remembering Dr Susan Michaelis. Many people in public life are described as courageous, but in Susan's case that word feels insufficient. She was, as we have heard, a commercial pilot, a researcher, a campaigner, a wife and a woman whose instinct, when faced with injustice or uncertainty, was not to turn away from it but to investigate it. She had already devoted much of her professional life to public safety, particularly in the aviation sector. We have heard about how she challenged assumptions, gathered evidence and pursued truth in an area where the consequences mattered for passengers, crews and the wider public. In 2013, she received her devastating diagnosis of invasive lobular

breast cancer. As we have heard today, her symptoms were not dramatic; they presented as just a tiny mark on her breast.

Two mammograms and two ultrasounds failed to identify the disease, and it was ultimately identified by an MRI scan. We have heard how that revealed what appeared to be a relatively small lesion of about inch that was later confirmed to be over 7 cm. That single account tells us why this debate continues to matter and shows the particular challenge of a cancer that can be harder to detect through standard imaging.

Remarkably, Susan did not live her final years in retreat from the world; she continued with her work and her research, and continued campaigning. As we have heard, nine days before her death, she travelled to Manchester to help launch the scientific programme for the lobular breast cancer Moon Shot Project, knowing full well that any breakthrough would come too late for her. That is an extraordinary act of generosity and a challenge to all of us in this place. If someone is living with advanced cancer and can spend her final days and the last of her strength ask for progress for others, surely it is our responsibility and Government to find the clarity and urgency to respond.

As we have heard, lobular breast cancer is not rare. It is the second most common type of breast cancer, accounting for around 15% of cases, but despite that it too often remains hidden in plain sight.

Seamus Logan: This is not a party-political issue; it is something the shadow Minister and the whole House can agree on. In 2022, the Scottish Government began the process of improving their imaging kits with the introduction of 3D mammography, which is a major step forward. Two months ago, the Scottish Parliament lodged a motion supporting the lobular breast cancer Moon Shot Project and called for the £20 million to be allocated. Does he agree that the breadth of support for this campaign—440 MPs now support it, including myself—is now irresistible, and that the Minister should award the funding?

Dr Shastri-Hurst: The hon. Gentleman is right; there is collective support for doing more on this issue. That starts with getting the research right. Without the research, we do not know how to plan for the treatments of the future. I will move on to the other points, but he is also entirely right that this is not a party-political issue, but one that affects all of us and all of our constituents. We have to work with a sense of urgency around it.

As we have heard, the lobular breast cancer Moon Shot Project is looking for £20 million over five years to advance the understanding of invasive lobular breast cancer and to support better detection, treatment and surveillance. We cannot dispute that that is a significant sum, but we have to look at it in the context of national health spending and what cancer costs: the cost to families and patients and the cost to the NHS when it is detected late or treated inadequately. We have to bear those factors in mind.

We should also be clear about what research funding means in practice. It does not mean a guarantee of easy answers. Science does not work like that, but it does mean giving our best minds the chance to ask the right questions. It means building the evidence base and moving beyond a generic understanding of breast cancer

and towards a more precise understanding of this specific disease. That is the direction of travel that we have seen over a number of years in modern healthcare. We have seen it in genomics and targeted therapies and we see it in the increasing recognition that treatment must be shaped by the biology of the disease and the needs of the patient. There is no reason that lobular breast cancer should be left behind in that progress.

There has been movement—it is right to acknowledge that. The National Institute for Health and Care Research has issued a highlight notice encouraging applications for research into lobular breast cancer; the Government have published their own national cancer plan; and the Health Bill speaks of research duties and innovation. Those are by no means meaningless, but they are not yet enough. That is why today's debate must focus on delivery, so I ask the Minister whether the Government will set out a timeline to fund the lobular breast cancer Moon Shot Project. If the answer is yes, campaigners deserve to know how and through what mechanism that will happen. If the answer is no, they deserve an honest explanation. Is it a financial barrier? Is it a scientific one? Is it procedural? Are the Government waiting for further proposals, reviews or assessments? The people who have campaigned with such dignity on this issue should not be left trying to decode in silence.

I also ask the Minister to address the issue of guidance. Lobular breast cancer is referred to only in limited form in existing national breast cancer guidance, and campaigners have called for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to review whether the guidance properly reflects the disease. That guidance, of course, shapes clinical practice and influences what clinicians look for, what tests are considered and how treatment is approached. If the evidence is not yet strong enough to support separate recommendations, that should strengthen the case for targeted research, not weaken it. We cannot use the absence of evidence as a reason not to gather it. That would be a circular argument. The patients affected by this disease deserve much better.

There is also a wider lesson here about women's health. Too often women's symptoms have been dismissed as vague, complex or difficult to categorise. Too often women have had to become their own advocates at the very moment when they are frightened, unwell and least able to fight. One duty of a good health system is to reduce the burden on the patient and prove that they are worth listening to. Susan Michaelis understood that deeply. As we heard earlier, on 24 June last year, while on oxygen and clearly in pain, she stood outside Downing Street as part of a silent vigil representing the 22 people diagnosed every day with lobular breast cancer in the United Kingdom. She delivered a letter asking for help. Two weeks later she died wearing her Lobular Moon Shot Project T-shirt. That is an image that should stay with all of us today, not because policies should be made on emotion alone—clearly they should not. Policy has to be evidence-based, financially responsible and clinically sound. But should policy not be stripped of a moral seriousness, either. Evidence tells us what may work. Compassion reminds us why we keep working. Responsibility requires us to bring those two factors together.

The last Government invested in cancer research, including support for the Institute of Cancer Research and the Royal Marsden biomedical research centre,

along with wider work relevant to lobular breast cancer. In opposition we have continued to press the Government on the Moon Shot Project, including through the shadow health team and other colleagues. But this should not, as we have discussed, become a party political contest. Cancer does not observe party lines, and neither should our determination to improve the outcomes for patients.

The test for the Government is relatively simple. Can they turn sympathy into a plan? Can they give campaigners a clear route forward? Can they match the scale of the problem with a response that is specific, funded and time-bound? What those affected by lobular breast cancer need is not another expression of admiration for their bravery and courage. They need progress: a system that sees their cancer sooner, treatments shaped by its biology, surveillance that reflects the risk of recurrence and spread, guidance that recognises the particular character of the disease and research funded at a level that gives discovery a fair chance.

Susan Michaelis gave the final chapter of her life to this cause. She did so not for herself, but for women she would never meet and families she would never know. That legacy is worthy of more than a mere tribute; it is worthy of action. I hope the Minister will leave this debate having listened carefully, but also prepared to act decisively. The Government should not only meet the campaigners, but set out the remaining barriers, publish a route to a decision and make clear whether they will fund the Moon Shot project. Dr Susan Michaelis spent her life making hidden risks visible; the task before us now is to ensure that lobular breast cancer is hidden no longer.

4.1 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing this vital debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) for campaigning on this topic, following her own diagnosis of lobular breast cancer.

I add my tribute to Dr Susan Michaelis, as today marks one year since she passed away from lobular breast cancer. As a founder of the Lobular Moon Shot Project, she campaigned tirelessly on behalf of women diagnosed with lobular breast cancer and raised awareness for the condition. I also pay tribute to members of the Lobular Moon Shot Project, including Susan's husband, Tristan Loraine, for picking up the mantle, continuing the important work of the project and carrying Susan's torch forward.

I recognise the number of charities that carry out important work in this area, such as Lobular Breast Cancer UK, Breast Cancer Now and Cancer Research UK, and all the right hon. and hon. Members who continue to provide support, many of whom we have heard from today.

Lobular breast cancer accounts for 15% of breast cancer cases. However, as we have heard, this form of cancer sadly goes undetected in too many women. We are determined to transform diagnosis and outcomes for patients. Earlier this year, the Minister for Public Health and Prevention, who is the lead DHSC Minister on this issue—I am standing in for her today—and Lord Vallance, the Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear at the Department for Science,

[Stephen Kinnock]

Innovation and Technology, met representatives of the Lobular Moon Shot Project. Alongside Government research funders, they discussed the Lobular Moon Shot's work, listened to the experiences of lobular breast cancer from those who attended, and discussed how to advance research in this vital area.

Following that meeting, last month Lord Vallance hosted a scientific roundtable that brought together a range of researchers, clinicians and industry representatives to identify opportunities to advance research and innovation. At that meeting, attendees agreed that one of the next steps should be to encourage collaborative research and funding applications across multiple existing schemes, including for basic discovery science. I would like to emphasise that Government research funders stand ready to support that work as it progresses.

We acknowledge and share the Lobular Moon Shot Project's ambition for researchers to take a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to addressing the unique challenges of lobular breast cancer. Government responsibility for delivering cancer research is shared between the Department of Health and Social Care, with research delivered by the National Institute for Health and Care Research, and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, with research delivered via UK Research and Innovation.

The Medical Research Council primarily supports the discovery sciences and fundamental biological research, which is the focus of the Lobular Moon Shot campaign. Through MRC, UKRI has emphasised its commitment to supporting interdisciplinary team-based research across its funding schemes and highlighted support for collaborative activities to provide a platform on which to build a portfolio of research in this important area. NIHR's research is complementary to the MRC's focus, supporting the translation of discovery science into patient benefit.

Through the MRC and NIHR, we are already funding research into lobular breast cancer. For example, a breast cancer screening study is investigating whether a new, faster MRI scan could detect breast cancers earlier. The FAST—first post-contrast subtracted—MRI is a new type of scan that aims to detect cancers, including lobular breast cancer, that may not be routinely picked up by mammograms during a first screening visit. The £1.36 million study is jointly funded by the MRC and the NIHR. Furthermore, with a total investment of £32 million, the Institute of Cancer Research and the Royal Marsden's NIHR Biomedical Research Centre support lobular breast cancer by combining translational research, precision diagnostics and targeted clinical trials to develop and test tailored treatments.

Promising discoveries are being made. Scientists at the Breast Cancer Now Toby Robins Research Centre at the Institute of Cancer Research have recently discovered a drug, currently being tested in clinical trials for a rare blood cancer, that could also be used to treat lobular breast cancer. Researchers now hope to progress the drug to clinical trials for lobular breast cancer. More widely, we are supporting world-leading research and development to enable the prevention of cancer and to improve diagnosis, treatment and care for people affected by the conditions. Cancer is a major area of NIHR spending. Reflecting its high priority, the institute spent

£141.6 million on it in 2024-25. Alongside that, UKRI invested £198 million in cancer research in the same year.

We are investing in the best science, which explores lobular breast cancer both in isolation and in conjunction with other cancers, to maximise the opportunity to share learning and identify possible breakthroughs. Historically, the breast cancer research community has categorised the field around signalling, pathway and molecular presentation on tumours. Rather than naming a particular cancer sub-type, therefore, grants within the MRC portfolio focus on the understanding of molecular mechanisms common to both lobular breast cancer and invasive breast cancer.

We know that more research is needed. That is why both the MRC and NIHR are committed to continuing to support the development of high-quality, fundable research proposals. There are a range of existing opportunities across funders that support this developing portfolio. The NIHR is actively encouraging high-quality, ambitious research proposals on lobular breast cancer, having launched a highlight notice in late 2025 to signal to researchers our interest in funding research into this area.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab) *rose*—

Helen Maguire *rose*—

Stephen Kinnock: I think my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) was first.

Daniel Francis: I thank the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) for securing the debate. I have supported my constituent Emma Hunwick and her campaigning on this issue. It is the third time I have attended a debate on this subject in the two years I have been an MP. I hear what the Minister says about research, but I think what supporters want is assurance that we will not be having a similar conversation again next year. They want confidence that we will have made some progress in the next 12 months.

Stephen Kinnock: In a nutshell, what I am trying to lay out is that it is not an either/or question. There is a tremendous amount of work going on to research cancer, including lobular breast cancer, which is a vital subset of that work.

The challenge for us is the idea of ringfencing £20 million, because ringfencing is not the standard process. The standard process is to have applications that are subject to peer review and judged in open competition, with awards made on the basis of the importance of the topic to the public and health and care services, value for money and scientific quality. If there is a difference of view in the Chamber today, it is whether we have an ecosystem of cutting-edge research, applications and competitive process, based on the principles I have just outlined, or a ringfenced fund.

I have to be absolutely clear and straight with my hon. Friend that currently the Government are not of the view that a ringfencing approach is the right way to go. The worry is that that approach could potentially cut across the ecosystem-based approach that we are seeking to nurture and foster, which we believe will deliver better outcomes in the end.

Helen Maguire: Thankfully, the Minister has clarified some of the issues that I was going to ask about. He says the Government are not necessarily looking to ringfence the £20 million, but are waiting for applications for research. The Lobular Moon Shot Project has already put forward some ideas on research. He has said that he stands ready to support the project, so I would just like some more specific detail. He says that we are waiting for applications for research, but does not what the Lobular Moon Shot Project has submitted or talked about fall within that?

Stephen Kinnock: As I mentioned earlier, unfortunately I am not the lead Minister on this issue, so I do not have the most up-to-date information on the proposal that has been submitted. If it is okay with the hon. Lady, I will speak with the ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South, and write to the hon. Lady on that subject, providing an update on exactly where the proposal is in terms of the overall process that we have. Have I understood her intervention correctly?

Helen Maguire *indicated assent.*

Stephen Kinnock: Okay. I thank the hon. Lady. That is what we will do.

Dr Arthur: I appreciate that the Minister is substituting for another excellent Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson); I am sad that she is not here, because she is fantastic. We ringfence money for brain tumour research—I know that that community wants more money, so I am not saying it is the gold standard, but we have made that choice, because we recognised the public concern about brain tumours. There is also public concern about lobular breast cancer and the feeling that people who have it are being left behind. It is fantastic that we have better screening coming on board, but ultimately people need treatment if they are diagnosed during the screening process.

The Minister highlighted the fact that there is a competitive bidding process. Is it the case that the bids are not good enough? If that is the case, can we invest money to improve the quality of those bids? As I said earlier, we could bring in better staff, perhaps from overseas, or invest in PhD students to work in this area.

Stephen Kinnock: My understanding is that there are bids that are good enough and they are the ones that have attracted funding for research into lobular breast cancer. What I do not know at this moment is precisely where the live bids are and whether they are making the cut in terms of the quality that we are looking for. I will absolutely follow up with my ministerial colleague, and I will write to my hon. Friend on that point.

Sam Rushworth: I think there is a space between the two approaches. As wonderful as the Lobular Moon Shot Project is, I fully respect why the Government say that we cannot allow campaign groups to dictate which universities get x millions of pounds for particular projects, and I see the value of there being a peer-reviewed process through a competitive ecosystem. However, there is a space where we can go beyond a highlight notice, whereby the Government could specifically say, “We want

research that will answer these specific sets of research questions.” I wonder whether that is something that he could take back to his colleagues for consideration.

Stephen Kinnock: I will absolutely take that suggestion back. I understand my hon. Friend’s point about having a specific call for proposals. I will discuss it with my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South and get back to him.

Our approach to funding research is through open and fair competition and peer review to ensure that the highest-quality proposals most likely to deliver real impact for patients are funded without imposing financial targets or limits. We also recognise that international research co-operation is fundamental to driving medical breakthroughs and saving lives. That is why the DHSC participates in and influences the EU cancer mission, which aims to improve the lives of more than 3 million people affected by cancer by 2030 through multi-country research calls and activities. For breast cancer, that includes a focus on driving screening innovation, including the MammoScreen project, supported by UKRI, which is developing safe, non-invasive, microwave-based imaging for more accurate screening.

The Government’s national cancer plan for England, published earlier this year, sets out our ambition to improve cancer outcomes and ensure that by 2035, three in four people diagnosed with cancer survive for five years or more. Research, innovation and earlier diagnosis are central to achieving that ambition. We know that too many women with lobular breast cancer face delays in diagnosis because it can be more difficult to detect. That is why the work being championed by the Lobular Moon Shot Project is so important.

The cancer plan recognises that improving outcomes depends on strengthening research, supporting innovation and bringing together researchers, clinicians, charities, industry and patients to tackle some of the biggest challenges in cancer care. That spirit of collaboration is exactly what we have seen through the Lobular Moon Shot Project. Through continued engagement with campaigners, researchers and patients, we want to support progress towards a better understanding of lobular breast cancer, and ultimately improvements in diagnosis, treatment and outcomes for the women affected by it. More broadly, the plan is about improving not only clinical outcomes, but people’s experience of cancer care. Through more personalised support and better co-ordinated services, we want to ensure that every patient receives high-quality care and support throughout their cancer journey.

The ambition of the national cancer plan is clear: to combine the strengths of our NHS, our research community and our life sciences sector so that patients benefit from the very best cancer care. That includes people living with lobular breast cancer who deserve the same progress, hope and opportunity as every other cancer patient.

The DHSC was pleased to discuss the issue of NHS breast cancer screening at the petitions debate opened by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) last month. The NHS breast screening programme offers all women in England between the ages of 50 and their 71st birthday the opportunity to be screened every three years for breast cancer, to help detect abnormalities and intervene early to reduce the number of lives lost to invasive breast cancer.

[Stephen Kinnock]

In addition, some younger women at increased risk of breast cancer because of genetics or their family history are eligible for earlier, more frequent screening, sometimes using MRI rather than mammogram.

We are also investing in research to improve the early diagnosis of breast cancer through the early detection using information technology in health, or EDITH, trial, which is backed by £11 million in Government support via the NIHR. Almost 700,000 women from across the country will take part in the trial to test whether using AI to support radiologists increases the number of cancers detected in women taking part in the national breast cancer screening programme. The trial will evaluate multiple AI technologies to assist radiologists in screening mammograms for signs of cancer. It may enable one specialist to complete the process safely, freeing up hundreds of radiologists to tackle waiting lists and rising cancer rates.

My message to the research community is clear: research funding remains available, and that funding does not have a ceiling. We know that recent advances in technology and data science create a timely opportunity to accelerate progress. Our investment in research means that the UK is well positioned to lead research on this topic. We will continue to strongly encourage research applications. We stand ready to support the research community to develop and submit high-quality, ambitious proposals in remit for review.

Our belief is that that approach will maximise the opportunity of seeing major steps forward in delivering better outcomes for those with lobular breast cancer through research. I thank all hon. Members and you, Mrs Hobhouse, for your time today.

4.19 pm

John Milne: I thank all hon. Members here present. Some really powerful points have been made. I particularly thank the Minister for his reply—I find it the most

revealing reply of all that I have heard over the past year. Considering it is not even strictly his portfolio, I am very impressed. I hope that he or one of his colleagues will agree to follow up, because he has raised some very interesting points. I would like to consult with colleagues and follow up.

We are getting an understanding of the processes within Government for making these decisions. From the outside, it is very frustrating. I cannot tell when the Government are stalling or when they are really doing something. I mean that in general; I am not talking about this particular subject. I have had a number of meetings with completely different Departments this week, as it happens, with Ministers. It is very hard to tell when we are just being fobbed off and when we are actually on a path to a solution. I have been in politics only a couple of years; forgive my naivety.

I was very interested to hear what the Minister said and I felt he was more honest. I would really appreciate an opportunity to follow up either with him or his colleagues in the coming days.

Finally, I must pay tribute again to Dr Susan Michaelis for all her work. This day is of course the one-year anniversary of her death. I also pay tribute to all the lobular ladies, who are campaigning not just for themselves, but for everybody. This is a worldwide problem; it does not just affect us. I pay tribute to them all and I thank everyone today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for the Lobular Moon Shot Project.

4.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 9 July 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK Export Finance: Mandate

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Peter Kyle): The Government are taking decisive action to strengthen the UK's economic security and deliver growth in an increasingly contested and uncertain global economy.

As the UK's export credit agency, UK Export Finance drives growth by helping businesses across the country win contracts overseas, expand into new markets, and sustain high-value jobs. It plays a central role in mobilising capital in support of the Government's economic objectives. UKEF's 2025-26 impact report shows that last year UKEF provided £11 billion of support, which supported up to 85,000 jobs across the UK. Over the last 5 years, UKEF has supported 330,000 UK jobs, unlocking £23 billion of GDP growth.

Export credit agencies in peer and competitor countries are moving quickly to support a broader range of trade and investment activity, providing their firms with a wider and deeper range of financing to compete internationally. UKEF must be similarly equipped to match this ambition. However, its current statutory framework is primarily focused on supporting exports and does not provide sufficient flexibility to support the full range of modern trade, investment and supply chain activity.

As part of its modern industrial strategy, the Government committed to reviewing UKEF's mandate, with a view to establishing a wider trade and investment remit to drive growth across the eight growth sectors. Delivering this commitment is a key part of the Government plan for growth.

I am therefore announcing the Government's intention to bring forward legislation, when parliamentary time allows, to modernise the Export and Investment Guarantees Act 1991 and expand UKEF's statutory powers, enabling it to operate as a more flexible, globally deployable financing instrument in support of UK prosperity.

The Government's ambition is for UKEF to be able to support a broader range of international trade and investment activities, in order to support the UK economy, strengthen vulnerable supply chains and secure the UK's economic resilience. The ambition includes:

- Supporting UK firms who trade, invest and operate overseas;
- Strengthening the UK's economic security, including by facilitating the supply of critical goods into the UK;
- Building investment partnerships overseas to mobilise finance flows into the UK.

These measures will enable UKEF to deploy its finance more strategically, so that it can build economic partnerships globally, support UK firms in internationalising, and strengthen supply chains in support of the UK's economic security.

These changes will build on UKEF's existing capabilities and expertise, while maintaining its robust control framework, which includes Treasury consent and parliamentary oversight.

[HCWS206]

Humble Address: Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): I have today laid before the House 13 additional documents within the scope of the 24 February 2026 Humble Address seeking all papers relating to the creation of the role of special representative for trade and investment and the appointment of Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor in 2001.

These documents confirm the arrangements for the appointment set out in the documents provided on 21 May 2026 but also provide some further detail, including confirmation that the British Trade International board was informed and Ministers were briefed on his preparation for the role, and details of his induction programme.

The 13 documents include:

- extracts from BTI board papers;
- further documents about the role, job title, and an update note for the responsible Minister.
- plans for his induction programme and transition to the new role; and
- press releases and media handling discussion.

The Government have now concluded all reasonable searches for material requested by Parliament. The focus of our work is now on supporting Thames Valley police with their investigation into possible misconduct in public office. If, in the course of this or other work, the Government find additional documents in scope of the Humble Address, these will be provided to Parliament in line with the established process.

I am conscious that the Business and Trade Committee is considering inquiring into the Government's management of Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor between 2001 and 2011. I am due to discuss with the Committee how we can best support it while avoiding prejudicing the police investigation.

[HCWS207]

TREASURY

Financial Services: Critical Third Parties Regime

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Rachel Blake): The Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 amended the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 to establish a new framework enabling the oversight of those third parties whose services are critical to the stability of the UK financial sector. This framework forms an important part of the Government's wider programme to promote a resilient, stable and internationally competitive financial services sector.

The designation of a third party will enable the financial regulators—jointly the Bank of England, Prudential Regulation Authority and Financial Conduct Authority—to apply proportionate and targeted oversight of the systemically critical services, focused on managing risks to UK financial stability.

Regulations have been made under section 312L of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 to designate specific third party entities as critical third parties where this is necessary to manage systemic risks arising from these services they provide to the UK financial sector.

These regulations will come into force on 13 July 2026 and form part of a rolling programme of designations with further designations expected in the future as part of the ongoing regime and as risks to the operational resilience of the UK financial sector evolve.

[HCWS212]

EDUCATION

Social Work Regulation in England: Independent Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): On 5 November 2025, I informed the House that the Secretary of State for Education had commissioned Dame Annie Hudson to undertake the statutory independent review of the operation of part 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. I am now updating the House to confirm that the review has concluded and that today I am laying before Parliament Dame Annie Hudson's review report together with the Government response. The review and the Government response relate to Social Work England and the regulation of social workers in England.

I would like to thank Dame Annie Hudson, the review team, and the many stakeholders who contributed evidence and insight to this important review.

The review was asked to assess how effectively Social Work England is discharging its statutory functions and delivering against its statutory objectives, and to consider whether changes are needed to support more effective regulation and improved standards in social work practice.

The review recognises progress since Social Work England was established, including maintaining the register, developing its regulatory approach and standards, completing its first round of inspections, progressing equalities work, and developing approaches to early resolution of concerns.

The review nevertheless concludes that there is a clear case for change to secure sustained improvement. It identifies the need for stronger performance in core regulatory functions, particularly fitness to practise; greater clarity about the role and remit of Social Work England; and stronger governance, sponsorship and accountability arrangements. It also calls for a more coherent standards landscape across professional regulation, qualifying education and post qualifying development; clearer expectations for employers and the wider system; and better use of data, transparency and equalities analysis.

The Government accept the review's central conclusion that sustained improvement is needed in social work regulation in England. This is a shared improvement agenda. Social Work England has a central role in delivering effective regulation, but Government, employers and wider partners also have responsibilities. The Government response therefore sets out the action we expect Social Work England to take, the steps Government will take to strengthen sponsorship and system coherence, and the areas where further work with partners will be needed.

Social workers do vital work with children, families and adults, often in complex and challenging circumstances. Effective professional regulation is essential to public protection, public confidence and high professional standards. It is therefore important that Social Work England is focused on delivering its regulatory functions effectively and that improvement is practical, visible and sustained.

Fitness to practise is the most significant operational priority identified by the review. It is central to public protection and public confidence. The Government recognise that fitness to practise pressures are not unique to Social Work England, and that regulators across sectors are managing increasing case volumes and complexity. However, delays, poor communication and insufficient grip across the end-to-end process affect everyone involved: people who raise concerns, social workers under investigation, witnesses, employers and the wider public.

The Government are clear that urgent improvement is required in timeliness, communications, user experience and strategic grip across the end-to-end process. They therefore expect Social Work England to deliver, within six months, an externally supported, end-to-end fitness to practise strategic improvement plan, building on work already under way and bringing existing plans together into a single coherent approach. This must include clear milestones, revised forecasts and key performance indicators (KPI) on timeliness, methods to track progress and arrangements to recalibrate at pace where needed. The Department for Education will provide strengthened oversight, with regular reporting and ministerial visibility of progress, risks and escalation points. If Social Work England does not meet this six-month deadline, or if reporting shows inadequate progress against the plan, the Government will escalate intervention, including through governance, sponsorship and statutory levers available to the Secretary of State.

The Government response also sets out our position on legislative and procedural changes that may support a more effective fitness to practise process. These include issues relating to the lawful sharing and use of relevant information from private family court proceedings, accepted disposal powers, the role of the Professional Standards Authority, information sharing, suspension, and any further changes identified through the fitness to practise strategic improvement plan. We will consider these carefully, including the appropriate route and timing.

The review also makes important findings about the role, leadership and sponsorship of Social Work England. The Government agree that the regulator's role must be clearly focused on core regulatory functions and remain distinct from professional representation or wider sector improvement activity. This does not prevent proportionate engagement, communications, data and equalities work where these support effective regulation.

Strong leadership, effective challenge and clear accountability will be essential to delivering the improvements required. The Government will work with Social Work England to ensure the board has the right expertise, including in social work and regulation. The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care will also strengthen joint working and senior engagement so that sponsorship better reflects both children's and adults' social work and supports clear accountability for progress.

The review also concludes that the standards landscape for social work needs to be more coherent. The Government agree that social workers, employers, education providers and the public should be able to understand clearly how different standards, frameworks and guidance fit together. The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care will work with Social Work England and relevant sector bodies to develop an overarching framework, reducing duplication, clarifying the status of different standards and guidance, and supporting a more coherent relationship between qualifying education, professional regulation, continuing professional development, and post-qualifying development. Where the review recommends longer-term changes to post-qualifying standards and assurance, the Government will consider the appropriate route, timing and deliverability, including policy, legal, funding and capacity implications.

As part of this, the Government support Social Work England reviewing its education and training standards including the knowledge, skills and behaviours, and clarifying how they should support assessment in practice placements. The aim should be a clearer and more practice-focused framework for initial qualifying social work education, which supports high and common expectations across children's and adults' social work.

The Government also agree that better data, transparency, and equalities analysis are essential to effective regulation and public confidence, particularly in understanding fitness to practise outcomes, differential impacts, and the experience of different groups.

The Government will work closely with Social Work England and partners across the sector to deliver practical and sustained improvement, with clear expectations, regular oversight and escalation where progress is not sufficient. Copies of the review report and the Government response will be available on gov.uk and deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS208]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Sizewell B: Contract for Difference

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): My honourable Friend Lord Vallance of Balham, Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation, has today made the following statement:

The Government mission to become a clean energy superpower is about delivering secure, affordable and low carbon electricity for households and businesses, reducing our dependence on volatile fossil fuel markets and protecting billpayers for the long term.

As we move towards a clean power system, electricity demand is expected to increase significantly as heat, transport and industry are electrified. Delivering this transition at the lowest cost requires a mix of technologies. While renewable energy will form the backbone of the system, baseload power such as nuclear is essential to maintain system reliability, reduce overall system costs and protect consumers from exposure to global energy price shocks.

Nuclear power therefore plays a vital role in delivering a secure, low cost and low carbon electricity system. As a source of reliable electricity produced wholly within the UK, it provides baseload generation to complement renewable output and helps reduce reliance on imports.

Extending the lifetime of existing nuclear power stations is the most cost-effective way of delivering further nuclear generation. It allows the UK to make best use of existing assets, delivering significant volumes of clean power at lower cost than alternative forms of new generation.

This approach is consistent with international best practice. Several countries, including Belgium, France and the US, have recently taken steps to extend the lifetimes of their existing nuclear power stations to strengthen energy security and support decarbonisation.

Located in Suffolk, Sizewell B is a critical part of the UK's nuclear fleet. Since coming online in 1995, it has provided over 270 TWh of low carbon electricity, helping to maintain security of supply and reduce emissions. Without intervention, the plant is currently expected to cease operations in 2035, despite it being technically feasible for it to continue generating for an additional 20 years.

There are strong reasons to support the continued operation of the plant.

Firstly, on security of supply, Sizewell B provides electricity that is not dependent on weather conditions. This is critical to maintaining a resilient electricity system, particularly during periods of low renewable output, and helps reduce reliance on imported energy.

Secondly, analysis shows that extending Sizewell B and making continued use of the existing infrastructure will significantly reduce overall system costs, relative to a low carbon counterfactual without the project. By locking in a stable price, the contract for difference will also help protect consumers from future volatility in wholesale electricity prices. During periods of high prices, payments flow back to billpayers, delivering direct consumer benefit. Had Sizewell B been operating under this agreement during the energy price crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, consumers would have saved around £2 billion.

Thirdly, the project will support 900 highly skilled on-site roles, helping to sustain both the UK nuclear supply chain and the expertise required to deliver future nuclear projects. This is in addition to the economic benefits associated with the new investment required for the life extension works.

To unlock the private investment required for this extension, the Government have reached agreement on a commercial heads of terms with EDF Energy Nuclear Generation Ltd for a bespoke contract for difference to support the lifetime extension of Sizewell B.

The contract for difference, once signed, will enable the continued operation of Sizewell B beyond 2035, securing sufficient low carbon power for the equivalent of 2.5 million homes for a further 20 years, supporting our clean power mission and wider energy security objectives.

The key terms are as follows:

A strike price of £70.50 per MWh (2025 prices), reflecting robust due diligence and benchmarking against comparable projects.

A 20 year contract term, aligned with the planned extension period.

A two-way contract for difference structure, ensuring that when electricity prices are high, payments flow back to consumers.

Consumer protection measures, including a one-way cost gain share mechanism, which would ensure consumers benefit from cost savings during the refurbishment phase. All cost overrun risk sits with the developer.

Incentives to support timely delivery of the lifetime extension works, avoid extended plant downtime and efficiently manage operation costs.

Existing arrangements for decommissioning and waste management remain in place.

Taken together, these terms represent a balanced deal that supports investment while protecting billpayers.

Implementation of the heads of terms is subject to reaching agreement on the long-form contract for difference, as well as required regulatory approvals and legislative amendments to enable existing nuclear plants to become eligible for contracts for difference. The Government intend to progress these steps in parallel to support the timely delivery of the project. Further details of the agreement will be published in due course.

[HCWS205]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Veterinary Sector

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): I can today inform the House of the publication of a White Paper outlining the Government's vision for supporting a thriving, modern veterinary sector through reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966.

We are a country that cares deeply for animals, whether they are our pets and companions, our farmed animals or our wildlife. Veterinary professionals do incredible work to uphold our high animal health and welfare standards, safeguard our biosecurity, support animal disease control and maintain food security and public health, as well as enable trade agreements.

To continue to deliver this, the veterinary sector needs a modern, fair and effective regulatory system that reflects the realities of today's veterinary practice and supports a sustainable workforce. The White Paper sets out the Government's vision to achieve this through reform of the VSA.

It responds to our recent public consultation, which gained over 6,000 responses, demonstrating the significant support for VSA reform. This reflects the years of calls from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, the profession and the public to reform the VSA.

The White Paper also sets out the Government's response to the market investigation into veterinary services for household pets undertaken by the Competition and Markets Authority. It confirms that our proposed reforms will address competition concerns and support innovation, consumer choice and economic growth.

Since the current VSA came into force 60 years ago, the profession has changed beyond recognition, as have our views about animals and their welfare. The current legislation is inflexible and no longer fit for purpose. It does not recognise the incredible work that is undertaken by veterinary nurses or allied veterinary professionals, and nor does it take into account changes in business ownership across the sector. It does not reflect best practice with regard to managing fitness to practise or the governance of the regulator, and it does not do enough to protect consumers.

Reform of the VSA would address all of this to ensure that the veterinary sector remains fit for purpose, flexible and future-facing.

This White Paper sets out four broad areas of reform:

- Regulation of all veterinary professionals;
- Regulation of all veterinary and animal healthcare businesses;
- Support for consumers; and
- Structures and governance of the regulator.

One of our key aims in this reform is to ensure that we continue to uphold animal health and welfare by strengthening our veterinary workforce through recognition of all members of the veterinary team. This would ensure that animals receive the best and most appropriate care from qualified and licensed professionals. This will be key to increasing our resilience to exotic and endemic disease threats, playing a vital role in strengthening our food security and biosecurity.

Our economy would be supported by breaking down barriers to opportunities, regulating all veterinary businesses and increasing competition for consumers. We are proposing introducing new licensing options to increase access to the professions, especially for those with disabilities, and bringing all veterinary professionals under the same regulatory umbrella. Increased responsibilities for veterinary professionals would go hand in hand with increased support to new and returning veterinary surgeons and nurses in order to strengthen the workforce and address the challenges of recruitment and retention.

Finally, our proposals seek to rectify the issues identified by the CMA through proportionate business regulation, increased access to information and price transparency, to support this Government's commitment to help people with the cost of living.

The proposed UK-wide changes in the White Paper are crucial to transforming legislation in order to maintain high standards of animal health and welfare, protect the public and consumers, and uphold public trust in the veterinary professions.

[HCWS203]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

FCDO Services Ministerial Targets 2026-27

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): FCDO Services operates as a trading fund of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. In line with normal practice, I have set the following performance targets for 2026-27:

An in-year surplus before interest, tax and dividend;

Achievement of the return on capital employed of at least 6.5% (weighted average);

A productivity ratio of at least 82%, measuring actual billable hours versus available billable hours;

An in-year customer satisfaction rating average of at least 82;

An average civil service people survey score for "Employee Engagement" of at least 61%; and

An average civil service people survey score for "My Manager" of at least 65%.

FCDO Services will report to Parliament on its success against these targets through its annual report and accounts for 2026-27.

FCDO Services is an executive agency and trading fund of the FCDO. It provides a range of integrated, secure services worldwide to the FCDO and other UK Government Departments, supporting the delivery of Government agendas. Services include protective security, estates and construction, cloud computing, communications and monitoring, logistics, translation and interpreting. This is combined with a portfolio of global maintenance work. FCDO Services also manages the UK National Authority for Counter Eavesdropping, helping protect UK assets from physical, electronic and cyber-attack.

[HCWS210]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety and Remediation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon):

This Government are committed to ensuring there is an effective building safety regime in place, so that people can be confident their homes are safe. It is hugely important to correct the mistakes of the past so that residents can move on with their lives. Furthermore, I am of the view that good regulation supports growth as well as safety. Today, I am announcing the next stage in development for the wider building safety system.

In line with calls from industry, residents and campaigners, we are enabling new applications to the cladding safety scheme to be prioritised according to risk to life, rather than solely by building height. This will ensure buildings assessed as presenting the highest risk to life are prioritised for remediation.

As part of this risk-based approach, we are also taking targeted action to address fire safety risks in buildings below 11 metres, where serious, life-critical cladding defects fall outside the scope of statutory protections, leaving leaseholders often facing significant cladding remediation costs.

We have investigated all under 11 metres buildings brought to our attention since 2022. The vast majority have not required cladding remediation, with fire risks often addressed through proportionate, lower-cost mitigation measures. Only a limited number of buildings have been found to require cladding remediation.

We acknowledge that leaseholders in buildings under 11 metres have faced prolonged uncertainty. I am pleased to confirm today that we are launching new, targeted funding to support the remediation of unsafe cladding on a small number of multi-occupancy residential buildings under 11 metres in England. This will be delivered through an extension of the cladding safety scheme and administered by Homes England. This delivers on the commitment set out in the remediation acceleration plan update in July last year.

Funding will prioritise high-risk buildings with the most serious cladding fire safety defects. Following support for these cases, any remaining funding may be directed to other buildings where intervention would deliver the greatest benefit in reducing risk and supporting residents. Applications for funding are expected to open in August.

From autumn 2026, the national remediation database, delivered by Homes England, will provide a single view of remediation activity across relevant buildings, improving information sharing and supporting oversight across partner organisations.

Responsible persons such as building owners remain responsible for ensuring a building is safe and life-critical defects are addressed.

In addition, today we are publishing the findings of the remediation programme insurance survey, which indicates that some leaseholders continue to face particularly high insurance costs despite progress in remediating building safety defects. The Financial Conduct Authority will work with MHCLG and HMT to undertake a short, focused review of the multi-occupancy buildings insurance market. The review will explore how insurers' pricing approaches for multiple occupancy buildings

have changed since 2023, how firms are considering leaseholders' interests when assessing whether their products deliver fair value, and how fire safety remediation work and other related factors are being taken into account in insurers' risk assessments. It will also work with Association of British Insurers and MHCLG to assess the effectiveness of the fire safety reinsurance facility in increasing market capacity and reducing premiums.

Alongside this, we are publishing the Government response to the single construction regulator prospectus consultation. The Government welcome the broad support for the single construction regulator (SCR) from respondents. Our response to the consultation sets out the Government's direction for the SCR, including our vision and ambition for the regulator, outcomes for the building system and the SCR's primary objective. It confirms our intention to bring forward primary legislation as the next step towards establishing the SCR, using the Building Safety Regulator (BSR) as its foundation.

Establishing the SCR will support a more effective, fair and coherent regulatory system that improves outcomes for residents and building users while providing greater clarity for industry.

The Government continue to drive reform across the wider building safety system. Our objective is to ensure that the system established after the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy is protecting residents, supporting responsible development and operating in a clear, proportionate and effective way.

As the new framework has matured, experience has shown where improvements can be made while maintaining the protections residents rightly expect. The reforms announced today will improve how the regime operates in practice while maintaining high standards of safety.

That begins with improving the proportionality of the higher-risk buildings regime. Robust oversight of safety critical work remains essential, but requirements must be targeted and efficient if they are to command confidence and support delivery. A proportionate regime is not a compromise on safety. It is essential to ensure regulatory effort and limited specialist resources are focused where they have the greatest positive impact on safety and efficiency. We are therefore publishing today the response to two consultations, on recategorising work in existing higher-risk buildings and on targeted dispensations from procedural requirements for telecommunications work in existing buildings, as well as launching a new consultation on the emergency repairs route.

Furthermore, the BSR will also introduce a revised approach to building assessment certificates. This will provide an effective and proportionate, risk-based approach to managing occupied higher-risk buildings, with greater support for principal accountable persons, particularly resident-led organisations and those managing complex cases. The BSR will develop updated processes, prioritisation and guidance to help protect residents and leaseholders from unnecessary additional costs. The core duties established by the Building Safety Act will not change. Accountable persons must continue to manage their buildings effectively and take all reasonable steps to protect residents from fire spread and structural failure.

Taken together, this package of measures ensures the building safety framework remains focused on proportionate management of risk to be effective in operation and firmly centred on protecting residents.

[HCWS209]

JUSTICE

His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service: IPP Sentence Annual Report 2025-26

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Justice (Lord Timpson) has today made the following statement:

Today, I am laying before Parliament the HMPPS 2025-26 annual report on the IPP sentence, pursuant to section 67 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.

This report sets out the activity across HMPPS for the financial year of 2025-26 to support those serving the IPP sentence in prison to work towards a safe release, and those in the community, towards the termination of their licence.

The latest published statistics show that as at 31 March 2026, there were 896 unreleased and 1,433 recalled IPP prisoners, compared to 1,012 unreleased and 1,532 recalled IPP prisoners on the corresponding date in 2025. As at 31 December 2025, there were 891 offenders serving IPP sentences in the community and 207 prisoners in hospital for treatment under the Mental Health Act 1983, compared to 1,376 offenders in the community and 233 prisoners in hospital on the corresponding date in 2024.

The Sentencing Act 2026, which received Royal Assent on 22 January 2026, introduced further reforms to IPP licence termination on 1 June 2026. These reforms: reduced the qualifying period for licence termination from three years to two years following first release; and enable individuals whose licence is not terminated at the end of this period to apply for a further Parole Board review one year later, prior to automatic termination.

The IPP action plan 2026-27 is included as part of this annual report, which sets out planned HMPPS activity for the year, including six measurable targets. Through the IPP action plan HMPPS has committed funding to sustain vital services such as the IPP approved premises pilot, and to trial a new IPP advocate role, designed to provide more personalised support to those serving IPP sentences. Further successes include:

Additional funding for psychology services, enabling greater access to specialist assessments for individuals facing the most significant barriers to progression.

The phoenix unit at HMP Aylesbury is due to open later this summer as a purpose-designed residential unit to support IPP prisoners who have become disengaged from progression.

A release on temporary licence model has been agreed for all four progression regime prisons—Humber, Warren Hill, Erlestoke and Buckley Hall—to enable IPP ROTL.

Strengthened recall processes by: streamlining the documentation required for a recall request, to ensure that the reasons for recall are robustly and clearly stated; enhancing quality assurance for decision-making; delivering additional training for public protection casework section staff who formally revoke an offender's licence; and ensuring that only senior managers in PPCS can revoke the licence.

In addition, HMPPS used the risk assessed recall review power to re-release 61 recalled IPP prisoners between 1 November 2024 and 31 December 2025, in some cases months ahead of a scheduled parole hearing.

The Government are determined to make further progress towards a safe and sustainable release for all those serving the IPP sentence and an eventual end to their sentence, but only in such a way that does not put the public and victims at risk.

[HCWS204]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Timms Review: Interim Report

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): I am pleased to make this statement in relation to the Timms review of personal independence payment.

The Government have today published the interim report on behalf of the steering group for the Timms review. The report is available on gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government launched the Timms review to help ensure that PIP is fair and fit for the future in a changing world, and that it helps to support disabled people to achieve better health, higher living standards and greater independence, including through employment. The terms of reference set out that the review must operate within the Office for Budget Responsibility's projections for future PIP expenditure, to ensure that it is there to support generations to come.

The review is being co-produced with disabled people and other experts. The review is led by me and two co-chairs, Sharon Brennan and Dr Clenton Farquharson CBE, to whom I am very grateful, and a steering group of 12 people, almost all disabled people, who together are bringing their expertise and experience to shape and lead the work. This is the first time the UK Government have undertaken co-production at this scale, and I am grateful for the commitment and passion of this group.

No single group can be representative of the full diversity of disabled people's experiences. That is why the steering group has set up a wide range of evidence-gathering and engagement opportunities, to provide varied, accessible options for people with differing lived and learned experiences to get involved, and to ensure that the group can hear from as many different perspectives as possible.

The publication of the interim report today marks a significant milestone for the review and reflects its commitment to openness and transparency. The report has been published on gov.uk in a range of accessible versions, including braille, British Sign Language, audio, easy read, Welsh, large print and web-accessible formats.

The report does not contain recommendations or Government policy; it provides an account of the work of the review to date and explains how the review is being co-produced with people with lived and learned experience. It sets out the evidence considered so far and presents the review's emerging themes. It also outlines the next steps for the review, including how over the coming months it will continue its evidence and engagement programme to test emerging thinking and develop recommendations that reflect the steering group's ambitions for radical reform, and that are credible, deliverable and grounded in lived and learned experience.

The report delivers a clear message from the steering group, based on the evidence it has seen and heard so far: while PIP is widely valued as a benefit, it is no longer fit for purpose.

The report explains that PIP is often described as fundamental to managing the practical realities of a disability, from enabling access to transport and work, to supporting everyday activities. However, the experience of claiming PIP is often described as stressful and dehumanising. For some people, the current design and delivery of PIP can create barriers to participation, including work, community life and everyday activities, rather than supporting independence and participation as intended.

The report is published alongside the findings from the call for evidence, which received over 38,000 responses from disabled people, organisations that represent them, carers, clinicians, experts, Members of Parliament and other stakeholders. An existing evidence pack compiled by the Department for Work and Pensions, which was provided to the steering group as a starting point for further evidence gathering, is also published. Neither of these are meant to act as a single source of the truth but are shared as part of the review's commitment to openness and transparency.

As well as sincere thanks to the steering group for their commitment to this work, I would also like to thank everyone who has contributed their time, evidence and experience to the review so far. The review remains committed to ensuring that disabled people's voices are central to this work as it looks ahead to developing, testing and refining its final recommendations, which are to be submitted to the Secretary of State in the autumn.

I look forward to updating the House on the progress of this crucial work.

[HCWS211]

Written Corrections

Thursday 9 July 2026

Ministerial Corrections

CABINET OFFICE

Topical Questions

The following extract is from Cabinet Office oral questions on 25 June 2026.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): Can the Minister update us on what recent actions he has taken to co-ordinate the Government's domestic policy on the war in the middle east?

Darren Jones: We have established a Cabinet Sub-Committee called the Middle East Response Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, which has met weekly. I, as Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, have chaired senior ministerial groups underpinning that work to ensure we have a clear understanding of the impact of the conflict in the middle east on the UK domestic economy in relation to supply chains, the security of critical goods and the economic impact. That work is informing Government decisions to protect British citizens and the UK economy as best we can from that conflict.

[Official Report, 25 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 498.]

Written correction submitted by the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones):

Darren Jones: We have established a Cabinet Sub-Committee called the Middle East Response Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, which has met **regularly**. I, as Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, have chaired senior ministerial groups underpinning that work to ensure we have a clear understanding of the impact of the conflict in the middle east on the UK domestic economy in relation to supply chains, the security of critical goods and the economic impact. That work is informing Government decisions to protect British citizens and the UK economy as best we can from that conflict.

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Steel Trade Measure

The following extract is from the statement on the Steel Trade Measure on 25 June 2026.

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Tata Steel's Steelpark in Wednesfield and manufacturers across Wolverhampton North East and

the Black Country rely on resilient supply chains for steel. Will the Minister set out how today's statement on increased quotas and steel under contract before 14 March will continue to back British-made steel production while giving downstream manufacturers the competitive certainty and confidence that they need?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is right to defend her constituents' interests. We have tried to meet the precise concerns that she raises. I would be happy to go through with her on Monday afternoon each of the different categories of steel that might be applicable to her area. Some people have given the impression that we are cutting all categories of steel and that nobody will be able to bring in categories of steel without being tariffed. Actually, the quotas in most areas allow for historical levels of imports, and in others areas where we produce in the UK we are trying to persuade people to buy and use British steel.

[Official Report, 25 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 537.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is right to defend her constituents' interests. We have tried to meet the precise concerns that she raises. I would be happy to go through with her on Monday afternoon each of the different categories of steel that might be applicable to her area. Some people have given the impression that we are cutting all categories of steel and that nobody will be able to bring in categories of steel without being tariffed. Actually, the quotas in **several important categories** allow for historical levels of imports, and in others areas where we produce in the UK we are trying to persuade people to buy and use British steel.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK Aid Policy: Global Funding Trends

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on UK Aid Policy: Global Funding Trends on 7 July 2026.

Chris Elmore:... I briefly want to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) about polio. I reassure her that we are doing our utmost by investing £1.5 billion in Gavi between 2026 and 2030.

[Official Report, 7 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 68WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Chris Elmore):

Chris Elmore:... I briefly want to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) about polio. I reassure her that we are doing our utmost by investing **£1.25 billion** in Gavi between 2026 and 2030.

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