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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 8 January 2024

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. RISHI SUNAK, MP, OCTOBER 2022)

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SECOND YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 743

FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2023-2024

House of Commons

Monday 8 January 2024

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Recall of MPs Act 2015: Member for Wellingborough

Mr Speaker: I have received a notification from the petition officer for the constituency of Wellingborough in respect of the recall petition for Peter Bone. The recall petition closed on Tuesday 19 December. As more than 10% of those eligible to sign the petition did so, the petition was successful and the seat is accordingly vacant. I shall cause the text of the notification to be published in the *Votes and Proceedings* and in the *Official Report*.

[The notification will appear at the end of today's proceedings.]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Defence Jobs

1. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support defence jobs. [900852]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): Mr Speaker, I hope that you and all your staff had an enjoyable Christmas and new year break. I confirm that the most recent estimate shows that Ministry of Defence investment supports 209,000 jobs in industries across the UK. We continue to support UK businesses through direct procurement of equipment and services, supply chains and exports, and—investing in the future—through research and development.

Virginia Crosbie: Blwyddyn newydd dda—happy new year, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister outline investment at RAF Valley to date as part of the recapitalisation of the MOD's military flying training system and its local impact? Will he accept my invitation to visit RAF Valley, which is the largest skilled employer on Anglesey, where he will receive a warm Welsh croeso?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend was a constant champion of nuclear during my previous job, and I am glad she is carrying on that form in defence. I would be delighted to accept the invitation. In addition to RAF Valley being important for military flying training, it is important economically as the second-largest employer on the island. In the past 18 months, we have announced investments of £175 million in a new training facility for the Texan, and £600 million for Hawk T1 and T2 engineering maintenance, underscoring our ongoing commitment to investment in jobs and skills at RAF Valley for many years to come.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): In May, the MOD admitted that just 4% of the steel used to construct Type 31 frigates was sourced from UK steelyards. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that British warships are built in British shipyards by British workers using British steel?

James Cartlidge: Is a very good and important question. As the hon. Lady knows, sourcing steel is primarily a decision for our prime contractors who lead on procuring those platforms. To take the example of Type 26, I believe that almost 50% of that is UK-sourced, so it

varies according to needs and requirements, but we encourage our prime contractors to use UK steel where possible and practical.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): One decision that my hon. Friend could make to support defence jobs is to retain HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. Will he reassure the House, the Royal Marines, the Royal Navy and the armed forces that these two vital ships will be kept in operation and not mothballed?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks with great authority from all his time on the Defence Committee. No final decision has been made on those platforms. I know that there has been much coverage in the press—and, inevitably, chatter—and I know how important they are to our service personnel. I reassure him that we are looking at this in the round. We are absolutely committed to supporting defence jobs across the piece. Obviously, we have recruitment challenges, but we must also support British industry, and that is why the Secretary of State is leading on that in his role as shipbuilding tsar.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Speaker, I wish you and all right hon. and hon. Members a happy new year.

Northern Ireland is an integral part of the defence company supply chain, and I am keen to ensure that we in Northern Ireland have all the opportunity that there is on the mainland. What discussions has the Minister had with defence companies in Northern Ireland such as Thales on securing further employment in the defence sector?

James Cartlidge: I can confirm that I held my first small and medium-sized enterprise roundtable in Larne in Northern Ireland, where I met a number of Northern Ireland SMEs, which are integral to our industry. Just before Christmas, I met Thales, which is responsible for the NLaw and a number of other important munitions that have been used in Ukraine. That underlines the importance of supporting our British armaments industry.

Protection of Shipping Routes

2. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help protect shipping routes through the Red sea. [900853]

6. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Royal Navy in protecting merchant shipping routes in conflict zones. [900857]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

The Royal Navy and the Government are committed to the protection of maritime trade, ensuring that both people and shipping remain safe to travel through international waters. That work is driven by the latest intelligence and analysis of that picture. As I said on 19 December in my written statement, HMS Diamond has joined our partners and allies as part of Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect freedom of navigation and merchant shipping in the Red sea and the gulf of Aden.

Nigel Mills: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, and those in our armed services for their work protecting these important routes. Can he update the House on his discussions and work with our international partners to de-escalate the tensions, so that we do not need all the protection work and can go back to the normal free flow of trade?

Grant Shapps: As my hon. Friend will know, the Houthis have been causing havoc in that part of the Red sea, in particular attacking ships. There was a 500% increase in attacks on maritime shipping from November to December, showing that there is no direct connection to the wider conflict in the region but a decision by Houthis to attack free trade. That is unacceptable. We are working with our partners, through Operation Prosperity Guardian and other measures, to tackle it.

Mr Carmichael: The Secretary of State is absolutely right to point the finger at the Houthis, but we should not ignore the role of Iran in this enterprise. What are he and the Government doing with our international partners to ensure that the merchant marine have the confidence to keep using the Red sea, which is critical to the smooth operating of world trade?

Grant Shapps: We call on the Iranian-backed Houthis to immediately cease these attacks. The Houthis will bear the responsibility and, I have to say, the consequences should they ignore those warnings. The right hon. Gentleman asks what more we have been doing; I issued a statement along with 10 other countries during the break, in which we made clear that consequences will follow if they do not stop this action. To be clear, the UK will not tolerate the Houthis closing international waterways.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome what the Defence Secretary has to say. These attacks on Red sea shipping must stop. They destabilise regional security, disrupt international trade and put civilian and military lives in danger. We back the UK action with allies in the new maritime protection force, and the joint statement condemning the Houthi attacks that the Secretary of State just mentioned. He announced today but has not mentioned to the House that HMS Richmond is sailing to the Gulf. In the light of these escalating tensions, what other Royal Navy ships has he put on stand-by for the region?

Grant Shapps: I did not mention that specifically because I have already made a written ministerial statement to the House. HMS Richmond is sailing to the region because both HMS Diamond and HMS Lancaster are already there, and eventually they will need to be swapped out. It is not escalation in terms. I want to repeat to the right hon. Gentleman, the House and the country that we will not tolerate trade being impacted globally in the manner in which the Houthis are impacting it. It will have ramifications on everybody's bills and on the flow of free trade and goods, and it must come to a halt. We have made clear through that joint statement that we are prepared to take action if required. I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to support us in that action.

John Healey: When the UK took the important step of joining Operation Prosperity Guardian, the Secretary of State gave the House this update in a written statement. He has done the same today, alongside his comments at questions. If further action is required to deter Houthi attacks and to safeguard freedom of shipping in the Red sea, will he undertake to provide Parliament with an oral statement?

Grant Shapps: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and a very happy new year to you and to the House. The Secretary of State is right to highlight the geopolitical and economic threat from the Houthi-led attacks in the Red sea, as well as the need to participate in Operation Prosperity Guardian, but could he advise the House of how sustainable this and future joint operations will be when increasing numbers of sailors have left the service, and the intake to replace them in the 12 months to March 2023 plunged by 22.1%?

Grant Shapps: First, I am confident that we will be able to continue or increase our actions. We complete all our operational requirements at the moment. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is a very tight labour market, but I think that is a subject for celebration in this House: we are seeing such low sustained unemployment, even through some pretty turbulent times. We will redouble our efforts to ensure that all our military services can recruit the people they need.

Ukraine: Military Support

3. **Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to provide military support to Ukraine. [900854]

22. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to increase military support to Ukraine. [900874]

24. **Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to increase military support to Ukraine. [900876]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): We continue to support Ukraine's priorities, including air defence to protect national infrastructure, further artillery ammunition, and support to sustain capabilities, including 10,000 Ukrainians to be trained in the first half of 2024.

Wendy Morton: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the new maritime capability coalition, which builds on the support the UK, Norway and others are providing to Ukraine? Will he also re-emphasise the need for us to continue to work very closely with our NATO partners and allies to continue to provide and strengthen support to Ukraine, and make sure those resources reach where they are needed?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely will. As my right hon. Friend says, the new maritime capability coalition, which I launched at Admiralty House in December, has now been joined by 10 further nations, together with Norway, who will help to ensure that Ukraine's success in Crimea and the Black sea continues. Ukraine, a nation which has virtually no navy at all, is doing an incredible job, destroying up to 20% of Russia's Black sea fleet.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: In the United States, additional aid to Ukraine remains stuck in the Senate and there is the potential for a shift in its political leadership later this year. Considering we are still awaiting this Government's promised action plan for Ukraine, how assured can we be that the Secretary of State is discussing with our NATO allies all future scenarios to ensure there will be no lapse in collective military support for Ukraine?

Grant Shapps: I really hope that there can be no doubt about this Government's commitment to Ukraine. Not only were we first with the training, but with tanks, missiles and commissioning to enable Ukraine to continue this fight in all manner of different ways. On a personal level, having had a family of three Ukrainians live with us in my house for a year, I am personally committed to this cause as well. We are doing everything possible, including working throughout the Christmas and new year period during which I had numerous conversations with my Ukrainian opposite number and others throughout its Government, to make sure we are supporting their action. It is a Ukrainian plan that is needed to win this war, not a British or American one.

Dame Nia Griffith: Labour fully supports providing military aid to Ukraine, but what steps is the Secretary of State taking to speed up the development of a stockpile strategy, in collaboration with NATO allies, to replenish supplies and ensure that Ministry of Defence procurement and parts of the defence industry are on an urgent operational footing both to support Ukraine for the long term and to rebuild UK stocks for any future conflict?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We already have a huge amount of military munitions and equipment on order both to replenish and to help continue to support Ukraine. When it comes to Ukraine itself, the United Kingdom set up the international fund for Ukraine, through which we have numerous different orders in place for equipment for Ukraine, which has raised nearly £800 million. I think up to £400 million is already committed through those contracts.

Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work he has done as Defence Secretary since taking on the Department. His long experience in government has shown to the fore and I am delighted at the work he has done so far. In June last year I wrote, at the request of No. 10 and the Cabinet Office, to request the 2024-25 funding for support to Ukraine. The funding requested was between £2.3 billion and £2.6 billion. Unfortunately, since that time we have heard nothing from the Government about what they plan to do for the next financial year. Planners in the Ministry of Defence need time, as do the Ukrainians, to get used to it. If we do not start making an announcement soon, we will fall behind many of our European colleagues who have already overtaken us with their support.

Grant Shapps: Mr Speaker, can I start by thanking my right hon. Friend on behalf of everybody in this House? He had the foresight to supply NLAWS to Ukraine ahead of time and the foresight to start training troops for Ukraine ahead of time. Today I can say that we have trained 54,000 troops, including those who have trained since 2014. He is absolutely right about the ongoing support for Ukraine. All I can say is that he will not be disappointed and he will not need to wait too long.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): In just five days last week, Russia fired 500 drones and missiles at Ukraine. Putin is stepping up his attacks, so we must step up UK support, but current military aid funding runs out in a matter of weeks. The former Defence Secretary said—although not today—that without new money it is

“very hard to continue the leadership the UK has been taking on Ukraine”.

I asked the current Defence Secretary about the 2024 Ukraine funding in the House in November. The former Defence Secretary wrote about it eight months ago. Seven weeks from when I asked, I ask again: when will new military aid funding for Ukraine be announced, and will it be multi-year?

Grant Shapps: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman did not hear my previous answer: it will not be long. To correct the record for the House, the funding—£2.3 billion—continues through to April this year, so it is not in any way, shape or form in danger of running out. To reassure the right hon. Gentleman and the House, I am also in constant contact with Umerov—my opposite number—and many others throughout the Ukrainian system, so they understand where funding is up to and are able to plan accordingly.

Women in the Defence Sector

4. **Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of women employed in the defence sector. [900855]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): A happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to all colleagues.

As at October 2023, 55.4% of civil servants are female—a rise of 0.7 percentage points compared with 1 October 2022—and 11.7% of the UK regular armed forces and 15.9% of Future Reserves 2020 are women, up by 1.2 percentage points and 1.4 percentage points respectively in the past five years. That means that the trend is in the right direction, but we can do better, and I am confident that we will do so across the defence enterprise.¹

Sarah Dyke: Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House.

I thank the Minister for his response. Many of my constituents work in the defence sector, whether at RNAS Yeovilton, Leonardo in Yeovil or Thales in my constituency. I commend initiatives such as Leonardo’s AeroWomen programme, which aims to increase gender parity in the sector, but I am concerned by the barriers

that women still face. The women in defence charter aims to have women make up 30% of the UK armed forces by 2030, yet the current number is a meagre 12%. Has the Minister made an assessment in the last quarter of 2023 of the success of the charter since its launch?

Mr Speaker: Order. It might help if the hon. Lady put in for an Adjournment debate.

Dr Murrison: I would gladly answer such a debate. I know all the sites the hon. Lady referred to, and I do understand the issue. She will know that we are actively engaged with the defence suppliers forum to increase the number of women across the defence enterprise, and the target is 30%.

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

Many women undertake critical roles in our defence industry, so the policies by which we procure the equipment they build are very important for them. Ministers have been telling the Defence Committee since before Christmas that we can expect a major announcement on procurement reform in the new year. As we are now in January, can we have a commitment that we will have that announcement by the end of this month, please?

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend has cunningly got that question in. My understanding is that it is imminent. However, the point on women and procurement is well made, and my right hon. Friend will have observed—I hope with pleasure—the work that has been done, for example, in procuring uniform that actually fits the female form, which was not previously the case.

Gaza: UK Aid

5. **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the delivery of UK aid to Gaza. [900856]

15. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the delivery of UK aid to Gaza. [900867]

16. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the delivery of UK aid to Gaza. [900868]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

In support of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the first maritime delivery of UK aid arrived in Egypt at new year. RFA Lyme Bay and four RAF aircraft have positioned over 150 tonnes of humanitarian aid into Egypt. Distribution of the aid has been impeded by challenges around its movement into Gaza. FCDO colleagues continue to work with the UN, Israel and Egypt to allow greater volumes of aid to be delivered.

Beth Winter: Blwyddyn newydd heddychlon i bawb.—*[Translation: A peaceful new year to everyone.]*

On 29 December an aid convoy belonging to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency was hit by Israeli gunfire, despite the vehicles being identifiable

1. [Official Report, 9 January 2024, Vol. 743, c. 4MC.]

with the agency's markings and after the IDF had designated the route from Gaza City in earlier co-ordination. Given Israel's targeting of aid convoys, can the Minister say whether the Ministry of Defence maintains a tracker database of alleged breaches or violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza, as it has previously said it does for Yemen?

James Heapey: I will have to write to the hon. Lady on her exact point about the tracker. I am not aware of one, but that does not necessarily mean there is not one. I will write to her.

Although humanitarian aid is a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office lead, we continue to work with partners and allies to advocate for other crossings to be opened and to increase the volume of aid delivered into Gaza.

Kerry McCarthy: I welcome the news that RFA Lyme Bay has delivered aid to Egypt, so it is very disappointing to know that aid is still being held up. Given Israel's activity in Gaza, the only way we can make sure that humanitarian aid gets to the people who need it is by trying to secure another cessation in hostilities. What role is the MOD playing in trying to make that happen?

James Heapey: The MOD has put its shoulder to the wheel in support of the Government's wider diplomatic effort but, obviously, the negotiation of a pause such as the one that the hon. Lady rightly says is necessary to deliver aid in greater volumes is a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office lead. Mr Speaker, I believe you have had the foresight to grant an urgent question in which such questions may well be answered shortly by a Minister from that Department.

Andrew Gwynne: We are witnessing horrific scenes in Gaza. The humanitarian catastrophe there needs greater focus from countries like our own and others around the world, to bring it to an end and to get that aid in. Given that the Prime Minister said in a statement before Prorogation that we would use British armed forces capability to make those shipments of aid in greater numbers, why are we not getting those greater numbers of aid in? What is he doing to get Israel to open the crossings and to get that aid in, in the quantities that are needed?

James Heapey: British armed forces are being used to deliver aid into Gaza, and they have done so to good effect. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has struck up an excellent operational relationship with his Israeli counterpart, which has allowed for the opening of the Kerem Shalom crossing. Again, I think that is a reflection of the success of the UK's engagement with the Israeli Government on this matter.

The volumes of aid are limited not by the availability of military capacity—there is plenty of that—but by the availability of crossings and the ability to distribute the aid, on which Foreign Office colleagues are working closely with the UN, Israel, Egypt and others to increase.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

France and Jordan successfully delivered medical aid to Gaza by air last week. Has the Minister considered the viability of the UK air-dropping food and medical supplies to Gaza in the same way?

James Heapey: I think air dropping is a very imprecise way of doing business. Our preference is to seek maritime routes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is a feasibility study being undertaken to see whether aid could be delivered directly into Gaza from ship to shore, should the future security situation allow it?

James Heapey: The Defence Secretary has led internationally on exactly such an initiative, working with our friends in the Cypriot Ministry of Defence. There are ideas to do exactly that, but they obviously need to be agreed with all parties before they can happen.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I have urgently pressed the Minister and the Department to secure Red sea vessels, as well as facilitating aid into Gaza. People in Bolton are demanding assurances on both maritime safety and humanitarian support for Gaza. What assurances can he provide to people in Bolton?

James Heapey: Clearly, the delivery of aid into Gaza is principally a maritime and aviation effort in the eastern Mediterranean, but my hon. Friend is correct to say that the security of shipping in the Red sea also has an impact. That is why Royal Navy warships are part of the Red sea taskforce that is seeking to protect those sea lanes.

Veterans

7. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What recent steps Veterans UK has taken to support veterans and their families. [900858]

8. **Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans. [900859]

20. **Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans. [900872]

23. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans. [900875]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): The MOD delivers a range of services to veterans and their families. This includes the administration and payment of armed forces pensions and compensation, the provision of tailored advice and assistance through the Veterans Welfare Service and Defence Transition Services, and integrated personal commissioning for veterans.

Rachel Hopkins: Veteran homelessness rose by 14% last year according to the Government's own figures. Does the Minister agree that his colleague, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the right hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), is failing to deliver on his pledge to end veteran homelessness?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady will be aware that homelessness is not principally a function of the Ministry of Defence, but all of us want to make sure that

veterans and their families are properly accommodated, and naturally reducing homelessness remains a Government priority.

Robin Millar: Thirteen veterans advisory and pensions committees across the UK provide the Minister's Department with an important platform for hearing and helping veterans. Last year, with his help and the help of Members on both sides of the House, my private Member's Bill gave the Secretary of State greater flexibility to use the network to help more veterans in more ways. Can the Minister tell the House what progress he has made with the VAPCs since my Bill received royal assent on 18 September?

Dr Murrison: First, let me congratulate my hon. Friend on his work on the Bill, which should properly be called the Millar Bill. I recently met VAPC chairs to discuss next steps, and we will ensure that the MOD engages with representatives from VAPCs in a series of working groups to set the direction for secondary legislation that will clarify their future role.

Paul Holmes: Can the Minister give some more detail on how the Department intends to take forward the recommendation from the Veteran Welfare Service review, and can he outline any timescales to which he intends to work on that review?

Dr Murrison: Our response to the independent review of welfare services for veterans accepts the principle and intended outcome of all the recommendations, and we will shortly publish our response to the recommendations of the armed forces compensation scheme quinquennial review. The reviews will inform a programme of improvements in the way we deliver the compensation scheme and how we provide welfare support to ensure a consistently high level of service. The responses will set out our commitment and high-level plans, in particular how we will make our services less adversarial and more user-friendly.

Dr Davies: As promised by the Prime Minister, medals are being issued to recognise those who participated in Britain's nuclear testing programme during the 1950s and 1960s. Some families have expressed a wish for a presentation ceremony for their medal. How would the Minister recommend that those are organised, whether locally or nationally?

Dr Murrison: Nuclear test medals have been mailed to thousands of recipients to ensure that as many as possible had received them before Remembrance Sunday, and also with the advanced age of some of the recipients in mind. My sense is that that was the right thing to do and has been appreciated by recipients. Naturally, there are opportunities—my hon. Friend may have such opportunities himself—to thank veterans and mark their contribution. I think the lieutenantry in some counties has done so, but the imperative was to get the medals out before Remembrance Sunday.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I spent the recess studying the veterans strategy action plan with its 60-odd commitments and thinking about the views of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs on what he calls the "lack of political horsepower". Why is it, after 14 years and so many commitments, that 76.4% of veterans are so dissatisfied with the compensation scheme

for illnesses and injuries, and why are 500 veteran households declared homeless every three months, as we have heard? Is there still a lack of political horsepower or is there a need for better co-ordination between the—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not being funny, but I have a whole list of questions to get through. We have to have shorter questions—that was very long. I think the Minister got the gist of it.

Dr Murrison: I got the gist. The armed forces compensation scheme and the war pension scheme will be dramatically improved by the ongoing digitalisation of veterans' services. That is a huge commitment that will bring us into the 21st century and improve the service that is provided to veterans who are seeking compensation. The hon. Gentleman will know that in the last financial year there were 61 complaints to Veterans UK and 2,000 expressions of thanks for the services people had received.

AUKUS

9. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on the AUKUS partnership. [900860]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): I am pleased to confirm that we have made significant progress in developing the AUKUS partnership. The AUKUS defence ministerial meeting last month announced a range of tri-national activities taking forward advanced capabilities, including our deep space advanced radar capability, DARC. Australian personnel are training in the UK and the US, and £4 billion-worth of contracts have been awarded to UK companies building SSN-AUKUS. Finally, Congress passed legislation to enable AUKUS to facilitate frictionless trade between partners, including the reform of the international traffic in arms regulations.

Mrs Latham: The Secretary of State, together with the Australian Prime Minister, was recently welcomed at Rolls-Royce Raynesway in my constituency as part of the AUKUS preparations. I am sure the Minister would also be welcomed, if he can find time in his schedule for a visit. Two years ago, Rolls-Royce opened its doors to the UK's first nuclear skills academy, which takes on 200 apprentices annually and trains them to become nuclear engineers. Has the Minister considered how the Government can work with Rolls-Royce to further the UK's nuclear skills capacity?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her excellent question and I would be delighted to visit Raynesway. Last August, I was pleased to announce the launch of the nuclear skills taskforce, jointly with the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). The taskforce will drive activity through a coherent action plan, bringing together Government, academia and employers, crucially from across both civil and defence nuclear sectors, including from Rolls-Royce. It will build on existing work to address the skills challenge across the nuclear sector and will bolster our ability to deliver on our commitments made under the AUKUS defence partnership.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): AUKUS has strong support from across the House, but although the time scales seem very long, in reality there is growing concern in the defence community that they may already be slipping, often because of bureaucratic inertia. What is being done to keep this vital project on track? How often is the Minister meeting his officials to monitor and chase progress?

James Cartlidge: I am not aware of any slippage. We meet frequently and discuss this incredibly important matter. I am pleased to hear his confidence that AUKUS has cross-party support. It is generating huge numbers of jobs for the future: an additional 1,700 jobs will be created in Raynesway to build the reactors for the UK and Australia. It is an incredibly exciting project and we are 100% committed to it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Let me make clear that AUKUS pillar 1 and pillar 2 have Labour's full backing. However, we are concerned about whether the Government's current focus on implementing AUKUS is sufficient and we want more UK leadership for this national endeavour. The latest list of ministerial responsibilities, from October 2023, does not even mention AUKUS or Australia, although it does mention the USA. Ministers have agreed that pillar 1 should have only a part-time official responsible for its implementation. If AUKUS is not even in his job description and his officials are working on it part time, how can we take the Minister seriously when he says it is important?

James Cartlidge: The way we take it seriously is not by judging the number of officials or what we are doing in that regard, but by looking at what we are actually delivering in the real world in terms of military capability and for British industry. As I just said, the US has reformed ITAR and there are thousands of jobs across the UK, boosting our Indo-Pacific capabilities. This is an extremely important project. We are making huge progress and the Government are very proud of the partnership.

Cost of Living: Armed Forces Personnel

10. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support armed forces personnel with the cost of living. [900861]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): Defence has introduced a range of measures to support armed forces personnel, including capping subsidised accommodation charges to 1%; freezing daily food charges; increasing travelling allowances by 7%; providing wraparound childcare to families and increasing the continuity of education allowance rates from August 2023; and implementing the biggest uplift in service pay in 21 years, which includes 9.7% for the most junior ranks.

Mary Kelly Foy: The Government claim that service personnel are not financially burdened by domestic assignments, but a constituent of mine—a serving officer of the armed forces—finds himself thousands of pounds out of pocket, while others report turning to food banks

to survive. What discussions is the Minister having with Cabinet colleagues to expand measures and address the costs incurred as a result of serving this country during the cost of living crisis?

Dr Murrison: The cost of living crisis has affected all our constituents, has it not? Covid has made life difficult for everybody, but at the Ministry of Defence we have recognised as far as we can the pressures that bear, particularly on the lowest paid. That is why we have accepted the 9.7% uplift in pay, which I think is unique across the public sector for the last year, having accepted in full the recommendations of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the excellent work that he has done to support our armed forces with their cost of living. May I ask him to be especially aware of the burden that falls on members of our special forces—the additional burdens that they bear within families as well as in the field? Will he consider that when he thinks further about ways to ameliorate and support their living circumstances?

Dr Murrison: I understand my right hon. Friend's interest in this matter. He can be sure that the special forces—although we never talk about them—are always at the forefront of our minds.

Ukraine: Military Aid

11. **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): What military aid his Department plans to provide to Ukraine in financial year 2024-25. [900862]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Secretary of State's earlier answers to the former Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State.

Richard Foord: In 2022, the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced what military aid the UK would make available to Ukraine through to April 2023; in September 2022, the subsequent Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), announced—a full 15 months ago—what military aid she would make available to Ukraine through to April 2024. Why has there not yet been an announcement on funding for Ukraine for the rest of 2024 and beyond?

James Heapey: In the interests of brevity, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers given to the former Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State earlier.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the successful conclusion of the RAF's training of the first cohort of Ukrainian pilots. As they move to learn to fly F-16s, can my right hon. Friend commit that in the next financial year we will continue working with our allies to give Ukraine the pilots and planes they need to defend themselves?

James Heapey: Absolutely. Any pilot training pipeline has a foundational level of flying training that we are able to deliver. Similarly, given that English is the international language of aviation, we are able to do

language training as well. Very obviously, the more aircraft-specific training has to be delivered by F-16 nations, but we are proudly part of that F-16 coalition.

Israel: Terrorist Attacks

12. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to support Israel in preventing terrorist attacks. [900863]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): We have provided intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to help anticipate any further attacks and to assist with hostage recovery.

Theresa Villiers: Some 100,000 people have been displaced from their homes in northern Israel because of the fear that if Hezbollah adopt the same tactics as Hamas, the carnage could be even worse than on 7 October. What are the UK Government doing to try to prevent more weapons from getting to Hezbollah, to de-escalate the situation and to see, at the very least, Hezbollah retreat further north from the border?

Grant Shapps: I thank my right hon. Friend. We are working alongside our P3 partners to de-escalate tensions on the blue line and reduce that risk of escalation. We are continuing our efforts to support the resilience of the Lebanese armed forces, who we have helped elsewhere, with the eventual aim of getting them to the Lebanese southern border and ensuring implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1701.

Armed Forces Recruitment

14. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to recruit armed forces personnel. [900866]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): We continue to apply an array of measures to support recruitment and retention and refine the armed forces offer. Those include financial incentives, flexible service and an improved accommodation offer. The Haythornthwaite review has a key part to play, and teams have been stood up across the Ministry of Defence to implement all 67 recommendations, working to establish a reward and incentive architecture that will attract and retain skills.

Will Quince: Colchester is the proud home of 16 Air Assault Brigade, the Army's rapid reaction force. My right hon. Friend knows Colchester well. What steps is he taking to promote recruitment into the parachute regiment based at Merville barracks in Colchester, one of the UK's newest and most vibrant cities, where recruits will be embraced by our local community?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend and I both have an affection for the city of Colchester. The regiment continues to meet its operational requirements. There is currently an internal transfer bounty scheme that offers a Haythornthwaite-compliant £7,500 to infantry private soldiers on successful transfer to the parachute regiment. That supports the Army in moving towards its future soldier structure, and will certainly be of assistance to the regiment.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Despite the answer the Minister gave to the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), the fact remains that this year retention and recruitment into the armed forces is becoming a serious crisis. What is the current difference between intake and outflow for the three services?

Dr Murrison: I am more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the detailed breakdown per service, broken down into regulars and reserves. He is right to point out that right across the western world there is a crisis in retention and recruitment into the armed forces, but I hope that the measures that I described in answer to earlier questions indicate how we are trying to address that, not least by increasing the pay to members of our armed forces, especially the most junior.

Mr Speaker: I call Jamie Stone—not here.

ARAP Ineligibility: Wellbeing of Personnel

19. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If he will make an assessment of the potential impact of the ineligibility of certain Afghan armed forces personnel for the Afghan relocations and assistance policy on the wellbeing of serving and retired military personnel. [900871]

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): It is undoubtedly the case that many of those who served in Afghanistan are deeply disappointed that those they served with, either in the Afghan national army or the Afghan special forces, or in the wider apparatus of the state, have not been able to come.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Minister for his answer. A constituent who served in Afghanistan told me recently that current and retired members of our armed forces face considerable torment when they see their former Afghan colleagues left high and dry by the British Government. What active steps is the Minister taking to provide support to our service personnel in that situation, and to reunite the small but fortunate band of Afghan veterans that make it to the UK with their British service colleagues?

James Heapey: Within the serving cohort, such is the turnover of staffing within the armed forces that very few will have had direct operational experience alongside either the Afghan armed forces or even the patrol interpreters and others who are eligible for ARAP, but the hon. and learned Lady is right that some element of the serving force will be deeply invested in this matter. Obviously the chain of command is there to support them and answer their questions. Within the veterans community, the sentiment is very strongly held. The reality is that there have to be limits to the UK scheme, as there are to those of other countries. No country has made an open offer to those who served in the Afghan security forces; all countries' offers are focused on those who worked directly with that country. Clearly what direct service looks like is a matter for debate. I suspect that a question on that is coming.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Surely special consideration must be given to those members of the Afghan special forces who, even if they did not

work directly for us, worked extremely closely with us. Can the Minister tell the House how many, or how few, members specifically of the Triples and the special forces face a constant threat to their lives and ought to be rescued?

James Heapey: The number that is circulated is around 400 to 500, but that is not a number that the UK Government can necessarily verify because we do not have the employment records of those units.

Topical Questions

T1. [900878] **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): As we enter 2024, I pay tribute to and thank our armed forces for all their extraordinary work during 2023. I know that the whole House will join me in that. Sadly, 2024 is likely to be just as busy. We have already discussed the intolerable situation of the Houthis closing international waterways. We call for the Iranian-backed Houthis to immediately cease those attacks. The Houthis will bear responsibility for the consequences should they ignore those warnings.

Ashley Dalton: Happy new year to you and the whole House, Mr Speaker. Two west Lancashire men, Robert Hanson and Arthur Pim, served in the RAF's photographic reconnaissance unit during world war two, taking millions of photos over enemy lines. Their efforts helped the allies to defeat the Nazis. There remains no national monument to the PRU. I am backing one; are the Government?

Grant Shapps: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the subject, and I will certainly be happy to arrange for her to meet with a Minister to discuss it further.

T2. [900879] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Innocent Ukrainians have just seen in a second new year under some of the heaviest aerial bombardments since Russia's illegal war began. Will my right hon. Friend please update the House on what steps he is taking to ensure Ukraine has modern aerial defence systems to protect innocent Ukrainians from these murderous, appalling airstrikes?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about this ongoing illegal war run by Putin. We immediately responded to the attacks over the new year by bringing forward the gifting of 200 further air defence missiles. I have mentioned already the international fund for Ukraine, which is helping to provide, among other things, air defence.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister for Defence Procurement has today confirmed that HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, based in Devonport, which I am proud to represent, are still at risk of being mothballed. He said that no final decisions have been made, so the risk to these ships is

real. When will a decision be made? Will the ships be cut, or will they be tied up alongside, flying the white ensign but never really putting to sea?

Grant Shapps: Of course anyone who is serious about the defence budget has to make the decision about whether to put into maintenance ships that have already served twice their intended lives—18 years and more, times two—and that would come out of that maintenance after brand-new ships were at sea. There is obviously a decision for the Royal Navy to make on that, but I remind the House that there are eight Type 26s and five Type 31s under construction or under contract.

T5. [900882] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): We face a complex range of security threats and challenges in our rapidly changing world. Cyber-attacks are increasingly common and nations across the world are preparing to become combat ready for space warfare. What assessment has the Minister's Department made of supporting defence jobs to assist the UK's efforts against cyber and space warfare?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who asks a second excellent question, given the growing importance of the cyber and space domains. On cyber, I can confirm that the 2022 national cyber strategy highlights the Government's commitment to growing the UK cyber-ecosystem and that new cyber-career structures are being developed across Defence, with new ways of training, upskilling and rewarding our people. On space, we have created a space academy for Government, industry and academia and are supporting cross-Government work to develop a space workforce action plan for 2024.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the Minister recognise any semblance of truth in this statement by Dominic Cummings,

"the scandal of nuclear weapons infrastructure which is a dangerous disaster and a budget nightmare of hard-to-believe and highly classified proportions",

regarding the Coulport naval facility and the nuclear deterrent black hole?

James Cartlidge: As with our previous exchange, while I respect the hon. Gentleman's position, we do not comment on speculation. What I can say is that nuclear infrastructure is incredibly important to the future of our deterrent. His Majesty's naval base Clyde has developed an established management plan with a 40-year horizon that provides a strategic vision for the future that is clear and simple and that endures, and we have a £1.4 billion programme for Faslane and Coulport nuclear facilities and nuclear infrastructure.

T8. [900885] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): Last month's treaty with Japan and Italy brought the global air combat programme's Team Tempest a step closer to reality. It followed news that BAE Systems is to hire 2,700 graduates and apprentices this year, including more than 500 Lancashire-based roles across the air division. What estimate does my hon. Friend make of the defence sector's impact on the economy, job prospects and opportunities for young people in places like Fylde—and, indeed, Chorley?

Mr Speaker: That is a very good question.

James Cartlidge: It is brilliant news, and we are delighted to have signed the treaty with Japan and Italy last month. My hon. Friend asks about the impact; it is fair to say that it will have a particular impact on his constituency, which houses the Warton site, where we have our factory of the future for the global combat air programme. I can confirm that a 2021 report by PwC estimated that the programme would contribute £26 billion to the UK economy between 2021 and 2050 and support on average 21,000 jobs per year, many of which will be in Lancashire, Mr Speaker, and particularly in my hon. Friend's constituency.

T3. [900880] **Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I do not know whether the Minister has seen the article by the *Daily Mail* defence editor, Mark Nicol, about the lack of transparency on pinch points in the armed forces personnel workforce. Figures on that used to be produced regularly. When was the decision taken to no longer produce them, and will the Minister commit today to producing them in the interest of transparency?

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman a straight answer to that because I cannot remember when the figures were withdrawn, but I can certainly look into it and write to him. On pinch points, he will be aware that, through Haythornthwaite-type processes, we are incentivising people to join parts of defence that are underpopulated at the moment, such as chefs and—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Sir Michael Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My hon. Friend has already acknowledged the importance of women in the armed forces. Will he join me in expressing belated thanks to retired Air Marshal Sir Baz North, who, in a difficult constituency case, helped me to get someone into the Royal Air Force, and will he join me in praising that person, Lowri Simner, who has just been promoted to squadron leader?

Dr Murrison: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating them both.

T4. [900881] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): The service family accommodation at Clive barracks in my constituency is concerning. A family who have severe health problems are living in a mouldy house. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation does not want to spend the money on fixing those problems; it wants to move them into a different house for the second time in two years. What are the Minister's commitments on upgrading and maintaining the housing stock, particularly on sites that are earmarked for closure, such as Clive barracks?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady is welcome to write to me about that specific case. I pay tribute to her because she consistently raises such accommodation issues—we had an exchange about them in Westminster Hall. She mentions DIO money and, as I said in that exchange, the key is investment. We have doubled the budget for maintenance and upgrades this year as part of the extra £400 million that we are putting in. That is

why we can address the damp and mould in so many properties. I am happy to look at the specifics of the case she mentions.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): As the media report the retirement of HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion, there are obvious questions about Britain's future amphibious capability, which was used so admirably during the Falklands war, along with the unrivalled skills of our specialist troops. Does the Minister agree that our Royal Marine commandos are an asset that we cannot afford to lose?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely agree. I just want to correct a point that I made earlier: I was talking about frigates, but I think the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) was talking about the landing platform docks, on which no decision has been made.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) mentions, the Royal Marines are absolutely essential. I have asked the First Sea Lord to provide a plan for how their excellent work will be taken forward.

T6. [900883] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The long-running industrial dispute at Defence Equipment and Support in Beith in my constituency started in July last year and looks set to continue as workers fight for free and equal treatment. Given the important work that is undertaken at that facility—not least to ensure that vital equipment is dispatched to Ukraine—will the Secretary of State personally intervene to break the stalemate, end the dispute once and for all, and provide equality for all workers at the Beith site?

James Cartlidge: I know how important this issue is to the hon. Lady. Differing rates are paid for workers with different skills and qualifications, which is normal practice in both the public and private sectors. I understand that a generous pay offer remains on the table. It would significantly improve the pay of the workers in dispute beyond the recent 2023 pay award, which has already significantly uplifted base pay for those specific workers, alongside over £4,000 in bonuses. It is disappointing that GMB members have voted to continue industrial action, but DE&S officials continue to be open to talks with the GMB on a constructive basis.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The pursuit of exquisite exclusivity in defence procurement is to be lauded, but can the Minister confirm that his Department is also focused on procuring the logistic platforms that we need to sustain it? Is it perhaps time for a defence operational capability audit to look into that key capability gap?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point—of course, he speaks with great experience. As we have been stressing, the whole point of acquisition reform is, instead of seeking exquisite platforms, to go for 80% to get them into service faster and then to have spiral development. We think that that is the future of procurement.

T9. [900886] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): Our nuclear veterans waited 70 years for recognition and are waiting even longer for justice. In a debate last year, the Minister promised “in the days

ahead” to examine 150 documents relating to blood and urine tests held by the Atomic Weapons Establishment. What did his examination find?

Dr Murrison: That is certainly my intention—I have not seen them yet but I intend to. The hon. Lady will have seen the list of 150; I think she will be disappointed about the content of those documents when she sees them, because very few of them will give us any information that will take us any further forward. But I committed to reading them and will certainly do so in the very near future.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Ministers know that Sir John Moore barracks in my constituency is due for disposal in 2026 as part of the future soldier programme, which will bring phase 1 capability to the Pirbright site and put 900 houses in its place. Will a Minister meet me to ensure that the current ministerial team is right behind the move and, if it is, that we have an intelligent masterplan that does not just help Winchester City Council to meet its housing targets?

James Cartlidge: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The 2023 armed forces satisfaction survey confirmed that half of personnel do not believe that their family benefit from being a service family. The impact of service life on family and personal life remains a top factor behind the intention to leave, so what does the Secretary of State propose to do to listen to forces families and implement policies to make a difference?

Grant Shapps: It is very important that our service personnel feel that they are not only honoured when they go to war but comfortable at home. One of the big things I am doing is pressing forward with the review of armed service accommodation, including by providing £400 million to improve that accommodation, which will make the lives of service personnel better at home.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): A “short-sighted, militarily illiterate manoeuvre totally at odds with strategic reality” was how the Defence Committee described, in February 2018, the proposal to retire HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark ahead of their anticipated lifetime dates of 2033 and 2034. May I advise and warn the Secretary of State not to be blindsided by the people who are raising this matter again after a change of Secretary of State for Defence?

Grant Shapps: I point out that, of course, they will be five years older, but I again stress to the House that no decision has been made on the landing platform dock vessels.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Let me take the Minister back to the Triples. There has been some debate about the extent to which the Triples were paid directly by UK forces. I know that that was the case. Does the Minister accept that and, if he does, does he not think they should be looked at under category 2 rather than category 4 of the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme?

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): There is a difference of opinion between the advice I receive from officials and the position the hon. Gentleman has set out. It would be good to bring him in to meet those officials, have that discussion and reach some truth.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Ukraine action plan 2023 ever be published? Better still, will there be a Ukraine action plan 2024? And when will that be published?

Grant Shapps: We work hand in glove with the Ukrainian Government to make sure that the action plan is one that can win the war. We have seen huge progress, in particular, in Crimea and the Black sea, and we look forward, throughout the House, to further progress in '24 for our brave Ukrainian friends.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Given that homelessness among veterans has gone up by 14% and that it is a cross-departmental issue, what more are Ministers doing to ensure that all our veterans are housed?

Dr Murrison: As I said in answer to a previous question, homelessness remains a Government priority, whether or not someone is a veteran. In general, the experience of our veterans, when they return to civilian life, is a positive one and we should celebrate that.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Clyde-built HMS Argyll is the oldest escort in the fleet. She is currently in refit in Devonport and has been since August '22. Will the Minister for Defence Procurement advise when she will be recommissioned, re-crewed and back in service?

James Cartlidge: I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman on that one.

Israel and Palestine

3.34 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office if he will make a statement on the situation in Israel and Palestine.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Let me begin by reiterating our fundamental belief in Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas. The events of 7 October were truly horrifying. Israel has a right to restore its security and to ensure that such horrifying events can never be repeated. We are also clear that too many civilians have been killed. Israel needs to ensure that its campaign is targeted on Hamas leaders and operatives, fulfils its obligations to protect civilians and is consistent with international humanitarian law.

No one wants to see this conflict go on for a moment longer than necessary. That is why the United Kingdom played a leading role in securing the passage of UN Security Council resolution 2720, which made clear the urgent demand for expanded humanitarian access. The resolution also called for the release of hostages and for steps towards a sustainable ceasefire, for which the British Government have consistently led calls.

Britain has been pushing a number of innovative and impactful approaches—especially, but not only, maritime delivery—to support aid for Gaza. We are focused on the bigger picture and longer-term strategic value. UK Ministers are lobbying the Government of Israel hard and regularly to allow more aid in and reduce the numerous constraints that are hindering many aspects of our and others' efforts to help Gazan civilians. We have appointed Mark Bryson-Richardson as our representative for humanitarian affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Last week, a Royal Navy vessel delivered 87 tonnes of life-saving UK and Cypriot aid, destined for Gaza, into Egypt. We have also supported the United Nations World Food Programme to deliver a new humanitarian land corridor from Jordan into Gaza. Seven hundred and fifty tonnes of life-saving food aid arrived in the first delivery and a second convoy, with 315 tonnes of critical supplies, reached Gaza last week, partly funded by the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the risk of famine is stark, and the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers throughout the Government are pushing the need to address this with the Israeli Government.

The Government are urging all sides to avoid further escalation. The situation is fragile and an escalation in violence, including on Lebanon's southern border with Israel, is not in anyone's interests. In the Red sea, the Houthis' attacks against commercial shipping are patently unacceptable. We have already taken action to deter Houthi threats, and we will not hesitate to take further action as needed.

There is no perfect formula for peace. What I can say is that Gaza should ultimately be under Palestinian control, and we support a two-state solution that guarantees security and stability for both Israeli and Palestinian people.

Mr Lammy: Mr Speaker, the Christmas period has not brought peace to the middle east. There has been no let-up to the intolerable suffering in Gaza and no end to the cruelty for hostages. Millions are displaced, desperate and hungry. Israel continues to use devastating tactics that have seen far too many innocent civilians killed, with unacceptable blocks on essential aid, nowhere safe for civilians, a growing humanitarian catastrophe, and now warnings of a deadly famine. Meanwhile, Hamas terrorists continue to hold hostages, hide among civilians and fire rockets into Israel.

This dire situation must not continue. The need for a sustained ceasefire is clear. The fighting must stop urgently. We need a humanitarian truce now—not as a short pause but as the first step towards what will stop the killing of innocents, provide urgent humanitarian relief, ward off famine, free hostages and provide the space for a sustainable ceasefire so that fighting does not restart. I urge the Government to do everything they can to work for a sustained ceasefire, which will also ease the growing regional tensions across the divides and avoid the catastrophe of a wider war. Those risks are rising.

Will the Minister tell the House what steps the Government are taking to urge restraint in Lebanon and to see the full implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1701, which would allow civilians on both sides of the border to return home? In the Red sea, all the targeting of commercial ships and international trade routes that puts civilians and military personnel in danger must stop, so I welcome the approach of the US, the UK, Germany and others to send clear warnings to those responsible. Will the Government ensure that this House has the time and space to scrutinise decisions of any significance that may be required?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for what he said and the way he said it. He is entirely right about the plight of civilians caught up in this tragedy and the urgent requirement for humanitarian support to get into Gaza in much greater numbers.

The right hon. Gentleman calls for a sustained ceasefire, and the British Government believe that is the right approach. That is why we put so much effort into securing agreement on United Nations resolution 2720.

The right hon. Gentleman is also entirely right to say it is important that the conflict is contained, and from the first moment Britain has moved military assets and other equipment to try to ensure that we detect any likelihood of it spreading more widely.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned in particular what is going on in the Red sea, and will understand that many Governments are committed to ensuring freedom of navigation and trade. We are protected in that extent by international law. Operation Prosperity Guardian is in full swing and HMS Diamond will join HMS Lancaster shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call Chair of the Select Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Thank you Mr Speaker.

I welcome the £2 million for additional food and the special envoy that so many of us have been calling for. First, now that Israel says it has dismantled Hamas in the north of Gaza, what are the plans to surge aid into the area, and what are Israel's plans to rebuild the territory? Secondly, will my right hon. Friend give

consideration to my proposal for an Israel-Palestine contact group that can start the hard work of a long-term peace process by kicking off track 2 negotiations?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee for her comments about a contact group, which we will look at extremely carefully. I am grateful for her welcome for the humanitarian aid co-ordinator, who is working flat out on these matters, and also for what she says about the additional funding for food. The problems at the moment are not a shortfall in funding; they are in getting the food and necessary humanitarian requirements inside Gaza.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and may I wish you and your staff a very happy new year?

Of course, it has not been a happy new year for the 2 million desperate and terrified people trapped inside Gaza, for whom 2024 brought further constant bombardment as well as the threat of famine and disease, with 50,000 people injured and almost 25,000 confirmed killed. That proves that repeated pleas from this Government and others for Israel to abide by international humanitarian law have been routinely ignored.

Scotland's First Minister recently described what is happening in Gaza as "tantamount to ethnic cleansing", and South Africa has asked the International Court of Justice to urgently declare Israel in breach of the 1948 genocide convention for its continued killing of Palestinians, the destruction of homes, the expulsion of people and the blockade of food, water and medical assistance. Do the UK Government think that Scotland's First Minister and the Government of South Africa are wrong in their assessment of the current situation? If they are wrong, how are they wrong specifically?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The Government respect the role of the ICJ and we will of course follow what is going on with great care. We have always made it clear that it is up to the courts to determine these matters and that all parties must ensure that their actions are proportionate and necessary and minimise harm to civilians.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What have we learned since we last met? We have learned that Hamas are using North Korean weapons. We have heard of further examples of gender-based violence, we have heard examples of hostages being kept in cages, and we have heard the testimony of a released 17-year-old hostage, Agam Goldstein Almog, who spoke of sexual violence and torture perpetrated against hostages who are still being held. To top it all, in the last few days Jibril Rajoub, a Palestinian Authority representative and the secretary of Fatah's central committee, has said:

"We view political Islam, and foremost among it the Hamas Movement, as part of the fabric of our struggle and our political and social fabric."

Given what the Minister has said about the need for a two-state solution and the role of Fatah and the PA in that, what representations is he making to the PA about the radicalised language that they are using?

Mr Mitchell: The Government urge everyone to exercise restraint in the language that they use, but I entirely accept my hon. Friend's first point. Like many other Members, I saw the extensive reporting in *The New York Times* about what happened on 7 October, during the recess, and it behoves everyone to read it. As for the Palestinian Authority, Britain and our allies, and like-minded countries, are doing a great deal of work to try to secure a better arrangement for it when the fighting stops.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): As the Minister will know, a large number of children are being killed, but many others have been wounded or maimed as a result of the conflict. We now know that hospital treatment and hospital facilities in Gaza have virtually collapsed. A number of non-governmental organisations, such as Save the Children, are now working to evacuate children from Gaza to ensure that they receive urgent medical treatment in third countries. Will the Minister ask his officials to convene a meeting of the NGOs to establish what further assistance our country could give in this respect, as we did in the case of Ukraine?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman is right about the plight of children on both sides of this conflict. We are in close touch with the NGOs that he has cited, and we are also considering carefully what contribution a UK medical team could make. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, field hospitals, both inside and outside Gaza, are an important aspect of that. They could have a dramatic effect, and using them would be much better than taking people who are wounded either on to ships or to other countries. We are looking at all these matters to try and address the precise problem that the right hon. Gentleman has described.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The conflict is clearly escalating, and no single power or, indeed, alliance is in full control, but what we should not lose control over is freedom of navigation and shipping movements in international waters. Surely a red line has already been crossed because ships have been targeted. Can my right hon. Friend tell me what will happen if shipping is further targeted? Will we not just take out those missiles in the air, but attack the silos from which they are launched?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend will have seen that HMS *Diamond* has shot down an attack drone, on, I think, the first occasion that the Navy has been in action in that way for 30 years. He will also have heard what the Government have said: like many other countries, they have made it crystal clear that we will not accept the fettering of the international rights of navigation, and all those involved in trying to frustrate that should hear those words.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Just today, Medical Aid For Palestinians has reported that, along with the International Rescue Committee's emergency medical team, it has been forced to withdraw and cease activities at Al-Aqsa hospital—the only functioning hospital in Gaza's middle area—as a result of increasing Israeli military activity around it. There seems to be a repetition of the dismantling of health services that we have witnessed in the north in the south and middle

[Apsana Begum]

of Gaza. Can the Minister tell us whether the Government's support for the continued bombing of civilians and civilian infrastructure will now apply in every conflict, or whether it applies only in relation to Palestinian civilians and Palestinian hospitals?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady knows very well that all parties must ensure that their actions are proportionate and necessary and minimise harm to civilians, and it is in that context that we seek on all occasions to urge the Israeli Government to adopt those three key criteria.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Alec Shelbrooke.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): There will not be a single person in the House today whose heart does not break for the death of innocent civilians, which is a consequence of any conflict. Are the Government having any discussions in the wider Arab region to get Hamas to move away from their stated aims of destroying Israel and to ensure that they disarm, which would allow a basis on which to bring this fighting to an end?

Mr Mitchell: May I offer my right hon. Friend my congratulations on his honour? He is right about the importance of ensuring that all pressure is put on Hamas to desist from these outrageous and horrendous proposals that make up part of its charter. The British Government, through a whole variety of different means, do everything we can to prosecute that case.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Said Zaaneen, a PhD student at the University of Sheffield, has been trapped in Gaza by the war. He is an extremely able student, who has a full scholarship from the university, and he is keen to continue his studies. The Foreign Office has been compiling lists of those who wish to leave, but it is currently limited to dual nationals and their immediate dependants. I appreciate all the difficulties at the Rafah crossing, but would the Minister consider extending eligibility for the Foreign Office lists to those Palestinian nationals who, like Said, are in the middle of courses at UK universities, or will he at least agree to meet me to discuss the case?

Mr Mitchell: I think the answer is for the hon. Gentleman and I to have a chat immediately after this urgent question, and we will see what we can do to help.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): Women and girls are reported to have been raped or mutilated by Hamas in at least seven different locations in Israel in a deliberate, systematic and premeditated way. Hostages have been reportedly subject to appalling sexual abuse, too. These are girls as young as 18 or 19, and they are still there. What assessment has my right hon. Friend's Department made of the emerging evidence documenting Hamas-style savagery? What conversations has he had with the Red Cross, which should be stopping at nothing to insist on access to these hostages?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for her remarks. Our contact and heavy involvement with the Red Cross and Red Crescent is happening daily. In terms of her

core remark, it is the British Government's endeavour to ensure that there will not be impunity for those who commit these horrendous crimes. No matter how long it takes, we will do everything we can to ensure that that impunity does not exist.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Israeli Defence Minister has set out proposals for the post-war governance of Gaza involving a multinational taskforce working with Palestinians to restore peace, order and normality. What is the British Government's assessment of those proposals?

Mr Mitchell: We greatly welcome all constructive proposals, and we welcome the point that the Israeli Minister has made that when this dreadful conflict is over, Gaza must be run by Palestinians.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Overcrowding and inadequate food, water, shelter and sanitation—the World Health Organisation has already warned that these are ideal conditions for disease to spread. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to support partners on the ground in Gaza to help prevent the outbreak and spread of disease?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely correct. There is a huge danger that, as a result of insufficient food, appalling sanitation and inadequate shelter—made worse by the winter rains—these conditions will persist, and that is why we are intent on trying to get the number of trucks that get into Gaza up to 500 a day. It is also why we have deployed this medical team, working with others, to see what can be done immediately on the ground.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Israel Defence Forces chief spokesperson reflected on Saturday on the destruction of Hamas in the north of Gaza, before the IDF starts to tackle Hamas more seriously in the centre and the south. He said:

“We will do this differently...based on the lessons we have learned from the fighting so far.”

What confidence does the Minister have that Israel will conduct its counter-insurgency operations in such a way as to abide by international humanitarian law?

Mr Mitchell: It is not for me to second-guess the military tactics of what is going on in Gaza, but all I can say to the hon. Gentleman is to repeat the point I have made before: all parties must ensure that their actions are proportionate, necessary and minimise harm to civilians.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Members of the Israeli Government have expressed their desire that settlers should return to Gaza at some point after the conflict. Away from the terrible massacre taking place in that awful conflict zone, the situation in the west bank continues to deteriorate. In a very welcome move, the UK Government announced that they would bring in travel bans on violent settlers, but does the Minister agree that in order to deter this activity, which is worsening by the day, something more draconian may be needed? Would he please look at instituting immediate bans on trade with settlements?

Mr Mitchell: I can tell my right hon. Friend that his first point, about the importance of these matters, is well understood by the Government. On his second point, that is not the policy of the Government. He will be aware that we are opposed to boycotts, divestments and sanctions—that is the position of the Government.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Senior representatives of Israel continue to use language endorsing genocide against Palestinians. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the IDF would turn Gaza into rubble, and a senior leader in the Israeli army has said that, in Gaza:

“There will be no electricity and no water...there will only be destruction”

On LBC radio last week, the Israeli ambassador advocated the full destruction of Gaza and said that there was “no alternative”. Last week, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary to ask him to condemn her genocidal words, but he refused. Will the Minister now condemn her remarks and commit to taking the strongest possible action against her?

Mr Mitchell: No, but I can tell the hon. Member that, in respect of the humanitarian difficulties that he has identified, we are doing everything we can to try to secure unhindered humanitarian access, and we will continue to do so.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that Hamas will never accept a two-state solution, does the Minister agree that any two-state solution must exclude Hamas—or any renamed successor—from any role in the government of Gaza after this horror is all over?

Mr Mitchell: There is clearly no place in any future settlement for Hamas and their vile ideology and terrorist actions. The two-state solution must be driven forward by people of good will on all sides.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Last week, when the Israeli ambassador was told she was making “an argument for destroying the whole of Gaza”, she replied, “do you have another solution...?”

Genocidal rhetoric like that has been echoed by a litany of Israeli officials and is matched by a murderous bombing campaign that has now killed more than 23,000 Palestinians. That is why Israel now faces the charge of genocide at the International Court of Justice. Will the Minister expel the Israeli ambassador for her genocidal rhetoric? Will he support the case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, and will he end his Government’s complicity in this atrocity by banning arms sales to Israel and demanding an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: As I think the hon. Member will know, we are pressing for a sustainable ceasefire as well as humanitarian causes, and we are doing everything we can in that respect. In respect of the wider matter about international humanitarian law, the judgment that the Foreign Secretary made on 12 December on these matters still stands. There has been no additional evidence since that time to suggest otherwise.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Regarding the South African application into the International Court of Justice, our US allies have described it as “meritless, counterproductive and completely without any basis in fact”.

The Irish Prime Minister also appears to have distanced himself from it. Will my right hon. Friend say a bit more about his view on that application at the ICJ? Does he agree that using terms such as “genocide” is actually an inversion of the truth in this context?

Mr Mitchell: I do think that using such inflammatory terms is unhelpful; I agree with my right hon. Friend about that. In respect of the ICJ, South Africa is entirely entitled to refer this matter. Right hon. and hon. Members will reach conclusions for themselves on whether something like that is helpful at this time.

My right hon. Friend, like me, will bear in mind that Israel is a state party to the Geneva convention of 1949, so it is obliged to take action against those accused of grave breaches of international humanitarian law. Because of the nature of Israeli society, that is something that we would expect it to do, were those circumstances to arise.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Blwyddyn newydd dda—happy new year. More than 23,000 people have died in Gaza since October and entire communities have been razed to the ground. While the International Court of Justice has a clear definition of genocide, there remains no legal definition of ethnic cleansing. Will the Government act to ensure a definition of ethnic cleansing in law so that this legal test may be applied to the conflict?

Mr Mitchell: I am sure that there will be plenty of time for these legal concepts to be questioned and advanced, but the central aim of the British Government today is to get relief and humanitarian supplies into Gaza, to help those who are trapped there and who have been eloquently described across the House this afternoon.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Too many civilians and children have died. A sustainable ceasefire is needed urgently. There are concerns about malaria, scabies and other diseases, so as well as food and medicines will the Minister prioritise fuel for hospitals and health workers?

Mr Mitchell: There has been an increase in the amount of fuel getting into Gaza, but my right hon. Friend is right that it needs to be distributed. We are looking very carefully at how we can make progress on that.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): More than 22,000 Palestinians have been killed, two thirds of them women and children. Our own Foreign Secretary has warned Israel that civilian deaths in Gaza are too high. Now a state has triggered the genocide convention, which will be determined by the International Court of Justice this week, yet Britain continues to grant weapons licences and to export weapons to Israel. Does the Minister agree that it would be reckless to continue to grant weapons licences and to export weapons to Israel, as that could support a potential act of genocide and render UK Government officials complicit in genocide under article 25 of the Rome statute?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will know that Britain has one of the toughest arms exports regulation regimes in the world. Clearly, any new applications would be considered by that very tough regime in the normal way.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Hamas leaders have long enjoyed impunity, moving freely between Turkey, Lebanon and Qatar, financing and amassing international support for their terror activities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this special treatment by those nations has resulted in Hamas accruing the capabilities that led to the barbaric, evil and, frankly, medieval 7 October massacre? Will he ensure that more is done to clamp down on states that facilitate the strengthening of Hamas?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a very good case. He is right that we must ensure that those who perpetrate the dreadful evil to which he refers are not able to do so again.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State has indicated that he is in contact with the Israeli Government and is expressing the Government's views, but has he raised with them the prospect of widespread disease and famine among Palestinian people in Gaza? If so, has he received any sympathetic response from the Israeli Government that they are aware that how they are conducting their bombing campaign is likely to bring that about?

Mr Mitchell: These discussions are going on all the time, and they are greatly assisted by the British Government's appointment of Mark Bryson-Richardson, the humanitarian co-ordinator. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers have been actively engaged in making the points to which the hon. Gentleman refers, so he may rest assured that there is no lack of explanation from the British Government in that respect.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): We all want a sustainable ceasefire that leads to a lasting peace, but it is easy to forget that a ceasefire existed between Israel and Hamas on 6 October, and we all know what happened the following day. Does my right hon. Friend believe that a sustainable ceasefire can ever be achieved while Hamas remain in place?

Mr Mitchell: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not speculate on his last point, but he is right that we need to work towards a sustainable ceasefire. We need yet more urgently humanitarian pauses, because in order for there to be a ceasefire, both parties must be willing to accept it. That is one of the reasons why Britain went to such effort to ensure that council resolution 2720 was secured.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The statement we have just heard really does not measure up to the needs of the occasion: 22,000 people already killed; 1.9 million displaced; thousands dying in the rubble; thousands of children dying because of a lack of medical care and food; and people dying of starvation, thirst and hunger in the Gaza strip at the present time. Can the Government not understand the anger around the world when they watch this happening in real time, and why so many people are very pleased that the Government of South Africa have taken the initiative by going to the

International Court of Justice to hold Israel to account for the deaths of so many wholly innocent people in Gaza? Can the Government not understand that and at least support the South African process?

Mr Mitchell: The policy of the Government—supported, I think, by those on the Opposition Front Bench—is to secure a sustainable ceasefire. The problem with the right hon. Gentleman's analysis, in my view, is that it does not take adequate account of the quite appalling events that took place on 7 October, when more Jewish people were murdered in a pogrom than at any time since the end of the second world war.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government have said that there will be consequences if Houthi attacks on international shipping continue. What will those consequences be, when will they start, and will they include both the Houthi rebels and their Iranian backers?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. That point is separate from the conflict in Gaza, but she will have heard what the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the Foreign Secretary have said, and she will have heard those remarks echoed by our allies. I very much hope that the Houthis and others will draw the right conclusion from that.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The right hon. Member talked a number of times about resolution 2720, but the fact is that the aid is still not getting through. There are not even sufficient bakeries to bake the bread for the people and, as Members have said, disease is rife in Palestine. How are we going to support the innocent people that Hamas are using as shields, and that the IDF is also using to attack Hamas? How can those people have any sort of a life when so many have been killed so far and so many are now affected by the huge amount of disease?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right about the danger of diseases, which I spelled out a few moments ago to one of his hon. Friends, but the critical requirement is to ensure that we focus on getting additional support in. That is why we have supported so strongly the route in from Jordan to Gaza, and why the British Royal Fleet Auxiliary has been taking British and Cypriot aid from Cyprus down to Egypt.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Recently, the Israeli ambassador to the UK very candidly said that there was absolutely no chance of a two-state solution. Has my right hon. Friend worked out whether the ambassador was speaking independently, or whether she was reflecting the views of the Israeli Government? If the latter is the case, does that not sound like a slap in the face for UK policy? If it is the former—that she was making up her own view—how can she be relied upon as a faithful conveyor of the Israeli Government's message?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend will have noted a variety of different comments that have been made by Israeli spokesmen and Israeli Ministers, but it is very strongly the policy of the British Government, and many other Governments, that we should work, when this appalling conflict is over, towards a two-state solution where both Israel and Palestine can live behind secure and safe borders.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Happy new year to you and your team, Mr Speaker. It is clear that any sustainable ceasefire will have to involve an accountability mechanism for the allegations of war crimes, whether the taking of hostages, rape or genocide. Now that there is the case before the International Court of Justice brought by South Africa, UK residents have a right to know the approach that their Government are taking to that. I asked the Minister on 11 and 19 December to set out what mechanism for upholding international law the Government support. For the avoidance of doubt, will he now say that the Government have a position on the court and what role it will play, and whether he believes all parties should abide by any outcomes from it?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is entirely right to talk about accountability mechanisms. In this urgent question I have made it clear at least twice that the British Government are absolutely supportive of that and do not want any culture of impunity to pertain afterwards. I have spelled out what the Government think about the reference to the international court. We respect the role of the international court, and we are following closely what is going on. It is up to the court to determine these matters. Whether or not it is helpful to launch that challenge at this particular point is a matter on which there will be disagreement on both sides of the House.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Last week, I visited Kfar Aza for the second time. Since I last went there four years ago, a massacre has taken place. When I was at the kibbutz last week, I felt it was the closest to evil that I had ever been. I met the families of some of the hostages. I know that the British Red Cross and UN organisations are active on the ground in trying to look after the welfare of children. However, that does not appear to extend to the hostages, one of whom is only 11 months old. Will the Minister outline whether the Government are taking any steps to make sure that this is happening and that there is a strategy to ensure the welfare of the hostages?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right to identify the agony being felt by so many of the hostages' families, relations and loved ones. Some 130 hostages remain in Gaza, and we are working closely with more than 20 countries to help to secure their release. It is probably not helpful for me to give a running commentary in the House, but my hon. Friend may rest assured that we are doing everything we can to secure their early release.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I heard what the Minister said earlier in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and a Government Back Bencher about the International Court of Justice, but I wonder whether he has had time to read South Africa's 84-page application—it is rather damning, and some lawyers say it is a strong application. I agree with the Minister that it is for the court, not politicians, to decide whether there has been a genocide. However, if he has had time to look at South Africa's submission, does he at least agree that it seems, *prima facie*, that Israel has committed some serious breaches of international law in Gaza, for which it must be held accountable?

Mr Mitchell: It is not for me to exercise that judgment. The truth of the matter is that I have not read all 84 pages, but I have been briefed on them. It must now be left to the court to reach its determination.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the Government's role in sending more aid, securing the opening of the Kerem Shalom crossing and securing UN resolution 2720, alongside my right hon. Friend's rightful focus on what we can do to help the dire health and hunger situation in Gaza. How confident is he, however, that the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill will adequately reflect widespread concern about illegal and violent Israeli activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Mr Mitchell: I think that must wait until Wednesday. The Government do not believe that public bodies should be able to waste public money pursuing their own foreign policy, and I am sure that these points will be properly teased out on Wednesday. In respect of the very difficult humanitarian situation, which my hon. Friend rightly describes, the inadequate shelter is made worse by the winter rains that we are seeing, and there is a real danger of disease spreading. That is one reason why Britain has deployed a medical team to see what we can do to help with this desperate situation, particularly in Rafah but also throughout Gaza.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Israel is committing war crimes on a daily basis in Gaza. We have seen the forced displacement and collective punishment of Palestinians, starvation used as a weapon, healthcare facilities and journalists targeted, and much more. As we have heard, South Africa is now taking forward a legal case against Israel in the International Court of Justice. If, as it could, that court quickly issues an order for Israel to immediately suspend its military operations, will the Government uphold that order by finally—finally—calling for an immediate ceasefire, as many of us have been demanding?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the policy of an immediate ceasefire is not shared by either the Government or, indeed, those on the Opposition Front Bench. In respect of the work of the court, let us wait and see what the court decides. He asks me a hypothetical question, and I think we should wait and see what the court says.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is now almost 100 days since Hamas committed their evil atrocities in Israel. Also, 130 hostages are still held in captivity by Hamas terrorists. The international Red Cross has not had access to those hostages, the oldest of which are over 75 and the youngest under one year old. What action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the international Red Cross can insist on seeing the hostages and looking after their health?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right to focus on the appalling agony and plight of the hostages. As I said earlier, I do not think it is helpful to rehearse in the House precisely what we are doing, but he may rest assured that we are in continuous contact with the Red Cross and doing everything we possibly can, along with our allies, to try to secure the hostages' release.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The IDF claims that as many as 8,000 Hamas terrorists have been killed, while at the same time there are reports that Hamas are training children to take their place. The position of the more than 100 hostages still being held by Hamas looks incredibly precarious. Will the Minister outline what progress can be made and how the UK can ensure that those people can be released and Israel can be in a position to begin to seek peace? Does the Minister believe that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has a role to play in that peacemaking?

Mr Mitchell: The answer to my hon. Friend's final point is yes, and he sets out with great eloquence the issues and problems faced by the hostages in this appalling situation. He will have heard what I said to other hon. Members in that respect.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): Before we reach a ceasefire—something needed sooner rather than later, according to many of my constituents—two doctors in Bolton, Dr Samir Naseet and Dr Ibrahim Hamami, have asked what preparations we are making to prepare the ground for the post-ceasefire period by leading on volunteer medical practitioners going to Gaza at that time?

Mr Mitchell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in this respect: I know how much work he has been doing with communities in his constituency who are engaged with Gaza. I will take careful note of the point that he has made.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I think everybody here condemns the heinous attacks by Hamas on 7 October and the taking of hostages, and we all want their safe and immediate release. But that does not excuse the brutal, indiscriminate and disproportionate violence that the IDF are perpetrating on innocent Gazan civilians. Our world must operate on a rules-based system, and that includes our allies. Given the scale of casualties, may I press the Minister on whether he and the Government will support—not come to a decision on—the ICC's investigating potential war crimes and make all evidence available to it?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will have heard what I have said about any culture of impunity. In respect of her central question, all I can do is reiterate the points I have already made that the British Government are insistent that all parties must ensure that their actions are proportionate and necessary, and that they take account of civilian harm.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Hundreds of Stroud constituents are contacting me about a ceasefire and many understand it is complicated by Hamas being terrorists and their threats to repeat the rape and murder of 7 October. But we all want to see the protection of civilians, the conflict to end and the hostages to be released. As my right hon. Friend has said, the UK and the Foreign Secretary have led calls for a sustainable ceasefire. Will he set out the conditions that are necessary for a sustainable ceasefire to be achieved?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend will have seen extensive comment on that and she will also have followed the development of Security Council resolution 2720, which

Britain was effective in ensuring was agreed. A sustainable ceasefire is one that enables us to get relief into Gaza and we are doing everything we can to try to achieve that objective.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The only way this war is likely to be brought to an end is through Government pressure—US pressure on the Israeli Government, and the Arab countries playing their part in applying pressure on Hamas. In the absence of such pressure, can the Minister, who has a good track record on campaigning against genocide, certainly in relation to the International Court of Justice case of The Gambia against Myanmar, look at how that ICJ case on genocide prevention can be used to apply pressure and prevent the Israeli Government from indiscriminate attacks on civilians?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady may rest assured that we, together with our American allies and others, are seeking to exert pressure on those involved in this conflict in the way she describes, but I caution her against seeing any analogy between the Gambian-led case at the ICJ and the South African case over Israel and Gaza.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): National Security Minister Ben-Gvir issued a call to encourage the migration of Gaza residents as a solution to the crisis. Finance Minister Smotrich called for Palestinians to leave Gaza and make way for Israelis who could “make the desert bloom”. What steps have the UK Government taken to ensure that Palestinians will be able to return to their homes in Gaza as soon as conditions allow, in the light of those recent comments by Israeli Ministers and those by the Israeli ambassador to the UK, who called for Gazans to emigrate?

Mr Mitchell: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. The Government have made it absolutely clear that there can be no resettlement of Palestinians outside of Gaza: those who lived in Gaza before must have the right of return and the British Government have been unequivocal on that point.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The human suffering unfolding before our very eyes is absolutely horrific and heart breaking: tens of thousands of innocent Gazans losing their lives, 1.9 million displaced and only last week the Israeli National Security Minister talked about “the emigration of hundreds of thousands from Gaza”, as part of a post-war vision. Will the Minister condemn his Israeli counterpart for seeking to permanently displace Palestinians from their homes, confirm that Members of the Israeli Government are advocating for breaches of international law and agree that the actions of the Israeli state contravene the genocide convention? As a first step, will he call for an immediate ceasefire, so that we can bring an end to the conflict and treat those people who are suffering?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will be aware of the arguments for a sustainable ceasefire that are propagated by the Government and supported by the Opposition Front Bench. She is entirely right about the suffering and, in respect of her first point, she will have heard what I said to two of her hon. Friends.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I wholeheartedly welcome the £2 million the UK is providing for vital food aid, and I welcome the Minister's comments that he continues to lobby Israel to reduce barriers to aid getting into Gaza, to the people who need it most. Will he reassure me and my constituents in Aylesbury that his Department will continue to keep food aid and medical aid to Gaza under review, and will redouble its efforts to work with neighbouring countries to ensure that aid gets where it is needed most?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, Mr Speaker, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. He refers to the £2 million that was specifically allocated to the convoy from Jordan, but he should be aware that the contribution Britain is making is far more extensive and includes four air flights into el-Arish and the naval operation I described, in addition to what we seek to do in opening the new route from Jordan.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Northern Gaza lies in ruins. The Minister, when he was on the Back Benches, said in 2022 that Aleppo had been

“bombed back to the stone age”

and spoke of “indiscriminate attacks on hospitals” and “massive breaches of the rules of war and of international humanitarian law”.—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 835.]

The then Minister of State, now the Home Secretary, speaking on the Syrian situation in 2020, said that nearly 300 civilians—not 23,000 civilians—

“have been killed in Idlib in Aleppo since 1 January... International humanitarian law continues to be ignored, with civilian infrastructure being hit probably as a result of active targeting... The UK has condemned...these flagrant violations of international law and basic human decency... We have repeatedly pressed—including at the UN Security Council—for an immediate...ceasefire.”—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2020; Vol. 672, c. 23.]

The Minister has said today that it is not for him to decide what is a war crime. Why are this Government so quick—and rightly—to condemn Russia's war crimes, but not Israel's war crimes?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government and indeed the Opposition stand up for international humanitarian law and condemn breaches of it whenever they take place. That is why from this Dispatch Box, throughout these terrible days since 7 October, we have consistently appealed to everyone to stand by international humanitarian law and obey what it says.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Last week I also visited the region. Is my right hon. Friend aware that South Africa is geopolitically moving towards Iran and openly supports Hamas? Indeed, its Foreign Secretary said that Israel does not even have the right to defend itself. It is in danger of becoming a terrorist proxy. As a former Attorney General, I can say that South Africa's case at The Hague has no legal merit whatsoever. Israel's actions are in lawful self-defence. The case is a dangerous political stunt that the United States has already criticised. Does my right hon. Friend agree that His Majesty's Government should do the same and criticise South Africa's action?

Mr Mitchell: The South Africans are entitled under the rules to refer the matter to the International Court of Justice in the way that they have and, as I have repeatedly said, there will be different views across the House on whether it is helpful to do so at this stage. In respect of what my right hon. and learned Friend says about South Africa, South Africa is a pluralist democracy and there are many different voices that come out of it. Britain has a close, deep and abiding historical relationship with South Africa and we give our advice to the South African Government whenever we have the opportunity to do so.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Minister says Israeli military action should be targeted on Hamas leaders and operatives. He knows better than anyone that it is not. It disproportionately kills civilians, including children, journalists and health care and aid workers. What steps are the Government taking to restrain Israel from breaking international law, and will he concede that ending trade with illegal settlements is, as a matter of fact and law, unrelated to boycott, divestment and sanctions?

Mr Mitchell: In respect of the discussions to which the hon. Gentleman refers, I can assure him that the British Government hold those discussions all the time. He will know that the Prime Minister has spoken to Prime Minister Netanyahu at least four times and met him in Israel towards the end of October. He has met President Herzog, the ruler of Qatar, King Abdullah, President al-Sisi, António Guterres, President Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammed bin Salman from Saudi Arabia. Those arguments and discussions are going on, and above all we make the point that people must abide by international humanitarian law.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Last week the Israeli ambassador in London said the quiet bit out loud when she implied that the Israeli Government are trying to totally destroy the Gaza strip. Has the Foreign Secretary hauled her in to explain that this Government oppose that policy, or is it the case that this Government are comfortable with that position—just as they seem to have been comfortable, alongside the US Administration, with the total and utter slaughter of innocent Palestinians over the last three months?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government make their views very clear at all times; I have just given the hon. Gentleman a list of all the different people the Prime Minister has been engaged with since this awful conflict started. We make consistent and clear points, all of which are questioned in this House.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Whatever the rhetoric we still sometimes hear, I know the Minister will agree that there is absolutely nowhere in this conflict that is safe for children. Further to the answers he has already given to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), may I ask him to spell out how his humanitarian strategy, and the aid that he is trying to get in to the area, will respond to the desperate needs of the children who are affected?

Mr Mitchell: We are trying to ensure that 500 trucks a day get in to provide the humanitarian aid the hon. Lady is talking about. We are also trying to do everything we can to ensure that there is additional health and hospital capacity inside Gaza, as well as just outside; we do not think it is sensible for people to be taken offshore, but they need to be treated inside Gaza where possible. In every respect, whether on medicines, food, shelter or the capacity to provide additional and more detailed medical help, we are doing everything we can to advance those objectives.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Given that the death toll of Palestinians in Gaza is over 22,000 and that at least a third of those deaths will involve children, does the Minister still believe that the Israel Defence Forces response to the 7 October atrocities, in which 1,200 Israeli citizens were murdered, remains proportionate?

Mr Mitchell: I really do not think that the equation that the hon. Gentleman makes between barbaric death in that way is one that stands very close scrutiny. He will have heard what I have said consistently throughout this statement about the role that Britain is taking to try to improve a desperate situation.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Every time pleas are made to exercise restraint, Netanyahu doubles down, so that 22,000 mostly women and child deaths and non-functioning hospitals have now become the norm. Two of his Ministers say that the forcibly evicted Palestinians can resettle elsewhere—that is ethnic cleansing. Are we not just greenlighting a leader who was already unpopular before all this and who cares less about pinpoint accuracy and international law, as he promised, than clinging on now as a war hero?

Mr Mitchell: The longevity or otherwise of the Prime Minister of Israel is a matter for the Israeli people. On the hon. Lady's point about Palestinians being allowed to return to Gaza, she will have heard what I said: the British Government totally oppose any question of resettlement of Palestinians outside Gaza or the fettering of their right to return when this dreadful contest is over.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): It is not good enough for the Government to keep calling for Israel to abide by international and humanitarian law when there is overwhelming evidence that it is not. By contrast, the Government have been very clear that Russia has been breaching international humanitarian law in Ukraine and have called out the bombing of civilians—indeed, the bombing of a children's playground. Why the double standards? Is it credible to continue with them?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman draws attention to the point that I have been making—that we are always standing up for international humanitarian law; it does not matter where there are breaches. We condemn breaches of international humanitarian law and seek to hold to account those who break it.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister has supported a two-state solution, with Gaza under Palestinian control, but the proposals tabled last week by the Israeli Defence Minister are very different, envisaging

a subsidiary status of some kind for Palestine. How in practice does the Minister envisage the two-state model being taken forward once the conflict ends?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely correct to say that a number of proposals are being generated, some of which are being given voice at this moment. But the critical thing is that, when this dreadful conflict ceases, there will be a moment for the political track to assert itself. What we now need to see is that political track, when it can start, having real force and real strength and listening to the widest number of constructive voices to try to make sure that we make progress. He will remember that the progress made at Oslo followed the second intifada. We must pray that when this dreadful conflict is over there will be an opportunity for a strong political track to assert itself.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Minister himself acknowledged that the spectre of famine is stalking Gaza. I applaud his aim to restore the pre-war level of 500 or so trucks going into Gaza to deliver humanitarian aid, but will he tell us how many trucks actually went through in the last 24 hours? Is it true that in some cases trucks are waiting up to 15 days for clearance and that trucks are taken out of the convoy of aid because one item has failed security checks? If so, what can be done to make sure that trucks queueing to deliver aid are taken through the border and reach their intended beneficiaries as quickly as possible?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Currently, around 150 trucks a day are getting in—[*Interruption.*] That is, as she is indicating from a sedentary position, entirely inadequate, but we are trying to make sure that the number rises to 500. Although I said in my opening remarks that there is a fear of famine, it is not our assessment at the moment that famine has arrived. But there is acute starvation and hunger, and it is that that we are trying to combat at this stage.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The Minister has referred multiple times to the application of international law. What definition of proportionate, targeted and minimising are the Government applying if they consider the actions of Israel to be in compliance with all of those? How many children have to be killed before the Government stop the linguistic gymnastics and call for an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will have heard what I said about the importance of a sustainable ceasefire. He will have heard much the same from the official Opposition. As we showed at the United Nations, we are working towards achieving a sustainable ceasefire. In the run-up to that, we want to see humanitarian pauses that are as long and as immediate as possible. That is the policy that we will continue to pursue.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): On 11 December, along with other parliamentarians, I heard the harrowing eyewitness account of Dr Ghassan Abu-Sittah, a British-Palestinian surgeon who had recently returned from Gaza. He spoke of the desperate state of the healthcare provision there, with a lack of essential supplies and no morphine for patients after surgery.

He spoke of treating children, who he believes had phosphorus burns, with washing up liquid and vinegar, and without painkillers. He believes that medical teams need to be allowed to set up in-field hospitals, and that the most critically injured patients need to be allowed to leave Gaza. On 7 January, Israeli authorities denied a request by the World Health Organisation to deliver urgent medical supplies to the central drug store in Gaza city and al-Awda Hospital. Will the Government put pressure on Israel to allow the delivery of those vital supplies, and will the Government call for a permanent ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: I have set out the reasons why calling for a permanent ceasefire is not, in our opinion, the right way to proceed. We need to call, as the United Nations resolution does, for a sustainable ceasefire, and we need to address the problems, which the hon. Lady set out so clearly, in the ways that we are: by trying to get more humanitarian supplies and support into Gaza, and to move towards the sustainable ceasefire that I think everyone agrees should take place.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): We know that women and children make up about 70% of the more than 22,000 people who have been killed in Gaza. That is a horrific number, and should be called such. We know that the 7 October attacks saw women and young people bear the terrible brunt of the violence, which continues. There are now serious implications for the treatment of women and children in future, including in other places. That future must mean a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution. Does the Minister recognise the particular impact on innocent women and children, and the urgent need, therefore, for a ceasefire to protect them now and in the future? What specifically is he doing to deal with the disproportionate impact on innocent women and children on the ground?

Mr Mitchell: I recognise entirely what the hon. Lady says about the plight of innocent women and children caught up in these horrendous circumstances. That is why Britain is working with our allies to try to improve the level of humanitarian access, so that we can help the people who, as she so eloquently set out, are suffering at this time.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): The suffering in Gaza over the last three months has been intolerable. I have spoken with many constituents about how unbearable it is to see, day after day, innocent civilians, particularly children, being killed. We urgently need to get to a sustainable ceasefire. Beyond that, a long-term peace will need a determined international effort to deliver a two-state solution, with Gaza as part of a future Palestinian state. What discussions have the UK Government had with international allies about the future of Gaza once the fighting has come to an end?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman correctly sets out the challenge and the requirement for us all. The British Government, at the diplomatic and political levels, through ministerial engagement not just in Israel but throughout the middle east, are seeking to advance precisely the objectives that he so coherently put.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Has the Minister made clear to the Israeli Government his criticism of the comments of the Israeli ambassador in which she explicitly rejected a two-state solution, what has the response of the Israeli Prime Minister been, and does the Minister accept that if that is the policy of the Israeli Government going forward, Israel will have effectively ended any possibility of long-term peace in the region?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will know that there are many different voices coming out of Israel. It was perhaps a matter of surprise that the ambassador chose to express herself at this point in precisely that way, but he will be aware that the policy of the British Government is to support a two-state solution. That has always been the policy. It is the policy of both Front Benches and one that Britain is bending every sinew to make sure that we achieve.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): The Israeli Government have demanded full control of the Philadelphi corridor, the land border between Gaza and Egypt. As the Minister himself said earlier, it is the main aid corridor for UK and international aid into Gaza. The Egyptian Government are reportedly opposed to the proposal due to the effect on the country's sovereignty, so how concerned are the British Government about the Israeli Government's demands in respect of the Philadelphi corridor?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will have seen the progress that has been made on other forms of access. I have mentioned specifically the convoys from Jordan, two of which have now reached Gaza, and the maritime support that Britain is providing to bring Cypriot and British aid into Egypt. We are confronting the difficulties in securing humanitarian support for those who desperately need it, and doing everything we can to overcome them.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The level of death and destruction in Gaza is horrifying and completely unacceptable, including bombings of a refugee camp on Christmas eve, which even the Israeli Government have admitted were grave errors. That is why the likes of me have been calling for, and voting for, an end to the violence. Does the Minister agree that we should call for a humanitarian truce, which could be used to secure a sustainable, permanent ceasefire and an end to this conflict?

Mr Mitchell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we are seeking humanitarian pauses, and we hope that we can reach a sustainable ceasefire. That is the policy of the Government, and it is the policy that was echoed at the United Nations. He will also want to reflect on the fact that Israel has an absolute right to exercise self-defence, but it must do so within international humanitarian law.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Young women just out of school remain in captivity, facing rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war by Hamas, and we know that Hamas remain a barrier, rather than a conduit, towards a two-state solution. On the other side, senior politicians and the Israeli ambassador now feel the confidence to be able to declare that a two-state solution is off the table, completely ruling out the position that the Minister articulates. Does he not share my fear that

[Mr Toby Perkins]

his refusal to condemn the comments of the Israeli ambassador, and his continuing to say that we support international law when it is clear that it is being broken, will give the Israelis the sense that, secretly, we support the approach they are taking? As friends of the Israelis, we must be much stronger in condemning what they are doing.

Mr Mitchell: Nothing secret is engaged here. We have been very clear about exactly where we stand, even when it is not very popular across the House: we will stand up for a sustainable ceasefire, seek to get a political track and use Britain's diplomatic skills and clout, which are much respected in the region, to try to approach a political settlement that honours the two-state solution. I am not sure there is very much between what the hon. Gentleman and I are saying today, but that is the endeavour in which the British Government are engaged.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It was pleasing to hear the Minister say that Gaza must be run by Palestinians and that there should be no forced resettlement of Palestinians. I am deeply concerned by the comments made by the Israeli ambassador condemning the two-state solution. Further to the response that the Minister gave to my hon. Friends, will he outline whether there is an international coalition for a two-state solution? How powerful is this international coalition? How much influence does it have over Israel, and what is Britain's role within it?

Mr Mitchell: Throughout all the difficulties, there has been a solid, constant refrain that there has to be a two-state solution, with both Israel and Palestine living in peace behind secure borders. If the hon. Lady reads the speeches made at the United Nations by many of the countries to which she refers, I think she will draw hope from their consistency.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Over Christmas, I heard from a constituent whose sister and her sister's four children are stuck in Gaza. If there were a ceasefire, it might be easier for them to leave Gaza. If the UK were prepared to offer humanitarian visas to relatives of UK citizens who are in Gaza, it might be easier for them to leave. What is the Minister's message to my constituent, her sister and her sister's young children who are trapped in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: It is difficult for me to comment on a specific case but, if the hon. Gentleman wishes to discuss it with me after this urgent question, I would be happy to see him. He will know that 300 British nationals have been able to leave, thanks not least to the hard work of the brilliant young men and women who are working in the emergency centre at the Foreign Office in London. A small number remain, but we are working literally night and day to make sure we do everything we can to look after our citizens and their relations.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister mentioned Oslo in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). The sad truth is that Prime Minister Netanyahu never really supported Oslo and a two-state solution, and

Hamas definitely do not. The two have thrived off each other's absolutist positions over the past few decades. For those of us who do believe in Oslo, in the peace process and in two states for two peoples, what happens next really matters. The Minister says he wants to secure better arrangements for the Palestinian Authority after the fighting ends. What does he mean by that?

Mr Mitchell: The Foreign Secretary has engaged with both the Palestinian Authority's Foreign Minister and President Abbas. Britain wants to support the Palestinian Authority in further developing the sinews of statehood that will be required if there is to be a two-state solution, as I hope there will be one day.

I very much agree with the analysis in the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, and it is now for Britain and other countries to do everything we can to develop those abilities within the Palestinian Authority so that they can properly exercise power, governance and representation in Gaza in due course.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of Tzipi Hotovely's statement on LBC radio that the destruction of Gaza should continue and be extensive, why have the Government not condemned those words, which drew back on her previous comments about a two-state solution? What is the Minister going to do, because this is inconsistent with everything he is saying at the Dispatch Box?

Mr Mitchell: No one wants to see wanton destruction, which is why I have been very clear about international humanitarian law. I also hope the hon. Lady would assert that, given the horrendous events of 7 October, Israel has a right to self-defence. That is what Israel is seeking to exercise in tracking down Hamas and stopping their ability to repeat what they did on 7 October, as Hamas's leaders have made clear they wish to do.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am struggling to understand what the Government's response is, apart from surprise at the use of extremist language. What chance can there be for the humanitarian truce that is needed now, and for a sustainable ceasefire and a lasting peace, when extremist views are uttered not just by terrorist organisations but by some Ministers and diplomats representing the Israeli Government?

Mr Mitchell: Many wild statements have been made, some with which Members will agree and others with which they will not, but the British Government's purpose is to achieve a sustainable ceasefire and to meet the immense humanitarian need. It is then to lift people's eyes, when this terrible conflict is over, to the possibilities of peace that a political track can deliver.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): A great many of my constituents write to me on a daily basis demanding that the Government change their position to deliver a ceasefire, but on the point about language, when Israeli Ministers Smotrich and Ben-Gvir said that Gaza should be essentially free of Palestinians, the Government, along with European counterparts, correctly condemned them, but when the ambassador in London called for Gaza to be flattened even more than it already has been, they say nothing. Why?

Mr Mitchell: I have explained the Government policy in some detail both in respect of tackling the humanitarian need that so manifestly exists and in developing the political track when this conflict is over, and I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman and his party will feel able to support that.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The UN has described Gaza as a “graveyard for children”; it is reported that more than 9,000 have been killed and thousands more severely injured. Those children who have survived face a bleak future, with limited access to aid as bombs continue to rain down on them. Many have lost their parents and their entire families. I heard the Minister’s earlier responses, but can he explain in more detail why the Government support unaccompanied children fleeing Ukraine but cannot set up similar support for children in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: I do not think that the two situations are analogous, but I do think it is very important that we do everything we can to help the children and the others in Gaza whom the hon. Lady describes, and we will continue to do exactly that.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Further to that question, we know that children are seven times more likely than adults to be killed by blast injuries and that 1,000 children have lost one or both legs in the last three months in Gaza. The scars that Gazan children are bearing from this war will be long-lasting, so does the Minister agree that to have that two-state solution—that long and lasting peace—we need to step up as part of an international community to defend Gazan children?

Mr Mitchell: The plight of Gazan children will weigh heavily on all decent people on all sides of the argument being expressed in the House this afternoon. The Government will continue to do everything we can, but in terms of the long-term point the hon. Lady made about the two-state solution, all of our diplomatic and political efforts are bent towards trying to secure that.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): After almost 23,000 civilian deaths, including almost 10,000 children, many observers are describing the atrocity in Gaza as a genocide. I take the Minister at his word on his belief that we need to see a two-state solution. However,

last week we heard Bezael Smotrich, the Finance Minister, describing the need for voluntary emigration from Gaza and Israeli occupation and resettlement of Gaza, and we heard Prime Minister Netanyahu and Ambassador Hotovely describing what they want to see, which is the outright destruction of Hamas and the Palestinian people. I think we need to be honest: when Netanyahu calls for a total victory, he wants to see the annihilation of the Palestinian people, doesn’t he?

Mr Mitchell: I do not think that a close observation of Mr Netanyahu’s remarks would sustain that view. The point the hon. Gentleman is making underlines how important it is for people to be moderate in their language as we seek to move through this dreadful crisis, both in humanitarian terms and ceasefire terms, to the point beyond, when there can be a political track with some hope of success.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Finally, I call the ever-patient Mary Kelly Foy.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Is the Minister aware that before Christmas a sniper murdered two women—a mother and a daughter—inside the Holy Family parish in Gaza? The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem stated that the women

“were shot in cold blood inside the premises of the parish, where there are no belligerents”.

Pope Francis has condemned the attack, as has the Archbishop of Westminster; will the Government do so?

Mr Mitchell: We are not clear about the full facts of what happened. We have of course heard what the Holy Father has said and what others have said as well, but the fact that any innocent person loses their life in these horrendous circumstances is something which the whole House will deplore.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister of State for taking so many questions and the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), for staying the course. That concludes the urgent question and I ask Members wishing to do so to leave the Chamber as swiftly and as quietly as possible.

NHS Winter Update

4.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the winter pressures facing the national health service and social care, as well as the impact of the ongoing junior doctors' strikes. The NHS employs 1.3 million people and the social care system a further 1.5 million people. Together, they treat and care for tens of millions of people every day. We all know that winter is the most challenging time of the year for the NHS and social care, as our workforce have to tackle the pressures created by cold weather and seasonal viruses.

To put our health and social care system in a strong position heading into winter, this year we started preparing earlier than ever before. In January last year, we published our recovery plan for urgent and emergency care and provided £1 billion of dedicated funding to boost emergency capacity. The plan committed to delivering 5,000 new permanent staffed beds. I am pleased to update the House that more than 3,000 were already in place in December, and in the coming weeks NHS England will meet the 5,000 pledge and make sure that it has almost 100,000 core beds ready when covid and flu peak.

Our recovery plan also pledged 10,000 virtual ward beds so that more patients can be monitored safely at home, away from hospital. I am pleased to update the House that we have delivered more than 11,000 virtual ward beds, and they have been a vital service for eligible patients over the festive period.

We have boosted our ambulance service with £200 million of additional funding, putting new vehicles on the road, improving response times and getting crews out and about for more hours. In recognition of the importance of patients being discharged promptly from hospital when it is safe to do so, we have made sure that every acute hospital in England has access to a care transfer hub, bringing together teams from the NHS and social care to speed up discharge, backed by an extra £600 million for social care. To help prevent the spread of winter viruses, we brought forward flu and covid vaccinations, protecting the most vulnerable and making them less likely to require hospital treatment.

But no matter how thorough our preparations are, winter will always be the most challenging time of the year for our NHS. That is why it is extremely regrettable that the British Medical Association's junior doctors committee has chosen to strike not once, but twice at this time of year. It has also chosen to strike for an unprecedented length of time, putting profound pressure on hospitals and GP surgeries throughout the country.

Before Christmas, the BMA's strike caused the cancellation of almost 90,000 appointments, some of which will have to be rescheduled for a second or even third time. That is in addition to the 1.1 million appointments that have already been affected since strikes began in December 2022. This is not just another statistic; there is a person behind every one of these appointments, who may be in pain or distress and who now must wait longer for the care they deserve.

Last week, a member of the BMA leadership said "strike action benefits absolutely nobody."

They were absolutely right on that. The ongoing strikes are causing more appointments to be cancelled and more worry for patients, and are putting a significant strain on staff.

During December's and this week's strikes, the NHS's priority has been to protect patient safety. Resources have been channelled into urgent and emergency care, including vital neonatal and maternity services. Huge efforts were made to make the most of the working days between Christmas and new year, because throughout any strike action, it is crucial that every patient who needs urgent medical care comes forward as normal. We continue to face challenges, and strikes have stretched emergency care, but thanks to the meticulous hard work in local trusts in preparing for strikes, as well as to the huge personal sacrifices that clinicians and staff are making to pick up the slack, emergency care has largely held up and the system has coped under the circumstances.

Staff across the NHS deserve our sincerest thanks for the heroic efforts they have made throughout the unprecedented strikes. I thank the doctors, nurses, paramedics and all frontline staff who have come into work to support each other, deliver care and protect patients; the consultants, including Members of this House, who are working extra hours, cancelling their holidays or even coming out of retirement to safeguard patient safety; the managers, administrators and NHS leaders who are working day and night to make sure that the right staff are in the right place to protect patient safety; and all those working in social care, from local authority staff to care workers and carers, who have rallied round to support hospitals.

I know that work does not stop when the strikes stop. NHS staff will begin turning their attention to recovering from the impact of the industrial action, restarting elective treatment and improving the flow of patients through emergency departments. The junior doctors committee's choice to strike at this time of year means that that work must now be done under additional pressures, as staff move to catch up from industrial action as well as tackling the impacts of cold weather, covid, flu and norovirus.

I want to find fair and reasonable solutions to industrial action. One of my first acts as Health and Social Care Secretary was to bring in the British Medical Association for talks to end these long-running disputes, as well as meeting representatives for Agenda for Change unions who speak for frontline staff, including nurses. We have reached agreements with unions that represent consultants and specialty doctors on offers to be put to their members. Those offers will modernise contracts, realign pay scales and improve doctors' career progression, while delivering value for the taxpayer and protecting the hard-won progress we have made to halve inflation. Consultants and specialty doctors are pausing strike action while members vote on the offers, with the results of both ballots expected shortly. The Government and BMA agree that they are the best deals available to us, and I very much hope that members will vote in favour so that those positive changes can be made and we can move the NHS forward.

On junior doctor negotiations, the talks that began in November had been progressing with the BMA junior doctors committee. The talks were constructive, exploring a range of proposals that would improve the working lives of doctors across the NHS. I was therefore extremely

disappointed when the BMA turned its back on the negotiations before they had concluded to call the damaging strikes that we face today. The Government will not negotiate with the BMA while strike action is under way and patient safety is at risk. Every strike is hugely disruptive for our NHS. The NHS and patient safety cannot be switched on and off on a whim. I do not believe it right to negotiate with unions while they are being unreasonable and some of their members are walking out of hospitals at the busiest and most challenging time of year for patients.

I remind the House that the junior doctors committee's headline demand of a 35% pay rise is simply unaffordable for taxpayers. Last summer, we accepted the recommendations of the independent pay review body in full. That meant that junior doctors received average pay rises of almost 9% in their September pay packets—some of the most generous increases across the entire public sector. Meeting the 35% demand would stoke inflation just as we as a country have halved it, burning a hole in the pockets of families up and down the country, and it would be totally out of step with the pay rises awarded to other dedicated public servants and employees throughout the private sector. Staff across the public sector have agreed fair and reasonable deals on pay; only the junior doctors committee has repeatedly walked away from talks.

Let me address the issue of NHS leaders asking some junior doctors to return to work when patient safety is at risk, in what are known as patient safety mitigations or derogations. As of 9.30 this morning, 40 patient safety mitigations have been submitted during the current round of strikes, and two have been accepted by the BMA. NHS leaders, many of whom are themselves members of the BMA, have decades of combined experience. They know their patients and they know their rotas, and they would ask for mitigations only if they were absolutely necessary—in, for example, a children's emergency department. They are wholly independent of Government: it is for them to make those decisions. I trust them and I trust their judgment. That is the reality, and that is the truth about patient safety mitigations.

One of the reasons why I came into politics was the NHS and what it had done for me and my family. That is also one of the reasons why I am a Conservative. This is a Government who have delivered record NHS funding, the first ever NHS long-term workforce plan, and 50,000 more nurses for our NHS. We are providing the NHS with the doctors it needs for the future by doubling the number of medical school places, opening five new medical schools and pioneering one of the world's first medical apprenticeships. We have also supported doctors by making changes to pensions for those at the very top of their career path—at that point, that was the BMA's No. 1 ask, and a policy that the Opposition seemed to oppose.

Those are not the actions of a Government who are turning their back on the NHS, as some have declared. They are the actions of a Government who are building a health and social care system that is sustainable for the long term. To do that, we must put the strikes behind us and move forward together, because the NHS belongs not just to the junior doctors committee: it belongs to us all. It belongs to the millions of people who rely on its being there when they need care, as well as the millions of taxpayers who pay for it. For their benefit, it is time for the members of the junior doctors committee

to show that they are serious about doing a deal. They have legitimate concerns about their working lives, and a fair and reasonable deal can be reached, but calling damaging strikes is not the way in which to achieve that. Earlier this week I said that if they called off their damaging strike action, I would get round the table with them in 20 minutes. I am, of course, extremely disappointed that they refused my offer, and continue to refuse it—the strikes are ongoing as we speak—but if they come to the negotiating table with reasonable expectations, I will sit down with them.

This Government have a clear, long-term plan for the NHS. Our recovery plans in elective, emergency and primary care can improve access to treatment, transform services, and give patients more choice in and control over their care. Our long-term workforce plan will give the NHS the staff it needs to thrive for decades to come, our social care reforms will build a better care workforce to support our growing number of older people, and by creating the first smoke-free generation we will reduce long-term pressure on our health service. We have eliminated the longest waits, but we have not yet made a significant enough reduction in waiting lists. To do that, we need the junior doctors committee to come to the table and do a deal that is in the interests of patients, in the interests of our NHS, and in the national interest. Then we can build an NHS that is not only stronger today, but stronger for our children and grandchildren.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.9 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance site of her statement and wish her and the whole House a happy new year.

Unfortunately, the NHS is beginning 2024 the same way it ended 2022—on strike. This week's industrial action by junior doctors is the longest strike in the history of the NHS at the worst possible time, because even before the strikes this week the NHS was struggling to stay afloat this winter. Hospitals were declaring critical incidents before the strikes. Patients were waiting dangerously long for ambulances and in A&E before the strikes. Ambulances were queueing up outside hospitals for hours to hand over patients before the strikes. The truth is, before the strikes, and before the pandemic, the NHS has been facing winter crisis after winter crisis as a direct result of the Conservatives' failure—their failure to train enough staff, their failure to arm the health service with modern technology, and their failure to reform.

In January last year, the Prime Minister published an urgent and emergency care recovery plan, promising “the largest and fastest-ever improvement in emergency waiting times in the NHS's history”.

Instead, heart attack and stroke victims are waiting even longer for an ambulance, and A&E waiting times are the worst they have been all year. The Prime Minister promised 800 more ambulances, but the Government have now admitted that they are just replacing existing ambulances. He promised that 50,000 patients a month would be treated in virtual wards, but in reality it is fewer than 8,000 patients. Is not the truth that the Conservatives have once again sent the NHS naked into the winter, and patients are paying the price?

[*Wes Streeting*]

Given how ill-equipped the Government left the NHS, and given the desperate pleas from NHS leaders for the strikes to be resolved, why on earth did the Government choose to sit back and let this damaging strike action go ahead? Not only did the Health Secretary allow talks with the junior doctors to collapse and refuse to reopen negotiations until tomorrow, when the damage will have been done; at the 11th hour, as junior doctors stood on the edge of this strike action, she chose to push them straight into it. In what way was it helpful for the Secretary of State, in a series of broadcast interviews, to patronise junior doctors by rebranding them as “doctors in training”? A junior doctor can have 10 years’ experience under their belt; they do not expect to be trolled by Ministers who have been in office for barely 10 minutes.

In the Prime Minister’s interview on the BBC yesterday, we saw why he has allowed the strikes to go on for so long without intervening himself: he is using industrial action as an excuse for the state his party has left the NHS in after 14 years. He would rather blame NHS doctors and nurses than take a shred of responsibility himself. Meanwhile, patients cannot get an appointment, cannot get the surgery they need and cannot see a GP, NHS dentistry is decaying, and the NHS itself is on life support. While he was bragging about all the parts of the NHS that are not currently on strike—that is how low he now sets the bar—he seemed to have forgotten that nurses are still in formal dispute. Is he so uninterested in our nation’s health service that he did not know? Was he trying to pull the wool over the voters’ eyes? Or is he just another Tory Prime Minister asleep at the wheel as he drives the country off a cliff?

There was one thing that the Prime Minister got right in his interview with Laura Kuenssberg yesterday. Whether the question was on the NHS, immigration or the economy, his response was the same: ask the Leader of the Opposition. It seems that even this Conservative Prime Minister knows that if we want serious solutions to the problems facing the country today, there is only one place to look, and that is the Labour party.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that people do not give way during a statement.

Wes Streeting: Patients are sick and tired of waiting—waiting for ambulances, waiting for a GP appointment, waiting for their operation and waiting for a general election that cannot come soon enough. Why do the Conservatives not get out of the way and let Labour fix the mess they have made?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back from his world tour promoting his book. It is very nice to meet him for the first time across the Dispatch Box. While he was away in sunnier climes, he may have missed what is actually happening in Wales, which interestingly has been described by the Leader of the Opposition as the “blueprint” for how Labour will run the NHS, were it ever to come into government. Interestingly, in the Labour-run Welsh NHS, people are almost twice as likely to be waiting for treatment, and they are waiting

an average of five weeks longer for NHS treatment under Labour in Wales than they do in England. Indeed, the number of patients in Wales seeking treatment in England has increased by 40% in two years because of the experiences that people are having in Wales.

I will just correct the hon. Gentleman on a couple of other things, too. Just to help him understand, we are delivering the 800 new ambulances—those are new ambulances—at pace at the request of the NHS, just as we are putting in 5,000 extra beds in hospitals across England, because we understand the point about capacity and we want to help the NHS look after people in a timely and efficient manner.

I will also just correct him again on the doctors in training point. I am surprised he has come on to that at this point, but had he spoken to his friends in the BMA, he would have understood that that is the phrase that the BMA is using. It has passed a motion to stop using the phrase “junior doctors”. [*Interruption.*] Yes, the BMA passed a motion. The hon. Gentleman referred to doctors, but he perhaps does not understand the complexities of contractual negotiations. The phrasing is used to denote those professionals who are still on formal training pathways who are not specialty doctors or consultants. That terminology has been agreed with the BMA.

In terms of the strikes themselves, I note—I know that those sat behind me on the Government Benches noted it, too—that the hon. Gentleman did not condemn the strikes. I am happy to give way, if he would like to confirm whether he condemns the strikes. Unfortunately, he has missed his chance to do so, but I suspect that everybody, including the patients at home waiting for appointments, will see the Labour shadow Minister’s failure to condemn these strikes. That is because, in line with public sector strikes more generally, the Labour movement will always prioritise union harmony over patient safety. That is not what we as Conservatives do; we will always put patient safety first.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Happy new year. The Secretary of State will know that it is far from all doctors in training who have taken part in this strike. In my trust, Hampshire Hospitals, it was just over 60%, and the average across the south-east was little more than 50%. Many doctors were hard at work this past week caring for their patients. Does my right hon. Friend share the concern of many in the health service that the longer this dispute drags on, the more we lose the good will of the consultants who have been filling in and the more we do serious damage to the career pipeline that sees today’s doctors in training become tomorrow’s consultants?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for asking that question and for noting the enormous efforts that clinicians across the NHS have gone to in order to cover these strikes. We are conscious of the personal impacts that has had for many, and clinicians have had a very tough few Christmases. We were all collectively hoping that this Christmas would be just a little bit easier for them, but sadly these strikes have a real impact on people who are working to pick up the slack from

junior doctors not turning up. I am grateful to everyone who has gone into work, who has worked extra shifts and who has cancelled time off with their families. We must find a fair and reasonable solution to this industrial action, which is precisely why I was so very disappointed that the BMA junior doctors committee chose to walk away from these discussions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): A very happy new year to you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Our NHS faces an unprecedented winter of pressure, with inflationary costs, increasing viral infections and staff shortages. While the SNP Scottish Government have acted with £300 million to cut waiting lists and negotiated with NHS staff, preventing even a day of strike action, NHS England is undergoing a junior doctors strike—the longest in the history of any NHS in the UK. No one wants strike action, but it works, which is exactly why the Tories want to ban it. In fact, this Tory Government appear to be working to make this winter harder by cutting NHS capital funding, undercutting attempts to recruit new staff and not getting round the table with trade unions, instead blaming the BMA and junior doctors. Is the decision to underpay NHS staff and stoke strikes the policy of this Health Secretary, or is she being forced down that path by a Chancellor who is continuing his decade-long war on junior doctors?

Victoria Atkins: I imagine that the hon. Lady has seen that we accepted in full the pay review body's recommendations last year and, as of September, junior doctors and doctors in training have received on average an 8.8% increase on their basic salaries—they also earn money on top for antisocial hours, working overtime and so on. In addition, they have pension contributions of some 20%, which is a rare employment benefit across both the public and private sectors. In the future, I want to find a fair and reasonable settlement with the junior doctors, as we have been able to reach with consultants and specialty doctors, but we cannot do that if junior doctors are on strike. That is why it is so very disappointing that they walked away from the discussions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that we all wish to welcome Sir David Evennett back to the House in rude health.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome my right hon. Friend's factual statement on the state of the NHS in her winter update. Will she confirm that she would return to the negotiating table immediately were the BMA to call off these very damaging strikes?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome my right hon. Friend back. I have said throughout this that I was extremely disappointed that the committee chose to walk away from discussions. I also think that there is a lot more to discuss apart from pay—I have made it clear that I would like to look at other aspects of their working conditions—but, unfortunately, the junior doctors committee walked out. The strike action has had a real-terms impact on patients. We need to find a fair and reasonable solution, but I will not do that while the

junior doctors committee maintains strikes. It will have to come to the table with reasonable expectations and change their minds on the validity of strike action.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We have had 14 Tory winters. One would have thought that they would learn by now that the real crisis in our NHS is that social care is not up to scratch. A quarter of patients in my local hospital are waiting for social care. As a result of jamming the back door, the front door becomes inaccessible to so many patients. After all these years, when will the Secretary of State publish a proper plan for social care, or will she leave it to my right hon. Friend to take over?

Victoria Atkins: I am so sorry, I do not know who the hon. Lady is referring to. On the Conservatives' plans, at the 2022 autumn statement we announced up to £7.5 billion of additional funding—an historic increase—and we did not stop there. This summer, we announced an additional £600 million, which brings it up to £8.1 billion of additional funding over two years. That will support our care workforce, and the majority of the funding will end up in the pockets of the amazing people who provide care and support to the patients we are all concerned about.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of the BMA and an NHS consultant who has worked during the industrial action. Let us make no mistake that these strikes are causing suffering to patients, both adults and children. The derogation process has not worked because, as the Secretary of State said, the BMA has not returned junior doctors to work when they have been asked to—where there has been a risk of dangerous harm to patients. The first duty of any Government is to protect their citizens, so when will the Secretary of State bring forward the minimum service levels to protect patients from these dangerous strikes?

Victoria Atkins: First, I sincerely thank my hon. Friend. I was in contact with her over the weekend when she had come off a very long shift in emergency care, looking after patients locally. I have nothing but admiration for her and the many, many other people who stepped in at short notice to cover urgent and emergency care in our NHS during the strikes. On minimum service levels, she will know that we have already introduced them for ambulance services—something that was opposed by the Labour party—but we have just closed the consultation on minimum service levels in hospitals and we are, of course, carefully analysing the responses. Again, the point that 40—four zero—patient safety mitigations were made by NHS leaders yet only two were granted by the BMA, is very, very worrying when it comes to how seriously the BMA is taking concerns about patient safety.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): A few weeks before Christmas, NHS bosses were here in Parliament briefing MPs that, notwithstanding their preparation for the winter crisis, the one thing that would push them to the brink would be a rise in respiratory illness. Now here we are: cases of flu, covid, RSV—respiratory syncytial virus—and whooping cough are all rising rapidly. A strong public health intervention by the Government could

[Daisy Cooper]

have prevented that from happening. When will the Government get serious about public health interventions such as vaccine uptake, air filtration and protecting the immune compromised to stop people getting so ill so often for so long?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for re-emphasising the critical timing of the strike actions and the impact it has on patients. We know that winter is difficult. It is not just difficult for our healthcare system. Around the world, when cold winter strikes, it has physiological impacts on people with underlying health conditions. We also have a rise in infectious conditions, too. As she will appreciate, that is precisely why, on the advice of clinicians, we brought forward the flu and covid vaccination programme to try to protect the most vulnerable in our society. But again, the timing of the strikes is so very cynical, because their impact and tail will, I am sorry to say, have consequences beyond tomorrow's stop date.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I was really concerned when my right hon. Friend mentioned the number of requests made to the BMA for certain duties in hospitals and that only two had been responded to positively. That is really concerning for patients. Contrast that with the behaviour of Nick Hulme, the acting chief executive at Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, who has transformed its A&E in terms of waiting times. We need to promote such leaders, but we also need to unreservedly condemn the actions of the BMA junior doctors committee and get the strikes over and done with.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for her work in the Department. She knows only too well the difference an inspirational leader can make to a local NHS trust, and at regional or national level. Managers who are good and committed to their local area, who work with their clinicians and other healthcare staff to try to look after patients all year round, have been put under the most enormous pressure over the last few weeks because of the strikes. I thank every single one of them for doing what they can to safeguard patient safety. As I say, I trust their judgment. If they have put patient safety mitigations in, it is because they consider, in their professional judgment, that they are needed.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The public health director in Hull published her report recently. She talked about the double jeopardy that my constituents face: from the most disadvantaged communities, they have shorter lives in far poorer health. At the end of last year in A&E, patients were less likely to be treated within the four-hour target than anywhere else in England. Why is that after 14 years of a Conservative Government who are committed, apparently, to levelling up?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Lady, who will know that our constituencies, albeit not necessarily in the same region, nevertheless share similarities, being relatively close to each other. The work and the progress made on urgent and emergency care is precisely because we were concerned about, for example, ambulance response times and hospital discharges. We worked with NHSE to bring together the urgent

and emergency care plan and, for example, bring about 800 new ambulances on to our roads and about 5,000 more core beds into the NHS to try to address those needs. Unfortunately, the strike action that we have seen over recent days has very much militated against those efforts. We all accept that winter is a very difficult time for the NHS, and through the urgent and emergency care plan we have worked with NHSE to try to meet the demands that she so rightly puts forward.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to reaching a fair and reasonable solution to the strikes. Worcester went into this winter with the delivery of a new emergency department and was able to deliver 21 beds-worth of extra capacity over the winter, but I have heard from the hospital today that it is still facing intense pressure. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the staff who are working around the clock to meet that pressure, and will she support the SWFT trust management as they work to address some of the key transport bottlenecks on its site, in the interests of patients and staff alike?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend sets out clearly the many pressures and factors at play in running emergency departments and hospitals at the best of times, when we are not in the middle of winter and facing the pressures that it always brings on the healthcare system. I thank not only staff in his trust, but staff throughout the country for the work they have done over recent weeks to support the NHS and to bring treatment to patients. We are working hand in glove with NHSE regional and local leaders to see whether there are practical measures that can be taken to improve the flow through hospitals.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): NHS winter pressures are having a huge impact on cancer surgery and other cancer interventions. In Cumbria, in the south of the county 25% of those with a cancer diagnosis are waiting more than two months for their first intervention, and in the north of the county 47% are waiting more than two months. We know that every month's delay in treatment means a 10% reduction in people's chances of surviving. Some 123 cancer operations have been cancelled in the last year in our area. One reason is the lack of investment by this Government, and their predecessors of all colours, in radiotherapy. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and Conservative and Labour members of the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy, which I chair, to look at solving the problem by investing in the kit that Britain desperately needs to save lives?

Victoria Atkins: I hope the hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that we have made cancer treatment waiting times a key focus of our elective recovery plan, which has been backed by an additional £8 billion in revenue funding across the spending review period. We have made progress by delivering record numbers of urgent cancer checks, with more than 2.9 million people seen in the 12 months to October last year. Of course there is more to do, and I would be very happy to meet him and colleagues across the House to discuss the practical ways by which treatment can reach our constituents. He will not be surprised to know that cancer is a priority not just for me personally, but for the Government as a whole.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement; there is a lot in it to welcome, but I particularly welcome the additional 11,000 virtual ward beds. Hospital at home is hugely popular and we know it takes pressure off our hospital. I thank all of the clinicians who helped to make that possible. Can she confirm that it is her intention now to go further and roll it out to more hospitals and more specialties, so that more patients can recover at home?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work in making that happen. He worked very hard on virtual wards when he was a Health Minister, and they represent a real step change in how we treat people with long-term conditions who can be monitored safely at home. They mean that people do not have to spend time in hospital, with all the pressures that can mean for us as individuals. Importantly, that also frees up beds for other patients who need them. I am keen to roll the scheme out further. Indeed, we have not just met but exceeded our initial ambition, which is why I can confirm that we have delivered 11,000 places in the virtual bed ward category.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The BMA says that junior doctors' pay has been cut in real terms by 26% through consistent below-inflation increases. If the Tories really cared about this strike and about the NHS, would they not have avoided creating the circumstances that made junior doctors so angry that they felt the need to go on strike? Does that not just show that you cannot trust the Tories with the NHS?

Victoria Atkins: The figure that the BMA relies on is in fact from 2008, when the Labour party was in government for the first two years. The BMA cites a 35% pay rise. Just to clarify, independent organisations such as Full Fact and the Institute for Government rely on the consumer prices index measure, which shows a difference of 11% to 16%. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will take into account the fact that we have already given graduate doctors, in their first year out of medical school, a rise of 10.3%, and I was willing to negotiate further and consider additional settlements that are fair and reasonable to the taxpayer.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Is the Health Secretary aware that the impact of these strikes on the Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust has seen more than 7,000 appointments and operations cancelled and several million pounds in extra costs to the trust—and that is before the most recent strikes. Does she share my concern that the junior doctors are pursuing an unreasonable pay demand and causing lasting damage to patients and the finances of the NHS?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is a brilliant advocate on the challenges facing his rural and coastal community. We all know that geography is a factor in the difficulties of delivering healthcare in his corner of England, but everything the trust and clinicians do is about trying to improve healthcare for his constituents. I cannot be the only one who felt uncomfortable at the image of some on the picket lines last week singing while our constituents were struggling with cancelled appointments and worried about urgent and emergency care times. I am very keen that we should reach fair and reasonable settlements

with junior doctors, but in order for that to happen they must act reasonably, change their minds and call off the strikes.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Recently, Tamworth had clarification that mental health provision at the George Bryan Centre would not be invested in. From now on, patients must travel to Stafford for crisis care. Labour has pledged to recruit 8,500 more staff for community-based talking therapies in order to reduce waiting times and crises. Why have the Government not put in place a plan to recruit more NHS mental health staff?

Victoria Atkins: We have—in the NHS long-term plan. We have set an ambition to grow the mental health workforce by an additional 27,000 staff between 2019-20 and 2023-24. That is in addition to the at least £2.3 billion of additional funding a year by March this year.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): We are delighted to have our new community diagnostic centre, and of course our new A&E, under way in Scunthorpe. However, my right hon. Friend will know that we are fighting incredibly hard to prevent the loss of some of our hospital services. Of the hundreds of local residents who responded to my survey, over 98% agreed with me that we must not lose those services. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in order for the NHS to provide resilience during the winter and the services that it wishes to provide to patients, hospital bosses need to listen carefully to what patients think?

Victoria Atkins: Indeed. I thank my hon. Friend for all the hard work and advocacy she puts in on behalf of her constituents. If I may, I will ask the Minister for Health and Secondary Care to visit my hon. Friend's hospital to discuss with her the concerns of local residents and to ensure that the trust is aware of them.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Two GPs from Seatown, in my part of Devon, moved to Australia to practise a little over two years ago. Both are working as full-time GPs, with no gaps in their career, and they now wish to return to east Devon to help ease winter pressures. Retesting someone who returns to England is lengthy, costly and bureaucratic, and it does not take into account practice in similar primary care settings. Can NHS England not make it easier for UK-trained GPs working in Australia, New Zealand or Canada to return to general practice in England?

Victoria Atkins: That is a very fair challenge, and I will look into it, given that the hon. Gentleman has raised it.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The Labour party has been running the NHS in Wales for the last 27 years. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), highlighted that he was frustrated with waits for ambulances, GPs and operations. I politely point out to him, and to other Members, that my constituents in the Vale of Glamorgan, and people across the whole of Wales, are waiting much longer for ambulances, GPs and operations. In fact, a quarter of my constituents, and a quarter of people across the whole of Wales, are on an NHS waiting list. I advise my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that

[Alun Cairns]

junior doctors and GPs are also in disputes in Wales, despite the claims made by Opposition Members. I therefore ask her to show some caution before taking advice from her shadow.

Victoria Atkins: I will follow that advice with great enthusiasm. I have another statistic for my right hon. Friend: the Labour-run Welsh Government were hiding 45,000 patients from their A&E waiting figures in the first half of 2023, and falsely claiming that they perform better than England. If that is the blueprint for how it runs things, we should all be very worried if Labour ever again forms a UK Government.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards), it was disappointing that the Secretary of State did not mention mental health in her statement. Given the rising levels of destitution and chronic bad housing in our country, mental health services have winter crises too these days. What progress is she making in developing proper waiting times for people in need of mental health services?

Victoria Atkins: I reassure the hon. Lady that the impact of mental health patients remaining in A&E for any length of time, let alone beyond 72 hours, is genuinely a metric and factor that we look at very carefully, as we have done throughout the strikes. We appreciate that A&E is not the right environment for most people who are suffering from a mental health illness or a psychotic episode, and we want to move them into appropriate care as quickly and safely as we can. With that in mind, I hope that she will welcome the fact that we are spending some £7 million for up to 100 mental health ambulances over the next two years, to try to ensure that people get the right care they need, when they need it. More than 160 projects are being allocated funding in the community, including crisis cafés and safe havens, so that hopefully people are caught before the crisis happens and they end up in A&E.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the winter update from the Secretary of State. There is actually a winter update going on in South Leicestershire. Will she join local NHS stakeholders there, and me, in encouraging South Leicestershire's constituents to respond to the consultation on the future of the Feilding Palmer Hospital? The deadline is 14 January.

Victoria Atkins: I would be happy to do so. I am pleased to hear of local NHS leaders actively seeking the views of the patients and communities they serve, in order to ensure that their services are what the public expect from their local hospitals, and from primary and secondary care services.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I remember a former Conservative Prime Minister promising to fix social care, yet I am still hearing of too many patients who are medically fit for discharge being stuck in hospital. This time last year we had a record high of about 14,000 patients stuck in hospital who were fit for discharge. Will the Secretary of State tell us what the figure is at the moment, and whether she expects it to go

up or down before the end of the month?

Victoria Atkins: We are making progress. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that that figure alters not just day by day, but hour by hour. We have been investing in social care packages precisely because we understand the importance of being able to discharge people promptly and safely into the appropriate social care setting, which can have a huge impact on flow through the hospital.

Other factors can also have an impact on flow, such as practical measures for people who perhaps do not need social care help when they leave hospital. We are looking at what we can do to improve those local factors as well. The hon. Gentleman is right to make the point that the social care system goes hand in hand with our NHS and hospital care. That is why we have been so keen this year to inject extra investment into social care—to try to alleviate some of the issues that he rightly raises.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State seemed to forget the 50,000 hospital beds that Labour closed when they were in government—the thousands of mental health beds and the large number of wards they closed, including at Goole and District Hospital. But I digress.

I spent Christmas on duty as a first responder at the Yorkshire Ambulance Service—as the Secretary of State knows, the Minister for Health and Secondary Care performs the same role at the North West Ambulance Service—so I can attest to the professionalism and dedication of our ambulance services and of our 999 dispatch centres and the clinical hub that supports us at scene. Ambulance crews bear the strain not only of winter pressures year in, year out, but of this doctors' strike. I urge the Secretary of State to pay tribute once again to their work and, as I have said before in this place, to consider what we can do to expand community paramedicine, so that, as demography changes and more older people are cared for at home, more people can be treated at scene rather than being taken to A&E.

Victoria Atkins: I pay tribute to both my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Health and Secondary Care for their work as first responders. I would get into a lot of trouble in my own constituency if I did not mention the wonderful LIVES—our community first responders, who get to the scene of road accidents or emergency calls before ambulances and conduct the most extraordinary and complex procedures very safely on patients when they need it.

Recently, I was pleased to visit the London Ambulance Service to see for myself what team work can achieve across an ambulance service and how these highly qualified and experienced individuals can make a real difference to people's lives and health after recovery. I send my sincere thanks to everyone who has been working in those capacities in recent weeks and over the festive period.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We have gone from no winter crisis when Labour left office to an annual winter crisis—and now a crisis all year round under this Conservative Government. Patient satisfaction with the NHS is at a record low. Instead of there being a

blame culture, when will the Secretary of State accept responsibility for that appalling record?

Victoria Atkins: I think the hon. Lady was claiming that there was no winter under Labour, but perhaps that is yet another thing that does not quite stack up. I fully endorse her call for an end to blame culture, but point her to the real and practical measures that we have taken to improve urgent and emergency NHS care. I assume that she joins those on the Government side in condemning the unprecedented strike actions that the junior doctors committee has called at this particular time of year.

Richard Graham: Having chaired more than 150 meetings between Gloucestershire MPs and our NHS leaders, this week I am handing over the baton to my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson). My two thoughts are, first, to share the Secretary of State's immense gratitude to everyone in the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital and our other services for all their continuing, amazing work; and secondly, to highlight that the biggest single impediment to reducing the elective surgery backlog—the hips, knees and much more of many of our constituents—is this continued strike by doctors in training. I am sorry, but the continued failure of the shadow Secretary of State to highlight whether he supports patients or strikers shows an absence of leadership. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the doctors in training, the doctors on strike, have already received, in 2023, a pay rise of between 8.1% and 10.3%?

Victoria Atkins: I most certainly can confirm that—those doctors have already received the rise. As I said, I wanted to continue discussions on more fair and reasonable settlements for junior doctors, recognising as I do how tough their job is and the conditions under which they work. May I thank my hon. Friend for the leadership he has shown with his local trusts and clinicians? I agree with him that the one thing we have not heard from the Opposition is that they condemn the strikes. They seem to prioritise union harmony over patient safety.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital Trust has one of the most challenged A&E departments in England, for a number of reasons. In August last year, the Government awarded a grant of £21 million to provide extra beds to ease some of the issues in A&E, but those beds are not online and operational yet. What assurances can the Secretary of State give us that the measures that have been taken to ease winter pressures will be in place to help people before the winter is over?

Victoria Atkins: I will ask the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), to liaise with the hon. Lady directly. As I say, the latest figures I have from NHS England, working with local trusts, is that more than 3,000 of the extra 5,000 beds were in situ in December, and we expect the 5,000 deadline to be met very shortly. I hope she will see that at local level in her hospital very soon.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is not the rejection by the BMA of derogation requests made on

the basis of patient safety dangerously irresponsible? Rather than Dr Laurenson, co-chairman of the junior doctors committee, saying that the NHS hates doctors, it is past time that they called off this damaging strike action and put patients first.

Victoria Atkins: Very much so—the NHS belongs to us all, as I say repeatedly. It goes without saying that doctors are a critical part of our workforce. That is why, since becoming Secretary of State, I have wanted to have a good, constructive working relationship with all of the representatives of doctors and the wider workforce. That was why I called in the BMA and “Agenda for Change” as soon as I possibly could, and I am pleased that I have been able to find fair and reasonable settlements with consultants and specialty doctors. I very much hope that junior doctors will call off their strikes and come back around the table so that we can find solutions for them too.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): The latest period of strike action by junior doctors has been the longest in the NHS's history. We have seen trusts declaring critical incidents and A&E departments telling patients not to come in unless their lives are under threat. Can the Secretary of State tell me why the Prime Minister has not stepped in to resolve the dispute? Does he think it is not serious enough?

Victoria Atkins: As I said earlier, strikes have very serious consequences for the NHS. We cannot pretend that the NHS can be switched on and off at whim. My one ask of the junior doctors committee was that it stop the strikes so that we can return to the table. As the number of patient safety mitigations has revealed—by the way, it is the highest number of patient safety mitigations that local NHS leaders have ever asked for, because of the unprecedented length and timing of the strike—and because the BMA has refused even those derogations, with the exception of two, we have to get to a place where it returns to a more reasonable frame of mind and comes back to the table with more reasonable expectations, so that we can try to find a solution. I will not put patients' safety at risk: I have to enable NHS England to make preparations and continue the work it is doing day by day, hour by hour, to safeguard hospitals and patients during this very damaging strike action.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be as concerned as my constituents in Kettering that, for every three days of junior doctor strikes, the cost to Kettering General Hospital is a staggering quarter of a million pounds, with hundreds of operations cancelled or delayed for patients in pain. In confirming that the 35% pay demand is both unrealistic and unaffordable, will she call for junior doctors to return to their posts so that that money can be better spent on reducing waiting lists and improving patient outcomes?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend puts it eloquently; there is a real human cost to these strike actions. It is why I did everything I could when we were in negotiations to try to find fair and reasonable settlements for junior doctors. I was very disappointed when they walked out, but we have to find solutions for the sake of our patients and of all 1.3 million people working in our

[Victoria Atkins]

NHS across England. There have been some brilliant examples of local trusts, local clinicians and other members of staff working really hard and pulling together to cover these damaging strikes, but all we ask of junior doctors is to come back to work, do their jobs and look after our patients.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): NHS waiting lists have trebled since the Conservatives came to power almost 14 years ago. The Prime Minister's pledge to cut waiting lists has effectively been abandoned, with the Government choosing to blame NHS staff instead of fixing the problems. Is it not the case that the longer we give the Conservative Government in power, the longer patients in Slough and across our country will, sadly, have to wait?

Victoria Atkins: Waiting lists are coming down, but they are still too high. Towards the end of last year, we had a period without any strikes in the NHS. We saw the waiting lists fall by tens of thousands—indeed, by 65,000—over the period of October, which shows the impact of the industrial action. Sadly, we know that more than 1.1 million appointments have been rescheduled in the last 12 months. It is having an impact on waiting lists and, for the sake of patients, we ask the junior doctors to come back to work.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): May I first thank Tracy Bullock, the chief executive of University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust, who has announced her retirement today due to ill health.

We have been making significant progress in north Staffordshire with improvements to health services. Nursing vacancies have declined significantly over the last year and £13.4 million has been invested in improving urgent and emergency care services, freeing up some beds, but what puts all that at risk are these reckless strikes. Some 867 appointments at the Royal Stoke have been cancelled, as have 38 operations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that all the progress we are making is put at risk by these reckless and unprofessional strikes?

Victoria Atkins: First of all, I join my hon. Friend in thanking Ms Bullock for her work and public service, and I wish her a speedy recovery.

On the progress made in my hon. Friend's local area, he is right: there are some really encouraging signs for the future of the NHS. All the work that we have been doing across all the recovery plans—whether it is for urgent and emergency care, primary care or elective recovery plans—is about embedding progress in the future of our NHS in this year of all years, as we celebrate 75 years of its establishment.

On the impact of the junior doctors' strikes, my hon. Friend is right to refer to the number of new nurses and the progress that has been made locally. In fact, this year we have been able to announce that we have met a manifesto commitment to recruit 50,000 more nurses. We made that promise in 2019. We have met it early, as

well as the commitment to have 50 million more GP appointments than in 2019—two manifesto commitments made, and two manifesto commitments kept.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Happy new year, Mr Deputy Speaker.

More and more of my constituents are waiting longer and longer for emergency care. In 2010, the target for emergency care was 95% of patients within four hours. The Government watered down that target to 76%, and are not meeting that. When will they meet their own target, and when can we expect to see 95% of my constituents being seen within four hours?

Victoria Atkins: I hope the hon. Gentleman is injecting the same anguish into the conversations that I imagine he is having with his local junior doctors, asking them to come back to work. Of course, having junior doctors not working in hospitals across the NHS has an impact—of course it does; they are a vital part of our NHS. The attention of NHS leaders, medical directors and clinicians over past weeks has had to be diverted towards covering the strike action rather than making the sorts of improvements and progress we all want to see across urgent and emergency care, in line with our recovery plan.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Deputy Speaker. The majority of NHS staff at Southend Hospital are working incredibly hard. Despite winter pressures and industrial action, they have used winter money to open a new ward, adding extra bed spaces. However, the chief executive has written to tell me he is extremely concerned that approaching 40,000 out-patient and in-patient appointments across the Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust have been postponed since this industrial action started. This afternoon, we learned from the Secretary of State that doctors in training have received above inflation average pay rises of 9%, so is it not time that they simply got back to work, delivering the care my constituents deserve and pay for?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend. We know the figures for previous strike actions, but sadly we will hear the true extent and impact of the strike action over the last six days later this week, and I suspect we will have even more missed and cancelled appointments to add to the list she rightly sets out.

On the point about pay, the basic pay of a foundation year one doctor has risen by 10.3%. Once one takes into account factors such as overtime and unsocial hours payments, that means the average salary is £40,800, a figure that I hope begins to reflect the importance we put on doctors and their role in the NHS. As doctors progress with their careers, there is a good package of development and progress, culminating in the pay settlement, currently out to ballot with the BMA, that I hope consultants, who are at the end of their career and do so much to help train younger doctors, will vote for. There is much work to be done, but progress has already been made on pay. That is why the decision by the BMA junior doctors committee to call strikes of such length at this time of year was so disappointing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for responding to questions, and my thanks also go to those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Storm Henk

6.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): The heavy rainfall following Storm Henk has affected communities across the UK, with the worst impacts being seen in widespread areas across the midlands, including in Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire; in parts of the west country, including Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire; and in other areas. Parts of the country had a month's worth of rain in the first four days of January, and that rain fell on already saturated ground. Several of our biggest river systems—the Trent, Thames, Severn and Avon—saw record levels, or close to record levels, as they drained huge volumes of rain from across their catchments.

In the past few days, I have seen at first hand the devastating impacts that flooding can have on local communities. This morning, I returned from Alney island in Gloucester, which saw the third highest water levels in the last 100 years. Last week, I visited Nottinghamshire, where I met residents in Colwick with my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) and spoke to residents in Radcliffe-on-Trent with my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), where unfortunately residents had to be evacuated to keep them safe. My thoughts are with all those who have been impacted.

Over the weekend, the Secretary of State visited flooded communities in Newark-on-Trent and Leicestershire. Together, we met farmers in Lincolnshire to see at first hand the impacts of flooding in their area. We discussed what more could be done to support agricultural businesses to prevent flooding and minimise the impacts of flooding in the future. I met Henry Ward at Short Ferry, whose farm has been completely submerged under water, and we discussed just how devastating the financial impact can be.

I also visited a primary school in Heighington, just south of Lincoln, that had been completely flooded. The headteacher, the Environment Agency, Councillor Carrington, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and I discussed next steps to get the school reopened and the children back into their classrooms.

The Prime Minister was in Oxford yesterday, talking to those affected and thanking the first responders for the fantastic job they have done over the past week to keep communities safe. I echo those thanks to the Environment Agency, emergency responders, local authorities, internal drainage boards and all volunteers for their tireless efforts to keep our communities safe right across the country.

This was a severe weather incident. Storm Henk caused high winds and large amounts of rain across England last Wednesday—Met Office amber and yellow warnings were in place across the country—and this was followed by heavy rainfall on already saturated ground, after a wetter than average autumn. There is now an improving picture across the country but, as we enter a dry spell, flood warnings remain in place. We will continue to monitor the situation very closely.

Since 2010, the Government have invested over £6 billion to better protect over 600,000 properties from flooding and coastal erosion. Over recent days, more than 75,000

properties have been protected as a result of the Government's investment in flood defences. To date, unfortunately, 2,000 properties across the country are recorded as having been flooded.

In the east midlands, a major incident was declared in Colwick when the Trent peaked at over 5 metres. In Leicestershire, 350 properties were flooded, including in Loughborough. In Lincolnshire, river levels exceeded 2000's record on the Trent at Torksey lock. In Staffordshire, we saw the highest recorded water levels in Burton-on-Trent, where the flood defences completed in June 2022 protected hundreds of properties.

The Government began planning for the elevated flood risk as soon as the Met Office forecast indicated an unsettled period of weather over Christmas and the new year. The Environment Agency started planning and preparing in the week before Christmas. River channels and trash screens were cleared to prepare watercourses for flooding, and there was continued work to repair assets following the damage caused by Storm Babet. The Environment Agency's incident teams were double rostered, with the national duty manager leading regular planning and preparedness calls with all areas. The Environment Agency wrote to all Members of Parliament in England to provide local contacts and information for use in the event of a flood.

Over the last week, the Environment Agency issued 300 flood warnings to communities. It deployed more than 1,000 staff to affected communities, set up 125 pumps and put in place over 12 km of temporary and semi-permanent defences to protect communities. It worked closely with local resilience forums to manage the impacts on the ground. My Department has been holding daily cross-Government meetings to ensure that we are doing everything we can to minimise the impacts on our communities.

Over the weekend, the Government took swift action by activating the flood recovery framework earlier than usual to reassure people that we will step in. This support will provide immediate relief to householders, businesses and farmers affected by flooding.

Officials in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities wrote to the chief executives of the eight county councils that will be eligible, based on the data on the impacts so far: Leicestershire, Gloucestershire, West Northamptonshire, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Worcestershire. Others may well qualify, and we are monitoring the situation closely. Flooded households in eligible affected areas can apply for up to £500, giving them quick access to help with immediate costs. Affected households and businesses will also be eligible for 100% council tax and business rate relief for at least three months. Through the property flood resilience repair grant scheme, eligible flood-hit property owners can apply for up to £5,000 to help make their homes and businesses more resilient to future flooding.

My Department has switched on the farming recovery fund so that farmers who have suffered uninsurable damage to their land can apply for grants of up to £25,000, recognising the exceptional rainfall that has taken place. Small and medium-sized businesses, including farmers, can also apply for up to £2,500 of support from the business recovery grant to help them return to business as usual.

[Robbie Moore]

The Government's UK-wide Flood Re scheme will continue to provide reinsurance for those UK households at high flood risk. Last year, that cover supported 265,000 household policies, and more than 500,000 properties have benefited since the scheme's launch.

Outside the immediate response, the Government continue to take action to protect communities from flooding. Since 2010, we have invested more than £6 billion to better protect 600,000 properties from flooding and coastal erosion. We are on track to spend a record £5.2 billion on new flood defence schemes in the current six-year period. That is double the spend in the previous six years. It includes £100 million to support communities that have experienced repeated flooding, and last April the first 53 projects set to benefit were announced. We have made £25 million available for innovative projects that use the power of nature to improve flood protection, including actions by farmers and land managers. I will announce the successful projects shortly.

We are investing more in maintaining existing flood defences to help ensure that they are kept in good working order. The Government increased funding by £22 million a year at the last spending review, meaning that funding reached £201 million last year and £221 million this year.

The Government strengthened planning guidance on flood risk and coastal change in 2022. This asks local authorities to apply stricter criteria to new developments at risk of flooding before they are approved. In the year following that change, 99% of proposed developments complied with Environment Agency advice on flood risk.

In conclusion, working with local partners, we have acted swiftly to respond to the recent flooding and to provide funding support for the most affected. We will continue to lead the emergency response to flood incidents as they occur. At the same time, we will invest for the long term to create a nation better protected against our changing climate. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front Bencher.

6.11 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

Storm Henk has wreaked havoc across the country: thousands of homes are severely damaged, businesses have been devastated, and farms and crops have been destroyed. My heart goes out to all those affected. I join the Minister in thanking the emergency services, the Environment Agency, local authorities and volunteers for their response, working around the clock to keep people safe.

About 2,000 properties have been flooded to date and much of the country remains under water, yet the Prime Minister does not think it is serious enough to call a Cobra meeting. The Government's failure to act effectively against the risk of floods has cost the economy billions of pounds since 2010. The Government estimate losses to be at £1.3 billion a year on average. With one in six homes now at risk of flooding, homeowners must be horrified that the Government have done little more

than stare out of the window and watch the rain come down, with the previous Secretary of State blaming the fact that it came down from the wrong direction.

While we cannot stop the rain falling, we can and should do more to protect communities, businesses and farms from the devastation of flooding. Last October, the Environment Agency found that more than 4,000 English flood defences were rated "poor" or "very poor", while the same agency was found to have underspent the budget that had been allocated to it by £310 million. That money should have been used to protect against flood damage.

I visited Retford in Nottinghamshire and met heartbroken families who had lost everything. That town was allocated £11.7 million for flood defences two years ago, but shockingly, less than half of 1% of that money has actually been spent. The Government have clearly failed to put in place the robust co-ordination between central Government and agencies on the ground to ensure that people are kept safe in these circumstances, and devastatingly, working families are left to pick up the pieces.

Labour has proposed a Cobra-style flood resilience taskforce to make sure that communities are protected. It would meet every winter ahead of the peak season for flooding to co-ordinate flood preparation between central Government and agencies and local authorities on the ground, identifying areas most at risk and making sure that allocated funding is used to build flood defences, dig out drainage systems, dredge rivers and put in place natural flood management schemes, such as planting more trees upstream to help the land hold more water.

Enough of this Government's sticking-plaster politics: we need to get ahead of the problem, not just clean up afterwards. Communities deserve the reassurance that if the worst happens, there is a plan in place to keep people, their homes and their businesses safe, so will the Minister explain why the Government have still not fully mapped out which communities around the UK are most at risk from flooding, so that appropriate support can be put in place? Will he confirm how much of the funding allocated for flood defences remains unspent? When do the Government intend to upgrade flood defences that are found to be in poor and very poor condition? Will the Minister update the House on what conversations are taking place with insurers so that people whose homes are at risk from flooding remain able to insure them fully? Will the Government convene a Cobra meeting to ensure that Ministers are working across all Government Departments to keep people safe?

Robbie Moore: Let me pick up on the shadow spokesperson's points about Cobra. I am absolutely right in saying that the Government held a Cobra unit Cabinet Office meeting last Tuesday to promote cross-sector preparedness action, way in advance of Storm Henk taking place, and cross-Government meetings, chaired by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as the lead Government Department for flooding, were held on many occasions last week and throughout the weekend. There has been daily contact between DEFRA and resilience partners across the Government, including the Cabinet Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and local resilience forums also had preparedness meetings and

were prepared to convene strategic co-ordination groups to manage the local response. I know from my own visits last week and over the weekend just how quickly and efficiently the support has been rolling out.

I confirm to the House that since 2010 we have invested £6 billion to better protect 600,000 properties against flooding and coastal erosion. We are on track to spend £5.2 billion on flood defence schemes in the next six-year period—that is double the £2.6 billion previously allocated and it is better protecting more homes. Over the period of Storm Henk, 75,000 homes were better protected as a result of this Government's infrastructure and the investment that we have put in place.

The Opposition refer to planting trees, but this Government go further. We recognise that planting trees is one part—a single part—of the solution, but we are going much further by doubling the amount of investment from £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion over the next spending review period. That includes £100 million to support communities that have experienced repeated flooding. The first 53 projects that are set to benefit were announced last April. Over the period of Storm Henk, we have seen the benefits of the work we did in 2022 to better protect Burton upon Trent, which had the highest water levels with the River Trent peaking. That is where our investment is working.

We are also taking swift action by rolling out the flood recovery fund, which will better protect households, businesses and farmers. That was announced this weekend and the eight chief executives of the local authorities it will benefit have already been written to.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate the Minister and his colleagues on their prompt action and the very responsive way in which they have handled inquiries from MPs throughout the House whose constituencies have been affected.

The Minister did not mention Shropshire when he referred to those counties that have been eligible for the flood recovery framework. I assure him that the banks of the River Severn, which I know he visited in Shrewsbury around Christmas, flooded between Shrewsbury and Bewdley. Only on Friday I visited a household near Highley station in my constituency that had water up to the door handles across the ground floor. A significant number of properties are affected and I hope the Minister will consider the representations from Shropshire Council when they come through.

Robbie Moore: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Before Christmas, I visited Shrewsbury to see for myself the positive impacts that flood defences are having and to speak to Environment Agency representatives. I am well aware of and look forward meeting the caucus of 38 MPs who represent constituencies right across the River Severn channel. I reassure my right hon. Friend that I, my officials and the whole Department are in close contact with the Environment Agency. We are monitoring the situation closely. If we get to a situation where we need to expand the flood recovery fund even further, we will not hesitate to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The thoughts of SNP Members are very much with all who have been affected by these events. I offer my thanks to the emergency services, resilience partners and everyone who has assisted in the days following Storm Henk.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, there is a lot more to this than simply announcing sums of money that will come through: it is also about delivering schemes to minimise the risk of future flooding events. Will he commit to funding and delivering flood prevention and defence measures that not only keep pace with inflation but allow communities to stand a fighting chance of getting ahead of not just the increasing risk but the increasing frequency of such storm events?

Robbie Moore: Of course, my thoughts go out to all those north of the border in Scotland who were impacted by the severe weather events over the Christmas period. Indeed, I was up in Angus and Fife over Christmas, and I saw for myself the challenge of getting back down on flooded roads.

The Government continue to work with devolved Administrations to ensure that a level of interaction and communication is happening. I only wish that the Scottish Government would be as proactive as we have been in getting the levels of financial support to the families, households, businesses and farmers impacted by the flooding events we have experienced south of the border.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his statement. I apologise for bombarding not him but his predecessor with text messages over the weekend about the importance of getting support to businesses in Worcester.

I am very pleased to hear what my hon. Friend said about the flooding framework. May I commend to him the work being done for frequently flooded communities in particular? Just before Christmas, I was able to wield a spade and get work under way on flood defences for Toronto Close. My constituents in Diglis Avenue, who have been flooded yet again for the fourth time in about six years, will be very keen to see some funding from that pot. I urge my hon. Friend to work with the Environment Agency on any solutions that could be provided to that particular frequently flooded community.

Robbie Moore: There is nothing more harrowing for people than their property being repeatedly flooded. That is why I, working with colleagues in the Environment Agency, am keen to ensure that frequent-flooding funding best helps households that have been impacted. I am more than happy to continue the conversations that I have been having with my hon. Friend and neighbouring colleagues, because I know how important this matter is.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister says that his thoughts and sympathies are with all those affected but, frankly, his words ring hollow. Not only are the Government are failing to protect existing properties—an estimated 4,000 flood defences were in poor or very poor condition in 2022—but worse, Ministers are actively planning to pursue energy policies that will make extreme weather events worse. We are about to debate the obscene Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill,

[Caroline Lucas]

which would create yet more new oil and gas licences. Where on earth is the joined-up thinking? When will the Minister stop the excuses and introduce the ambitious climate policies that might just protect future flood victims, instead of just mopping things up at the end of the day?

Robbie Moore: Back in 2010, 40% of all energy in this country was produced from coal; now, we are at 1%. The Government are taking the reduction of emissions incredibly seriously. We were the first major economy to set a net zero target in law, and we cut our emissions by 48% between 1990 and 2021. Coupled with that, we are taking more proactive measures, including by doubling the amount of funding for improving our flood-resilience programmes from £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion, to better protect more frequently flooded communities, businesses and homeowners.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his statement and efforts, and I thank the Secretary of State, DEFRA and people across Government for all their work in these challenging times. I pay tribute to the Environment Agency, the emergency services, local authorities and volunteer workers for all that they do to keep people safe at this time.

My hon. Friend will know from our work together on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that our “Rural Mental Health” report addressed the impact of extreme weather events on people’s mental health, in terms both of the anxiety about being flooded and the trauma afterwards. Can he reassure people and communities across the country that they will be supported when the blue lights leave and the waters subside?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely can. When I was a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend, I and others on the Committee did a lot of work to produce that worthwhile report. It is vital that the Government not only pay close attention to the immediate impacts caused by flooding but provide reassurance to homeowners, businesses and those in the farming community who have been affected. We must also pay attention to negative implications, such as the effect on health and wellbeing. I am keen to ensure that we deliver on the recommendations of that report.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My heart goes out to all those affected by Storm Henk. Of course, over the Christmas recess we also had Storm Gerrit, which included a tornado that caused significant damage through Dukinfield and Stalybridge in Tameside. These days, these are less freak weather incidents: Tameside as a borough has been affected by wildfires on the moors, floods from the River Tame and now by a tornado. What extra capacity is the Minister, along with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, putting into bolstering civil contingency and resilience in communities so that local government can better tackle these not-so-freak weather events?

Robbie Moore: It was harrowing to see that tornado in Tameside over the winter, and many of us were shocked as to the impact and stark devastation that it

caused. It is important that the Government are working with devolved Administrations and local authorities. I will do exactly that across Government as well, working with my colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that we are delivering for those one-off events rather than just for frequent occurrences such as flooding.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I thank the Minister for visiting Short Ferry in my constituency, which has flooded several times. In conversations that I have had with farmers there in recent years, they have constantly said the same thing. They are fed up with the Environment Agency in recent decades not doing its job in clearing out the dykes so that the water can escape; it seems to be prioritising the preservation of wildlife and habitat rather than getting the dykes cleared. That is what they say, and they want proper compensation for flood plains as well. There is a National Farmers Union report on that, and I am confident that the Minister will work with the NFU to get it done right.

Robbie Moore: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for contacting me over the Christmas period to raise his concerns, not only about the farm at Short Ferry. It was good to meet his constituent Henry Ward at the weekend to see the EA asset and the implications of the water flooding his farm. I also saw on that visit how the vegetation in the River Witham and the delphs, which sit alongside it, needs attention. As my right hon. Friend will know, I am minded to look at options including dredging and removing vegetation in EA assets to ensure that we deliver a system that moves water further down the system more efficiently, which better protects our farming community. I have seen the report from the NFU and look forward to working with my right hon. Friend, his Lincolnshire colleagues and the NFU to try to get to some conclusion on that.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In Cumbria, we sadly know only too well the devastating impact of extreme weather events and flooding, so I and all of us in Cumbria stand in solidarity with those reeling from the impact of Storm Henk.

I want to say something positive about the Minister’s statement and what he has said in replies about farming. The worry that I have, which I think many of us have, is that farmers are still systematically at the bottom of the priority list when it comes to tackling flood risk. Can he tell us—he can do it later if he finds that easier—how many farms have received support for managing flood risk through countryside stewardship schemes? In my area, will he agree to direct the agencies of his Department—the Marine Management Organisation, the Environment Agency and Natural England—to act swiftly to support the Lynster Farmers Group to secure action to tackle flooding that threatens farms, livestock welfare, the Grange golf club and other local businesses by allowing the channel of the River Winster to flow as it should?

Robbie Moore: I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the detail and figures he requires, but I reassure him that the Government are taking our farmers and the impacts on agricultural land incredibly seriously. That is why this weekend we announced that farmers who have suffered uninsurable damage to their land will

be able to apply for grants of up to £25,000 through the farming recovery fund. That is a step where we have gone over and above what we have done before, and that is in recognition of the fact that the ground is absolutely saturated on the back of Storm Henk, Storm Babet and the constant rainfall we have had over the winter and autumn period.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I have been out in our villages in Rutland, Leicestershire and nearby Lincolnshire, whether that is Whitwell, Oakham, Greatford or Braceborough. We have had appalling flooding, with people evacuated from their homes, water up our waists—you name it—and boats out getting vehicles, animals and people to safety. My Conservative councillors in Rutland have called for an urgent meeting of the council, but I am concerned that Rutland was not listed in the areas to be considered. Can my hon. Friend confirm whether Rutland County Council has submitted its data to the Environment Agency? If it has not, I am gravely concerned that we are missing out on the urgent support we need. There is no doubt that Rutland should be on the priority list.

Robbie Moore: I thank my hon. Friend for contacting me over the Christmas period to raise the ongoing concerns in her constituency, not only from Storm Henk, but from the repeated rainfall we have had. I will look at and review all the flooded areas over and above the eight county council areas that have already been announced to make sure that we are reviewing any data. I want to ensure that we are getting data in good time so that no one—businesses, householders and farmers—is missing out on funds because sufficient data is not being provided.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): Brayton, Tadcaster and Chapel Haddlesey in my constituency have all faced awful flooding in recent weeks. Residents were left in the lurch as agencies would not take responsibility, and the fire service and local businesses, such as Campeys and UK Sandbags, have had to fill the gaps. Will the Minister consider at least the efficacy of implementing a flood resilience taskforce at some point in the future so that we can deal more pre-emptively with these flood events when they do occur, through such measures as clearing blocked drains, to give my constituents the reassurance they so desperately need?

Robbie Moore: I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are already doing that. The Government are working closely with our Environment Agency colleagues, the local authorities and our flood resilience forums to ensure that we are doing exactly what he is asking for. The request is somewhat unnecessary because we are already doing it.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I am sure that the Minister will sympathise with my constituents who have had their homes and businesses flooded not only in the town of Tewkesbury, but down the river at Sandhurst and Longford. It has been a desperate situation, with road closures inconveniencing many people. Given that most of our problems tend to come from the fact that we are at the confluence of two main rivers—the Avon and the Severn—will the Minister have serious discussions with the Environment Agency about the potential benefits of river dredging? It is talked about an awful lot, but it needs looking at closely.

Robbie Moore: Having been in Gloucestershire this morning, not too far from my hon. Friend's constituency of Tewkesbury, I am well aware of the challenges that businesses, householders and farmers are facing in his area. I want to be clear to the House that I am open to considering all options, whether that is dredging or removing vegetation from our EA assets, because we must make sure that, in addition to increasing the budget from £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion over the next financial period to improve our flood resilience, we are looking at all options to make sure that our farmers and those who face crop loss are being impacted positively by some different measures.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The Minister will be aware that the River Severn, before it gets to Shrewsbury, flows through North Shropshire. We experience severe flooding every year and have done for the last three or four years, although this year was not quite so bad. I have three questions for the Minister on this topic. First, what discussions has he had with his colleagues in Wales about managing the upper Severn catchment and finalising the scheme to prevent some of that water from coming downstream in the first place? Secondly, the surface water flooding has been appalling over the last few weeks because the council does not have the money to clear the culverts and drains, so what discussions has he had with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about that? Finally, the frequently flooded allowance requires a critical number of homes in a community to be flooded in order for it to be eligible. Why is it not available to every home that is frequently flooded?

Robbie Moore: Just before Christmas I made a visit to Shrewsbury and I met my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski). We discussed specifically with Environment Agency colleagues a wider plan with the 38 Members whose constituencies form the River Seven catchment area for what we can do to better protect land both upstream and further downstream. Those conversations are happening and I am engaging with that. When it comes to frequent flooding, we are always making sure that we are best protecting as many homes and businesses as possible. Again, that is illustrated by the quick action this Government took at the weekend in announcing the flood recovery scheme.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Thanks to a £10 million investment and a pledge to “get Bewdley done”, the eastern bank of the River Severn in the town of Bewdley in my constituency is receiving demountable and permanent flood defences. The problem is that, during the construction, the Environment Agency is unable to put up temporary defences to protect around 30 or so houses. We are grateful in Wyre Forest to be receiving that money, but is there any more that could be done for those residences and properties that are being affected during the construction of much-needed flood defences?

Robbie Moore: It is incredibly important that we best protect as many properties and businesses as possible. I would welcome a conversation with my hon. Friend, if he knows of particular areas in his constituency that need a bit more focus. Working with him, the Environment Agency, his local authority, and, I am sure, neighbouring colleagues, I would love to look at a solution we can put in place to better reassure his constituents.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Last week, I tried to visit residents of Tamworth villages such as Harlaston, Edingale and Elford, after the flooding of Storm Henk. I could not get to certain places in my constituency to meet them. One family had to stay overnight with family in Nottingham because they were unable to get home. These issues will only get worse each year as we face increasing climate challenges. Will the Government say what budget has been confirmed for improving flood defences in my area and when further defences will be built?

Robbie Moore: It is of course devastating when any community is impacted by flooding. That is why this Government have doubled the amount of funding that we are putting into flood resilience, from £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion from 2021 to 2027. We are taking action to improve our flood resilience and responding quickly to those communities that have been impacted, through the announcement we made very quickly this weekend on the flood recovery scheme. I am closely monitoring the situation to see where additional councils, if they meet the requirements, can apply for extra funding, and I will continue to do so.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Minister will know that the Thames valley is also affected by Storm Henk. What discussions has he had or will he have with Thames Water with a view to better protecting our public health infrastructure from rainwater and floodwater and therefore limiting discharges from outflows?

Robbie Moore: During extremely heavy rainfall, which we have seen from not only Storm Henk, but Storm Babet and during the winter period, water companies have worked tirelessly to minimise the impact on customers and the environment. While the sheer volume of rainfall has meant that some storm overflows have automatically activated, the Government and the Environment Agency continue to monitor the situation closely. I make the point that back in 2010, only 7% of storm overflows were monitored; we are now at 100% storm overflow monitoring, which better enables us to ensure that our resources are targeted where they are most needed. That is the reassurance I want to provide to my hon. Friend and the House.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Somerset is once again experiencing the effects of climate change at first hand, and Storm Henk was the latest catastrophic event to result in flooding across my constituency. Will provisions be introduced to help communities create their own bespoke extreme weather resilience plans in identified catchment areas?

Robbie Moore: It is important for all communities to work together closely, and during my visits over the last two weekends I saw some great examples of local authorities working closely with their communities. However, the Government are also taking action very quickly. We are working with the Environment Agency and with local authorities that have been affected, and through the flood resilience forums. That is how we are able to communicate as swiftly as possible with the affected communities, and how we have been able to make rapid decisions to ensure that we roll out the necessary support. The flood recovery scheme and fund have also made that possible this weekend.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Minister's welcome statement referred to the flooding of 350 properties in Leicestershire. In my constituency, Blaby, Broughton Astley, Cosby, Croft, Stoney Stanton, Sharnford and Whetstone were flooded. It was one of the worst floods experienced by those communities in South Leicestershire, and my compliments go to Blaby District Council and Councillors Les Phillimore, Maggie Wright, Ben Taylor and Mike Shirley—to name just a few—for the work they have been doing with local communities. Will the Minister write to me, as a matter of urgency, to explain what Government support is available to the villages I have mentioned?

Robbie Moore: Not only will I write to my hon. Friend, but I am more than happy to meet him to discuss this. It is excellent to note that his local councillors, such as Les Phillimore, are going above and beyond with the work that they are rolling out so swiftly and their interaction with their communities. I look forward to a meeting in the near future to discuss what more we can do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. I always try to be constructive in my comments. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has made some provision for some of the worst floods in living memory, but recent heavy rains in Northern Ireland put preventive measures such as the provision of sandbags under immense pressure. The seemingly increasing frequency of large storms calls for a more cross-departmental approach. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about increasing financial assistance for shops, restaurants, householders and farmers there?

Robbie Moore: I work closely with my colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and indeed I have regular conversations with the Minister for Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is sitting next to me. This is, of course, a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, but, while I am sure that we will continue to have conversations within the UK Government, I am more than happy to share any knowledge or learning with all the devolved Administrations.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Homes, schools and fields throughout my constituency have been flooded. I thank the Secretary of State, the Minister and the chair of the Environment Agency for going there to see the damage for themselves this weekend, and to talk to local farmers. One consistent message has been that the internal drainage board is doing a good and cost-efficient job in clearing the waterways, and I thank it for that, but the other consistent message is that the Environment Agency is not doing the same: it is not clearing the vegetation and debris that have been contributing to the flooding. Will my hon. Friend consider giving funds, and responsibility for the larger waterways, to the IDB, which is doing such a great job, to help protect my constituents?

Robbie Moore: It was fantastic to visit my hon. Friend's constituency at the weekend. I want to put on record my thanks to Jane Froggatt, who represents some of the internal drainage boards, and I commend the work that the boards do. In certain circumstances, they go above

and beyond. It is clear, and noted at my end, that a different approach needs to be taken to Lincolnshire—which I know very well—and, as I said during my visit, I am more than happy to review what needs to be done in terms of dredging and removing vegetation from Environment Agency assets and the Delph, which we looked at. It is important that we are not only protecting urban environments, but looking after our farming community and ensuring that the land on which they rely to produce the crops that enable us all to eat the food we want to eat is protected as well as possible.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Barely any part of my constituency was unaffected by the floods. It is not just about the sobbing residents; it is also about the chaos caused across the roads. The A34 was shut, the Abingdon Road was shut, and children could not get to Larkmead School in Abingdon. The Environment Agency has been promising a comprehensive plan since we were flooded devastatingly in 2007, and the Oxford flood alleviation scheme is in train but there is nothing for Abingdon. Would the Minister consider meeting me to discuss why the Environment Agency's own plan for Abingdon has recently been axed?

Robbie Moore: My Environment Agency colleagues are working incredibly hard across Oxfordshire. The Oxford flood alleviation scheme is in place, but I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss what further action she would like to be taken. I want to reassure her that we are working around the clock to make sure that all households, businesses and farmers are protected from the implications of Storm Henk.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I commend the flooding Minister for his energetic response to Storm Henk, and all those who have worked so hard during this terrible weather. In West Worcestershire I have worked with his predecessors and the Environment Agency over the years to deliver schemes in Upton-Upon-Severn, Kempsey, Uckinghall, Powick and Pershore. His predecessor was kind enough to allocate money from the frequently flooded communities fund to the project in Severn Stoke and Tenbury Wells. Will he work with me and the Environment Agency to ensure that those two important schemes are delivered during his tenure?

Robbie Moore: I want to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the previous flooding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who did tremendous work in this role. She worked hard to ensure that the frequent flood schemes were put in place as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) has worked very proactively to ensure that her residents are best protected from the implications of flooding. I am more than happy to meet her to work at speed to make sure that our households and businesses are as well protected as possible.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The various storms over the past three months have caused havoc on the East Anglian coast, not least in Pakefield in my constituency, where time is of the essence to prevent more homes being destroyed. However, this work is at risk of being delayed, as it is deemed urgent rather than an emergency. Will my hon. Friend do all he can to remove such red tape?

Robbie Moore: I am always up for removing red tape where necessary. I commend my hon. Friend for being a doughty champion for his constituents, because I think this is the fifth time that he has mentioned Pakefield to me, not least in the Westminster Hall debate that he secured just before Christmas to discuss this issue. As he knows, I am more than happy to have a detailed conversation with him and his colleagues along the Norfolk and Suffolk coastline.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The flooding Minister visited Alney Island in Gloucester early this morning. I thank him, the Environment Agency, the city council and all who helped mitigate the situation. Some 80 homes in Gloucester have been flooded—one home is one too many, but that compares with more than 5,000 homes and businesses flooded in 2007 with very similar water levels, 48,000 people without electricity and 135,000 without drinking water for a week. The huge investment into the defences for Mythe waterworks, Walham substation, Horsbere brook and the Westgate drainage scheme, and other aspects of the Conservative Government's Pitt review, have made a massive difference. Will my hon. Friend commit to looking closely at the Severn partnership's proposals for a strategic new reservoir to hold back water in Wales in due course?

Robbie Moore: First, I thank my hon. Friend for inviting me to Gloucester this morning. It was an excellent visit to meet his residents and speak with those who have experienced flooding on Alney Island. It was clear that the investment that this Government put in place and the flood improvement measures put in place in 2006 have worked up until now, but we know the implications when the River Severn catchment is as saturated as it has been. I am willing to meet not only him but the other 38 colleagues who form the caucus, to put a strategic plan in place for the whole River Severn catchment.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank the Minister for his very sensible comments on dredging. When does he expect some further movement on that? Can he say where he thinks the priorities should lie between protecting the farm land we need to grow our food and maintaining wildlife habitat?

Robbie Moore: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, because I want to make it absolutely clear that no options should be off the table. It is important that we quite rightly have nature-based solutions upstream, but also that where Environment Agency assets need dredging, we review that and consider what more could be done in that area, while ensuring that we are working with our internal drainage boards, which are doing a fantastic job. On my visit to Lincolnshire over the weekend, it was clearly communicated to me that the internal drainage boards are going above and beyond to protect our productive agricultural land. I want to reassure all those in the agricultural community that the Government will do all we can to protect productive agricultural land. It is completely unfair for a farmer to experience crop loss when that crop has been under water for 10 days and then fails. That is a huge financial loss to our farmers, who spend thousands of pounds putting that crop in place. I want to reassure my hon. Friend that we will review all options.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement and for very promptly triggering the flood recovery network. I note that there are a number of local authorities adjacent to mine in Swindon. I want to take this opportunity to ask him to meet me to discuss whether smaller unitary authorities such as Swindon sometimes miss out. The number of incidents might be smaller, but I can tell him from my own experience as an active constituency MP that the impact is just as great.

Robbie Moore: Absolutely, and I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question. Regardless of the size of a local authority, what matters is that we protect our constituents from flooding. I am more than happy to meet him and his neighbouring colleagues to ensure that, as a Government, we deliver on protecting as many homes and businesses as possible.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for his visit to various parts of Nottinghamshire this week to see the impact on many of our communities. I reiterate his thanks to the many hundreds of staff, and community flood wardens and other volunteers in our communities, who have been working around the clock in recent days. He will have seen the impact on our infrastructure locally. Part of the recovery and the prevention of future flooding impacts is about reinstating and recovering that infrastructure—not least our roads, which have taken a massive hit in recent days. I see that he is sitting beside the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). Could they have a conversation about how they might support local councils in reinstating that infrastructure, which will cost many millions of pounds?

Robbie Moore: It was a very worthwhile visit to Nottinghamshire and Nottingham at the weekend and at the end of last week to meet my hon. Friend's councillor team, who have been incredibly proactive in delivering for many communities across Nottinghamshire. It was important for me to visit Radcliffe on Trent, where I saw park homes that had been flooded and, unfortunately, residents evacuated from their properties. I am of course willing to work with colleagues—such as the Minister for local government, my hon. Friend in his role as leader of Nottinghamshire County Council, and others—to ensure that we are delivering as best we can for properties impacted by flooding.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): The recent flooding has caused significant disruption to parts of the national rail network. Will the Minister ask the Environment Agency to step up its work with Network

Rail to better identify the parts of the network that are vulnerable to flooding, and to put in place the necessary prevention and resilience work?

Robbie Moore: I will absolutely do that. It is incredibly important that people are able to get around as efficiently as they wish to. I am well aware that many of our assets owned and managed by Network Rail have been impacted by not only Storm Henk, but Storm Babet. I will ask the Environment Agency, as will departmental colleagues, to ensure that our assets are best protected. I will also pick that up with colleagues in the Department for Transport.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Finally but not least, I call Tobias Ellwood.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the financial support for flood-hit communities. Storm Henk has left its mark on Bournemouth, with local flooding and damage to our roads in the form of potholes. We know that if they are not repaired swiftly, they cause more damage to cars and bikes, and cost more to repair in the long term. The good news is that Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council has received £19 million to fix them, so the money is there, but the potholes are back. Will the Minister join me in encouraging the council to waste no further time in fixing them, and not to direct the money elsewhere?

Robbie Moore: When money has been provided by central Government, it is vital that all local authorities use it as quickly as possible. I urge my right hon. Friend's Lib Dem alliance local authority to use that money as swiftly as possible, to ensure that his constituents are not negatively impacted.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement. I have seen flooding at first hand in the Ribble Valley and know how devastating it is for everybody affected. I ask him to stay for the point of order.

Helen Morgan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has frequently referred to a caucus of MPs who represent constituents along the River Severn. As the only non-Conservative, I am excluded from those meetings. I wonder whether you can advise me on how I can encourage my colleagues on the Government Benches to work more constructively and ensure that my residents are also represented.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am certain that the Minister has heard the hon. Lady's request and will be in touch.

Horizon: Compensation and Convictions

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call the Minister, I will make a short statement about the House's sub judice resolution. There are relevant active legal proceedings relating to Horizon before the courts. In December 2022, Mr Speaker exercised his discretion in respect of matters sub judice to allow references to those proceedings, as they concern issues of national importance. That waiver is ongoing. However, I urge hon. Members to exercise caution in what they say, and to avoid referring in detail to cases that remain before the courts.

6.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Post Office scandal is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation's history, shaking people's faith in the principles of equity and fairness that form the core pillars of our legal system. I am very pleased that last week's excellent ITV drama "Mr Bates vs The Post Office" has brought an understanding of the Horizon scandal to a much broader audience. I have received much correspondence about the scandal and the emotional impact that the dramatisation has had. Those of us who have been campaigning and working on the issue for some years were already well aware of what happened.

I pay particular tribute to Alan Bates and his fellow postmasters, including Jo Hamilton and Lee Castleton, to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis), my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), the hon. Members for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), to Lord Arbuthnot and other members of the Horizon compensation advisory board, and of course to key figures in the media. They played a key role in seeking justice and compensation for the victims. I also thank the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), for his continually constructive approach, as well as my ministerial predecessors, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

Watching last week's ITV programme has only reinforced our zeal for seeing justice done as quickly as possible. We are already a long way down that road. Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is doing great work in exposing what went wrong and who was responsible. Full and final compensation has already been paid to 64% of those people affected. I have previously said to the House that my main concern now is regarding those still waiting for full and final compensation, and the slow pace at which criminal convictions related to Horizon are being overturned by the courts. Before Christmas, the advisory board published a letter that underlined exactly that.

This is not just a matter of getting justice for those wrongly convicted. Overturning their convictions is also key to unlocking compensation. Each person whose Horizon conviction is overturned is entitled to an interim compensation payment of £163,000. They can then choose whether to have their compensation individually assessed or to accept an up-front offer of £600,000. That offer is already speeding along compensation for a significant number of people.

In the light of the advisory board's letter about overturning convictions, I have spoken to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and to Lord Arbuthnot. I have also had a very positive meeting this afternoon with my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor. All of us in the House are united in our desire to see justice done, and we have devised some options for resolving the outstanding criminal convictions at much greater pace. The Lord Chancellor will, rightly, need to speak to senior figures in the judiciary about those options before we put them forward, but I am confident that we should be able to implement measures that address the concerns expressed by the advisory board. I hope that the Government will be able to announce those proposals to the House very shortly.

Of course, there is clearly great concern about the role of the Post Office in prosecuting these cases. The Post Office rightly decided to stop undertaking private prosecutions in 2015. If we are to make sure that a scandal such as this can never happen again, we need to look at the way in which private prosecutions such as these have been undertaken. Any company can bring private prosecutions in this way: this is not a special power of the Post Office. I know that the Lord Chancellor wants to give this issue proper and thoughtful consideration, and I am sure that he will report to the House about the issue in due course.

Getting justice for the victims of this scandal and ensuring that such a tragedy can never happen again is my highest priority as a Minister, as it has been throughout my 15 months in office. When we talk about compensation, we have to remember that the lives of the postmasters and their families caught up in this scandal have been changed forever. They have faced financial ruin, untold personal distress and a loss of reputation that no amount of financial compensation can fully restore. The Government recognise that we have a clear moral duty to right those wrongs to the best of our ability. To support those whose lives were turned upside down by the scandal, we have provided significant funding for compensation. We have also been clear that it should not be the taxpayer alone who picks up the tab. We will wait for the inquiry to report to make clear the extent of any other organisation's culpability for the scandal and any individual accountability.

Our aim is to ensure that every victim is fully recompensed for their losses and the suffering they have had to endure. To date, more than £148 million has been paid to 2,700 victims across all compensation schemes, 93 convictions have been overturned and, of those, 30 have agreed full and final settlements. Just over £30 million has been paid out in compensation to those with overturned convictions, including interim payments. Of course, we want to ensure that the process for agreeing compensation is fair, transparent and open to independent assessment. That is one of the reasons why I am today announcing that retired High Court judge Sir Gary Hickinbottom has agreed to chair an independent panel that will assess the pecuniary losses of those postmasters with overturned convictions where disputes arise. That will bring independent oversight to compensation payments in a similar way to Sir Ross Cranston's oversight of the group litigation order scheme and the independent panel in the Horizon shortfall scheme.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

Of the original 555 courageous postmasters who took the Post Office to court and who first brought the Horizon scandal into the public eye, £27 million has been paid out to 477 claimants in addition to the net £11 million received through the December 2019 settlement. Forty-seven members of the original GLO group have also received compensation following the overturning of their convictions, totalling more than £17 million. We have received full claim forms from 59 of those postmasters who are eligible for the GLO scheme and issued 43 offers. There have been 21 full and final settlements paid and a further seven full and final settlements accepted. That brings the total number of accepted full and final GLO settlements to 28. I would encourage claimants' lawyers to continue to submit GLO claims, because my Department stands ready to review them and turn them round quickly.

It is worth noting that the 2,417 postmasters who claimed through the original Horizon shortfall scheme have all received offers of compensation. Around 85% have accepted those offers, worth over £107 million. In total, over £91 million has been paid out through the scheme, with the Post Office now dealing with late applications and with cases where initial offers were not accepted.

However, this is not just about compensation; it is about restoration—the restoring of people's good names and the restoring of the public's trust, both in our postal service and in our justice system. It is therefore only right that we get to the bottom of what went wrong and of who knew what and when. Although the scale of the problem is immense, the Government are unwavering in their resolve to tackle it, to compensate those affected and to leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of justice. We owe that to the victims, to their families, to the memory of postmasters who have died since this tragedy first came to light and to those who, tragically, took their own lives after being accused of awful crimes they never committed. We owe it to everyone who has been caught up in this tragic miscarriage of justice.

I thank all Members across the House who are supporting us in this effort. Together we stand united, not just in memory of those who have suffered, but in shared purpose to ensure that such a tragedy can never, and will never, happen again. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

7.6 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for the advance copy of his statement.

The Horizon Post Office failure is a scandal to which we have been responding for some time, but I welcome the way the recent ITV drama has brought the story to a wider audience. It is a powerful reminder of the way that art and culture can be used to tackle injustice and to raise public awareness. I also pay tribute, as I have before, to the sub-postmasters, to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), to Lord Arbuthnot and to all those Members whose work has been integral in the progress to date to get justice.

A lot has been done but, as we all know, there is a lot more to do, because the Horizon scandal is quite simply one of the most egregious miscarriages of justice in British history—something that robbed people of their lives, their liberty and their livelihoods. Driven by the misguided belief that technology was infallible and workers dishonest, the Post Office prosecuted innocent people, causing unimaginable pain and suffering, which no amount of compensation can ever alleviate. To add insult to injury, the journey to justice for those sub-postmasters has been mired in a great many delays and barriers, and some of the people affected have, tragically, passed away before having the chance to see justice.

I recognise the attention that the Minister has given this matter, including by responding positively to the campaign to ensure that compensation payments are not subject to taxation. However, it is still an urgent priority to get compensation to all those affected, and it is unconscionable that convictions still remain, where it is clear that no wrongdoing has been committed. Justice must be served for those workers and their families, which is why Labour has called for all sub-postmasters to be exonerated in full. I listened carefully to what the Minister had to say about that, and I extend our support for any actions that may be required to overturn these convictions as quickly as possible, while ensuring that no victim has to re-enter litigation and relive the trauma they have experienced. I appreciate the Minister's acknowledgment that the public want to know that that will happen as soon as possible. I also welcome the review he announced into private prosecutions, because the public want assurance that nothing like this can ever be allowed to happen again.

It is right that the Sir Wyn Williams inquiry continues to uncover the truth. However, just when it was felt that this outrageous miscarriage of justice could not get any worse, more allegations have come to the fore, which must now surely be considered as part of that inquiry. It has emerged today that there are potentially dozens more victims from a pilot scheme. This afternoon, I learned from one of my constituents that they were informed only very recently that they are a victim of this scandal, so what steps are the Government taking to ensure that every victim is identified and encouraged to come forward?

It is clear that Fujitsu faces serious questions that demand a response. Those questions must be answered in the evidence sessions planned for the inquiry later this year. If it is found that Fujitsu knew the extent of what was occurring, there will have to be consequences that match the scale of the injustice. Additionally, those involved in the running of the Post Office who have received honours must be held to the high standard that those honours demand. They will also have the opportunity to give their side of the story in the inquiry, but if that evidence is unsatisfactory, I would urge the Forfeiture Committee to consider the propriety of those honours and to take any further appropriate action.

For many people who watched the ITV adaptation, it will be hard to believe that this ongoing tragedy is not a work of fiction, so egregious and pernicious have the impacts been on people's lives. But this is not a TV show; it is very real and it has had real-world impacts. Lessons must be learned, and justice must be served. I have faith that the Williams inquiry will ensure that those responsible are held to account. It is right that innocent people have

their convictions overturned not just so that they can begin to turn the page on this scandal, but to ensure that it leads to quick access to the compensation they rightly deserve, as the Minister said. However, I believe that that is just one of the many steps that will be required if amends are ever to be made for this most insidious of injustices.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and support, and for the manner in which he delivered his response to the statement. We share an ambition to see exoneration, and I am very happy to work with him over the next few days to make sure that we are getting to the right place.

He raises a very important point about people who were involved in a pilot scheme for Horizon—an issue that has also been raised by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). We want to make sure that every single victim is properly covered by the various schemes, and I have asked everybody who has evidence of any kind, including the right hon. Member for North Durham, to furnish me with the details. I will make sure that we pick up anybody who is left outside the schemes.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) mentioned Fujitsu, and I concur with his points. Anybody who is shown to be responsible for this scandal should be held accountable, including by making payments into the taxpayer's fund. I accept what he says about the honours system, as I have said before on a number of occasions. I speak as a former CEO. This is not to direct responsibility for any specific thing that happened—the Sir Wyn Williams inquiry is there to identify responsibility—but, as a former CEO, I would say that it is perfectly reasonable to ask the CEO who oversaw the Post Office during a critical time, when things went so badly wrong, to voluntarily hand back their honour. However, that is a matter for the person concerned.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I refer my hon. Friend the Minister to the article in *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* by M. R. McGuire and K. Renaud, entitled “Harm, injustice & technology: Reflections on the UK's subpostmasters' case”.

First, page 444 shows the graph of the prosecutions, which rose from 10 in 1997 to nearly 80 in 2001. The people responsible should have noticed that we were not going to get ordinary, decent people—sub-postmistresses and sub-postmasters—suddenly going crooked on that scale. Secondly, the article talks about the bugs that were named after the sub-post offices where they were discovered: the Dalmellington bug and the Callendar Square bug.

I also refer my hon. Friend the Minister to the article in *The Sun* about my constituent Cheryl Shaw, who gave up in 2008. Having lost £400 week after week, she brought in the Post Office investigators, who claimed that they could not find anything to explain what was happening. She had to sell out, she lost her home and she took on work as a carer. She is illustrative of those who were convicted and those who gave up before they were prosecuted.

Many people now believe that the Horizon system was set up for one purpose and adapted to another, for which it did not work. When people started entering things twice, there was apparently a loss where the Post Office did not actually lose any money. If the Post Office did not lose any money, how could people have been properly prosecuted? The titanic error was the belief in technology.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. I totally agree that people should be held responsible where, following an inquiry and investigation, they are shown to have wilfully neglected their duties. He raises an important point about the courts' attitude towards computer and technology-based evidence. My right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is looking at that issue too, it having been brought to his attention by Paul Marshall, one of the leading barristers involved in this scandal.

I am sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent, Mrs Shaw. I take it that she will have applied to the Horizon shortfall scheme, which should compensate people like her. If my hon. Friend would like any help or assistance to make sure that has happened, either for himself or for Mrs Shaw, I am very happy to provide it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Mr Deputy Speaker, you were in the Chair when we last discussed the Post Office (Horizon System) Compensation Bill on 19 December. I do not think any of us who knew about the TV drama would have believed the impact it has had. It is bittersweet that it has had such an effect. It is really telling that MPs, peers, the media and many others tried to bring this issue into the public consciousness, but none of us managed to do so as effectively as a TV drama.

I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Today I have been contacted by local sub-postmasters who want to meet me. They were never prosecuted, but they had shortfalls and paid money back to the Post Office. Many of them just walked away and retired, and they now have no evidence of what happened. When a sub-postmaster walks away from a post office, all the financial documentation goes back to Post Office Ltd. Can we have a thought on that, Minister?

Will the Minister confirm that all the money that went back to Post Office Ltd enhanced the profits on which, over the years, many bonuses were paid to Post Office executives? Will pressure be put on those people to repay those bonuses? I disagree with very little of the Minister's statement, and I think there is consensus across the Chamber on this, but some words sprang out at me: “very shortly” and “in due course”. Can we please have fixed timelines for the reports?

I commend Sir Wyn Williams, whom I first met when he took on the inquiry before it became statutory. It sounds ridiculous for me to say that I was impressed by him, but I really understood that he was going to get to the bottom of what happened. He has done that in spite of grievous failures on behalf of Post Office Ltd.

There must be accountability for everyone in Post Office Ltd and Fujitsu who prosecuted and persecuted sub-postmasters over the years. I pledge that SNP Members

[*Marion Fellows*]

will continue to put pressure on Governments of any colour to keep the momentum going to ensure that real justice is served, even if that involves more pressure on the former CEO and on the people who received honours because of their work for Post Office Ltd. [*Interruption.*] I see the Minister nodding and know he agrees with me.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and, indeed, for her work on the all-party group on post offices. In terms of the case she raises of the postmasters who have suffered financially and in which there will be difficulty in providing information because of lack of evidence, the benefit of the doubt should clearly be with the postmasters in this situation. The Horizon shortfall scheme is there to compensate people in that situation. If she needs any help with any of those cases I am very happy to assist.

On whether people repay bonuses or whatever else people might be held accountable for, in order to be fair we should wait for the results of the inquiry. We believe in process in this House and it is right that people have a right to reply and give their own evidence. I agree with the hon. Lady's confidence in Sir Wyn Williams, who is doing a tremendous job.

I am sorry that I cannot be more precise on the timescales, but I will be very disappointed if we go past the end of this week without giving more information to the House. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady about the accountability of individuals both for all reasons of justice and to act as a deterrent to anybody else who is ever tempted to do the wrong thing in such circumstances. These corporate failures and corporate abuses cannot continue and we need to make sure people realise that if it happens, they will be held to account.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I congratulate the Minister and his immediate predecessor for the sterling work they have done in attempting to bring justice to this problem. However, the Government need to do four things: to stop the Post Office unnecessarily challenging the victims' appeals and find a more rapid method to exonerate all the innocent victims; to instruct the Post Office to stop hiring expensive lawyers to challenge the compensation claims and therefore to accelerate the payment mechanism; to strip away the Post Office's right to police its own cases; and to accelerate the investigatory procedures prior to criminal prosecutions of the real villains in this case—we know who they are. Does the Minister believe that he can achieve those four aims in months rather than years?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind words and for all his work in the campaign for justice for postmasters. I also congratulate him on his recent knighthood; the whole of Yorkshire was rejoicing at his award.

I can assure my right hon. Friend on all four counts. Yes, we want a more rapid means of overturning convictions. Yes, we want to make sure that the Post Office does not challenge unfairly any attempt to overturn those convictions. Yes, too, on making sure that the investigatory process happens more quickly. Of course, some of these matters are outside our control, as he is fully aware, because of the separation of powers, but in

terms of the policing of cases I am happy to talk to him after this statement about what precisely he means by that. There is an independent element to the way all the compensation schemes are running. They are not being policed or restricted by the Post Office; there are independent panels and independent assessments as part of all those processes, but I am happy to talk to my right hon. Friend in detail about what we can do in those areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Justice delayed is justice denied but 85% of the convictions have still not been overturned despite the Select Committee warning last spring that the process was rolling much too slowly and having made recommendations for speeding it up. Many of those recommendations were rejected, yet tonight the Minister has told the House that only now is the Lord Chancellor exploring with the judiciary a way to speed things up. Will the Minister tell us tonight his timeframe for delivering justice to those who have been unfairly convicted? Can those who are still waiting for their convictions to be overturned expect justice to be done this year? Or must they wait until many more of them have, tragically, passed away without justice?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his work as Chair of the Select Committee, and I am very happy to be appearing before it next week to answer more detailed questions on these matters. He is right to say that most convictions have not come forward, which is precisely why we are making this statement today—so that more people with convictions have them overturned. One difficulty is that some of them have not come forward. Also, about 50 people who have come forward have not had their convictions overturned. We are looking at both those particular issues and I am happy to talk to the right hon. Gentleman about any of his recommendations.

Yes, we absolutely want to see these issues resolved this year. As we have said before, we want to see all compensation payments done by August, which was the original timeframe. Not all these matters are within our gift: we require victims and their representatives to bring forward claims and, in the current process, those seeking to overturn convictions to bring forward applications for that. That is a process that we are trying to expedite, and I hope to have some very good news for the right hon. Gentleman in the coming days.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As one who for all too many years has urged faster compensation and redress for those who have suffered in this scandal, I welcome the new sense of urgency and united purpose across the Floor of the House. When my hon. Friend is looking at the Post Office's right to bring private prosecutions, will he understand that it was the fact that it was 100% Government owned and accountable through this House to the Government that gave it so much more seriousness and weight against the innocent who were trying to defend themselves?

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, and that definitely played a part in the Post Office's ability to take forward prosecutions. That is something

that my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is looking at across the piece, not least in connection with the Post Office, although, as I said in my statement, it has not taken forward any prosecutions since 2015 and I think it is highly unlikely that it would try to, even before things might be changed.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and declare an interest as a member of the Horizon compensation advisory board.

I think we need more TV dramas, because it has had a remarkable effect on attendance in this House tonight. The drama was successful because it spoke about the victims. Many of us who have been involved in this case for many years have met many of them—I know the Minister and his predecessor have too—and know the torment that those individuals have been through, and the drama was excellent in showing that. The key thing now, as Alan Bates said at the weekend, is to get the compensation out of the door as quickly as possible.

I welcome what the Minister says on overturned convictions. The advisory board made recommendations on that, and I think all 927 convictions need quashing. May I ask him whether we can consider that on Wednesday at our next meeting, and what timescale he is looking at? Can we also get the pre-Horizon scheme that has now become evident, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) referred to, bottomed out very quickly to find out how many cases there are and how many were prosecuted—I know of at least two—so that we can get justice for those individuals as well? If anyone thinks there are not still people out there, I had three people contact me this afternoon, and I have spoken to them. There are people out there who we still need to reach out to.

Kevin Hollinrake: Absolutely. I think the programme not only captured the type of people we are talking about here, whom people who have met the sub-postmasters are already aware of, but perfectly highlighted the Post Office's brutal and desensitised approach in these matters. That is part of the reason why the programme has created the situation we have today, and we welcome that, because we are keen to deliver the compensation scheme and get support for it across the House and across the nation.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his work on the advisory board. I certainly hope to attend that advisory board meeting on Wednesday and share some of our thinking at that time about what measures we are proposing. He raised an important point about the pilot scheme and people affected by the pilot version of Horizon. We believe they are still covered by the compensation schemes—I think he agrees with that as well—but we want to make sure that those people have been reached out to. As I said when we spoke about it this morning, if he shares the details of those people with me, we will find out whether they have been contacted, and if not, why not, because other people might be in a similar circumstance.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the sense of urgency that there now is on both sides of the House about this situation. Will my hon. Friend bear in mind two points in taking this process forward? First, although it is critical that we speed up

the means by which these improper convictions are overturned, will he bear in mind that that will place exceptional and unprecedented strains on the appeal system and the criminal justice system, and that that would, if we followed the normal route, require unprecedented resources to be put in? Will he work closely with the Lord Chancellor to take on board the judiciary's ability to cope with that volume of cases being put forward?

Secondly, on private prosecutions, can I ask him perhaps to revisit the Justice Committee's recommendations from 2021—for example, that all private prosecutors should be subject to the oversight of His Majesty's chief inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service, to ensure proper standards of independence and objectivity in dealing with cases, which were clearly lacking in this situation?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his work. Yes, we share the ambition to speed up the whole process. I also thank my hon. Friend for what he has done with the Lord Chancellor, who mentioned my hon. Friend's work during our meeting earlier today. We are aware of the resources issue and the time scales around looking at individual cases; we are very much taking those into account in terms of the solution that we will hopefully arrive at. The Lord Chancellor is equally concerned about private prosecutions. I thank my hon. Friend for his work on that issue; again, our conversations today very much centred around his work on the Select Committee and its recommendations.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister referred to the brutal approach of the Post Office. It struck me that this was another example of what Bishop James Jones in the Hillsborough inquiry referred to as "The patronising disposition of unaccountable power". The conviction of my constituent, Janet Skinner, has been quashed, but she has not received any compensation to date. Can the Minister put a firm time on when she will start to get that compensation paid to her?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the right hon. Lady for her work on this issue. On Mrs Skinner, I should say that all people on any of the three schemes get access to an interim payment. If Mrs Skinner's conviction has been overturned, she is entitled to an interim payment of £163,000. From then, she can take two routes. She can go for a full assessment, which takes more time as the issues are complex, assessing financial loss and detriment relating to things such as health. Our commitment is that 90% of those who go down a full assessment route will have an offer made back to them within 40 working days; that is our target. The alternative is that she can pursue the fixed-sum award of £600,000. There is no need to compile a claim to do that—the money can be paid out pretty much instantly. That is not a route for everybody, but it has been a route for a significant number of the 30 people with overturned convictions who have decided to settle.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Four hours of compelling storytelling has brought a fresh wave of interest, anger and frustration to people around the country and indeed in this Chamber—it is great to see so many people supporting the sub-postmasters' plight. The Minister has been working diligently on the issue for 18 months now, so he needs no reminder that, as the episodes start by stating, this story is true.

[Paul Scully]

Will my hon. Friend diligently build on his work to make sure that the judiciary allow a blanket quashing of all the convictions, so that they can get to the Treasury to make sure that the funding is there for full and fair compensation and that the Post Office adheres to his timetable of August 2024? Sir Wyn Williams needs no reminder about getting those answers as part of his excellent work on the inquiry. Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to do this is to remind all those people that we are all human first and politicians second? This is about human cost.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend. He talked about building on my work. Can I say that I am building on his work? He did a tremendous job in his role when this issue first came to light. We share the ambition to do something that expedites the process of overturning convictions. The time for quibbling is over; it is now a case of action this day and delivering that overturning of convictions. Clearly, we want to do that in a way that does not cause us any constitutional or legal problems across the system. We believe we have a solution and we should be able to give more details in due course—very shortly. Sir Wyn Williams's work is also playing a key part and I thank him for establishing the statutory inquiry, which is going to lead to so many answers that people rightly demand.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister has heard from me previously about the difficulties faced by the executors of my constituent, who was a victim of this scandal and has subsequently died. Ultimately, the difficulty with my constituent's case was that she had been putting in her own money to make up shortfalls and the executors did not know how much they should settle for, because the Post Office itself had no idea what the proper sum ought to be. In such circumstances, what can the Government do to ensure every victim of this scandal gets the full compensation to which they are entitled?

Kevin Hollinrake: Again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done on behalf of his constituent and I am so sorry to hear she has passed away. I have a similar situation in my constituency, as Sam Harrison of Nawton, near Helmsley, sadly passed away last May before she received compensation. It is a tragedy. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, compensation will be paid to the executors, who will probably be family members, so it is not about any saving of money but nevertheless we still want to accelerate the process. I totally agree with what he says about the lack of evidence in some cases, which may be 20 years old. In those situations, the benefit of the doubt should be with the victim, ensuring that the settlement is assessed as generously as possible and paid out as quickly as possible.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement—he has said a great deal already—and pay tribute to those sub-postmasters who fought for justice, including one of my constituents who was part of the 555 who undertook the group-led litigation. Will the Minister give an insight into the steps that will be taken to review the actions and accountabilities of Fujitsu, as well as its culpability, as it is still awarded contracts, week after week, across Government? The entire

scandal has demonstrated acute institutional state failures that have to be acknowledged. What review will take place of the corporate governance actions of the Department that oversaw shareholder responsibilities towards the Post Office during this period, and what changes can proceed around the governance and accountability of the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. I share her wish to pay tribute to the sub-postmasters who campaigned so long and effectively on the issue. I read with interest the piece she wrote the other weekend about what she thinks should be done, and I agree with much of what she said. As I said earlier, anybody who is responsible, either at a corporate level or individually, should be held to account, which may include payments to assist with compensation and looking at the contracts that have been awarded. It is right to let Sir Wyn Williams undertake his inquiry, report properly and assign blame, and we should take action, at a corporate or individual level, at that time, to make sure both of those bodies are accountable.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Minister said that this was about not just compensation but restoration. That is true, but is it not also about misfeasance in public office? Will the Minister confirm that the maximum penalty for a public servant who willingly and knowingly acts in manner that results in harm, injury or financial loss to an innocent party is life imprisonment?

Kevin Hollinrake: Well, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point about accountability. We have given Sir Wyn Williams the chance to look at all these issues and determine accountability and individual responsibility. I have dealt with a number of different scandals over the years, from the Back Benches as well as in my ministerial role. They happen at a corporate level too often for us to simply carry on in the way we have done in the past, so I am happy to take away the hon. Gentleman's points about the potential penalty for the offence he describes, which I will discuss with officials and others.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Anybody who cares about the interests of justice in our country will be horrified not just at the nature of these miscarriages of justice, but at the sheer scale of them. Does that not beg a very important question? This is an unprecedented set of circumstances and, in my judgment, it requires an unprecedented approach: there should be legislation on the Floor of the House to deal with the convictions of this huge class of people who are not just not guilty, but victims. I urge the Minister and the Lord Chancellor to look urgently at the question of legislation—I know that it would be supported in this House—to create a presumption of innocence that will cut the Gordian knot and support the victims and their families who have been enduring this horror for too long.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question and for his work on this issue, and I appreciate the engagement that he has had with the Lord Chancellor. As my right hon. and learned Friend said, this situation is unprecedented. We certainly discussed legislation on the Floor of the House at length today in a meeting with the Lord Chancellor and officials. He will

be aware that the Lord Chancellor is speaking to the judiciary about these matters. He may want to do the same and make his feelings known to ensure that there is no barrier to making sure that we can legislate in the way that he describes.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Sometimes with hindsight it is possible to see that mistakes were made and that an injustice was carried out, but it beggars belief that, at the time, the Post Office, Fujitsu and Ministers believed that people who were trusted pillars of society suddenly turned into a mass group of thieves, plundering millions of pounds from their employer. Surely those who were observing this at the time must have known that something was wrong, yet they spent hundreds of millions of pounds persecuting and prosecuting people who were innocent and who have suffered intolerably. Will the Minister assure us that those who were guilty of negligence at that time or perhaps, even worse, cynical abuse of their position, will be held to account?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the right hon. Member; he has contributed to every debate on this issue that I have been involved in as a Back Bencher and as a Minister, and he has paid close attention to this all the way through and demanded justice. As I said, the approach of the Post Office was brutal, gratuitous and shocking. Should people be held to account? Absolutely. I do not think we can start to dissuade people from taking these wrongful, disgraceful actions without a deterrent. Certainly, holding people to account by whatever means possible, including potentially prosecutions, would be a significant deterrent for people thinking of doing this kind of stuff in the future.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister's approach, but I also pay tribute to the work that he did to raise the profile of this issue before he took on that role. This is a scandal of historic proportions and heads must roll, with or without gongs attached to them. I am aware of only one sub-postmaster in my constituency who was pursued by the Post Office and not convicted, but it struck me that that is because I have very few sub-post offices left. Are there grounds for investigating whether the Post Office used this dodgy accounting to mismanage the profitability of individual branches to accelerate the closure programme of many of those branches, which left us, in many cases, with very few post office branches left for our constituents to use?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his work. He raises a very important point. The motivation behind the actions of the Post Office and executives and managers in the Post Office is something that Sir Wyn Williams is looking at as part of his inquiry, and I am very interested to see the results of that. There is no sense that I am aware of that this was just another method of trying to contribute towards the closure of a post office. Despite the closures that my right hon. Friend has experienced, that is principally about the general nature of the impact on high streets of changing shopping habits, which is causing difficulties for some of the network. We are determined to try to ensure that the post office network is more viable and more sustainable, including for individual businesses. A more generous deal on the banking framework between banks and post offices, in terms of the remuneration

that they get to manage access to cash, for example, is one of the ways that we can make post offices more sustainable. We are fully committed to maintaining a significant network across the country, and it is currently set at 11,500 branches.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It was referenced earlier that many people involved in this terrible scandal are coming forward—more since the drama—but of course a small proportion have not. The Minister and his Department have been trying to track down those who are eligible for compensation, including by writing to Members of this House. What support will the Department provide in forensic person and company searches to try to track down all those who are eligible but may simply have become so exasperated or exhausted that they walked away and wanted nothing further to do with it?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Member raises an important point. We have written to all the people with convictions, for example, to say, "Please come forward." It is not about a lack of ability to identify individuals; a lot of it is about the confidence of those people to come forward after what they have been through. We hope that making it easier to overturn a conviction and easier to access compensation will encourage more people to come forward. As he said, people have been coming forward—people have come directly to me since the ITV programme was aired—so we think that what we are doing and have done is helping with that, but we certainly need to do more to convince people that coming forward is the right thing to do and that they can be confident of good treatment.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Many people who were running sub-post office branches were not victims but were left demoralised by what they saw happening to colleagues and people across their network and quietly gave up what had been their living and, in some cases, their homes. Will the Minister indicate whether there will be support to enable those people to come forward, give their stories and ascertain whether they might also be eligible for compensation because they felt forced out by the lack of care shown by the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. Certainly, the Horizon shortfall scheme should compensate anybody who was directly affected by the scandal—not just financially but through other, non-pecuniary issues they faced and suffered from. I am happy to take her point away and see what information we might have in that area.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Many of my constituents have emailed me over the past few days because they, too, watched the powerful dramatisation that we have all seen. What they want most is for the Post Office and individuals within it to be held to account, as other hon. Members have said. Does the Minister agree that looking to the facts of what has happened, many of these people may well have claims for malicious prosecution and that where evidence has been withheld or lies told in court, the police should look at whether there has been perjury and—seriously—a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, which would of course carry with it an extremely hefty prison sentence?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. and learned Lady is right to point out malicious prosecution, which forms part of the compensation package available to those people who have convictions. In terms of offences and things that happened that led to these issues that people are or may be guilty of, we expect the police or other enforcement agencies to look at that carefully. There is nothing to stop them bringing forward prosecutions where they can see that people would be guilty of a certain offence.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): While applauding the extraordinary courage and resilience of the sub-postmasters who have campaigned for justice for so long, does my hon. Friend agree that the makers of “Mr Bates vs The Post Office” and ITV represent public service broadcasting at its best and that without that we would not be having this statement?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I entirely agree; the programme brought the scandal into everybody’s living rooms, and although many people were vaguely or even very aware of it, they did not see its real effect in terms of the people it affected or the brutal way in which they were bullied and forced out of their businesses and livelihoods—and in 200 cases, I think, put in prison. The programme has done a fantastic job. We should pay tribute to ITV, its producers and the actors concerned, as well as to the many journalists—not least Nick Wallis, Tom Witherow and Karl Flinders—who brought these issues to light and into the public consciousness, which I am sure played a part in the producers’ decision to make the programme.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I also pay tribute to the Minister, and to all the people he mentioned in his statement, for their work. We must recognise and accept that it is not sound to base any criminal conviction on Horizon. My constituent was one of the original 555 in the group litigation order scheme. His conviction was overturned, so he is now seeking full compensation in the overturned convictions scheme, but his is one of three cases that the Post Office says there is no public interest in pursuing. It says that Horizon was not intrinsic to his conviction, but the figures used in his conviction were produced using Horizon. That is a Kafkaesque situation and it cannot be allowed to stand. The Post Office should not be anywhere near deciding who gets compensation and what compensation they get. It should be removed from the process. It has been shown to be untrustworthy and incapable of dealing with the matter in an even-handed way. Does the Minister agree?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman has contributed to virtually every debate or statement on this matter, and I thank him for his work on it. We agree with him, and indeed the compensation schemes agree with him, that the Horizon evidence should not play any part in whether or not somebody is found guilty. There are obviously different schemes: the Horizon shortfall scheme, and the group litigation order scheme, which people who were part of the group of 555 sub-postmasters took forward. To clarify, the 40-day target for a response to any claim is under the GLO scheme, not the overturned convictions scheme, although we are equally ambitious about providing rapid offers to people who bring forward claims for overturned convictions. He raises an important

point about public interest cases. Again, we have discussed that today with the Lord Chancellor. We want to ensure that everybody affected gets fair compensation and that the Post Office has as little influence as possible in those cases. Ideally, in terms of overturning convictions and access to compensation, we would deliver something completely outside the Post Office’s jurisdiction.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is progress that £27 million of compensation has now been paid to 477 of the 555, and that 47 of the GLO group have received compensation totalling £17 million following the overturning of their convictions, but my constituent Jo Hamilton tells me that it is still far too difficult and that people are still being far too easily messed around in the process. Will the Minister look again at how he can make it even easier and clearer for people to claim their full and final compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is exactly what we are attempting to do. I have met Jo Hamilton. She is a wonderful and incredibly tenacious individual, and one would never guess from her disposition that she had been through the trauma that she has. We accept that, at the moment, the processes for overturning a conviction or for compensation are not as rapid as we would like. That is exactly what we have been looking at for some time, not least over the past few days. We have had good conversations today, and we hope to have clearer and better news for my right hon. Friend in the next few days.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his work on this issue. Like so many Members, I represent people whose lives were destroyed by this outrageous injustice, two of whom I have been in touch with again today. On their behalf, I urge the Government to provide swift and fair compensation, and call for the immediate exoneration of all those who bear the crushing and unjust shame of accusation and conviction.

This scandal has also created outrage and disgust among serving postmasters who were not themselves victims and may post-date the scandal but who simply do not wish to be associated any longer with an organisation that can treat people in the contemptible way that the Post Office has treated the victims. Does he recognise that this is a moment of real crisis for the post office network, such that one of my postmasters has already resigned and another has threatened to do so for that very reason? Will he instruct the Post Office to go above and beyond to support the network, postmasters and potential postmasters, so that we still have a post office network at the end of all this?

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with all the hon. Gentleman’s points. Swift and fair compensation—absolutely. An immediate overturning of convictions is something that we are looking to achieve as soon as possible, if it is possible, clearly subject to the caveats I set out earlier. Despite what the Post Office has done, most members of the public still look at the post office network with great admiration. It is greatly valued in our communities, so I do not believe that it is a damaged brand, but it is right that postmasters should have a much better relationship with the central management at the Post Office and the network itself. Much work has happened in that area, including the recruitment of 100 area

managers to try to improve that relationship. That relationship will also be improved by making individual post office branches more financially sustainable, as the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed. We are very keen to do things such as the banking framework and the new parcel hub opportunity for those postmasters. The post office network has a bright future and a sound reputation, and we are keen to reinforce that.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): We have already heard about the work of the Business and Trade Committee, which looked at this issue for our February 2022 report. One of the most distressing features from our evidence sessions was hearing about the many people who were affected but were unwilling to come forward because it was too painful and they wanted to put the matter behind them. As we saw in the ITV drama, the Post Office was just not trusted. That led to the Committee's recommendation that there should be a trusted point of contact for people to go to. Will the Minister join me in welcoming today's news that 100 new people have come forward? Will he do his utmost to encourage everyone affected to come forward and claim the compensation that they are due?

Kevin Hollinrake: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on the Select Committee, of which he is a long-standing member. We are very concerned about the people who will not come forward for whatever reason. The best way to tackle that is to make it easier to get compensation. That is one of the reasons why we brought forward the fixed-sum award route for overturned convictions—there is no requirement to submit a detailed claim to access that £600,000—and made it easier generally to overturn convictions by making those two routes easier. We think that is the best way to convince people to come forward. The message should go out loud and clear from every Member of this House to the people affected: "Please come forward, because you will be treated fairly and you will be compensated quickly."

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am raising points from constituents who have been moved by the ITV drama on the Horizon scandal. I want to reiterate the points made by my hon. Friends and hon. Members on the Government Benches about the value of such a drama in bringing home the extent of the scandal to a much wider audience. I congratulate all those involved in making the drama, and the investigation work that went into it. May I add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) to support the review of private prosecutions? That is the power that allowed the Post Office to be a supposed victim, investigator and prosecutor. Finally, my constituents are deeply concerned about the delay in paying compensation to victims. Can the Minister expedite the payments in any way?

Kevin Hollinrake: I share the hon. Lady's point that the dramatisation was invaluable in raising awareness and in making sure that we bring forward measures as quickly as possible—all things that she mentioned. As I said, private prosecution is something that I discussed with the Lord Chancellor today, and he is keen to look at that in the general context. I am sure that he will report to the House in due course. I agree with the hon. Lady entirely on delays. We want to expedite this process

of overturning convictions and paying compensation, to make it much quicker and easier. That is the best way to resolve these issues and ensure that as many people as possible are confident to come forward.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Following the ITV drama broadcast last week, I have been contacted by many constituents, and they will welcome the Minister's focus today on justice for every single victim. But he knows that, despite his efforts and those of many other Ministers, the Criminal Cases Review Commission has said that many of the 700 people who have had criminal convictions will not take part in a further legal process, perhaps because of their understandable collapse of trust in the Post Office, and also in the judicial system. Now is the time for the Government to consider how all convictions that relied on evidence from the Horizon system, which must now be seen as unsafe, could be quashed without victims having to endure further legal wrangling.

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend raises important points. That is exactly the experience so far: people will not take part—of course, the Criminal Cases Review Commission can only do so much if they do not—despite the fact that the Post Office now looks at every single case and will write to people when it is not going to contest an appeal. It is trying to be more proactive in ensuring that people come forward, but I share my right hon. Friend's ambition. Ideally, we would like a process that does not require a convicted postmaster to come forward—something that we could do across the board. That is exactly what we are looking at, and I hope to have some news for her in the coming days.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his statement, and pay tribute to the sub-postmasters who have led the campaign. Concerns over Horizon have been in the air for at least 14 years. That is 14 years of pain, injustice and uncertainty for the victims and their families. Is it not time for the Government to take decisive action both to identify victims of Horizon and to mass-exonerate those convicted?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady raises an important point. That is exactly what we are trying to do, and what the statement is all about. As I said, we have compensated 64% of victims thus far with full and final compensation, and provided interim compensation to practically everybody who has come forward with a claim. She is right that we are disappointed that more people have not come forward to overturn their convictions. That is exactly the problem that we are trying to solve, and we are looking at innovative legal ways to do that. As I said, we hope to have some news very shortly.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am glad that the Minister is asserting the principle of ministerial responsibility, which has long been clear, ever since the Crichton Down case. Even if the Minister is not personally responsible, he is responsible for what goes wrong. When I was Minister for the Post Office, that was made clear to me. It is reprehensible that at least one of my successors is trying to dodge the bullet and just say, "I was given the wrong advice." If we own the Post Office, the Minister is responsible. That is a principle that we have to establish.

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

Looking to the future, I have often been in touch with the Minister regarding the views of David Ward, who is the president of the sub-postmasters north-east branch. What the branch wants now is for a line to be drawn under this, for compensation to be paid, for the reputation of the Post Office to be re-established and for the Post Office management to treat sub-postmasters properly from now on.

Kevin Hollinrake: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend. As Ministers, we must bear responsibility for what we do, as well as expect people within the Post Office, Fujitsu and others to bear responsibility. As Ministers, we must serve a useful purpose. I totally agree about drawing a line under this. That is exactly what we want to do, in two ways: by overturning convictions and by paying full and final compensation. I am pleased to say that around 30 people with overturned convictions have been able to draw a line under it by being compensated fully for what happened to them. We should try to build on that, and make it happen much more quickly. That is what we are working on right now, and we hope to deliver solutions in the very near future.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for the work that he is doing to push the issue to a conclusion. I pay tribute to my constituent, Della Robinson, who was the sub-postmistress at Dukinfield post office in my constituency. She was convicted in 2013 of false accounting. Her conviction has been quashed as part of the 555, but she lost everything. She lost her shop, she lost her home, she lost her friends and she lost her reputation. Heads have to roll, because people were in the know at Fujitsu and at the Post Office. While I am not somebody who seeks retribution, heads really must roll in this case because of the lives that were destroyed. As a daughter of Denton, Paula Vennells really ought to do the right thing and hand back her CBE.

Kevin Hollinrake: On behalf of the Government and the Post Office, I apologise for what happened to Della Robinson. These are tragic cases, as the hon. Gentleman says, with people losing not just their shop and their business but their home and the respect of their local community. That must have been devastating for her. She clearly has a route to compensation now, having overturned the conviction. There is either an immediate route through the fixed-sum award, or there is the detailed assessment. If it is the detailed assessment, we are keen to ensure that it is delivered as quickly as possible to put Della—Mrs Robinson, I should say—back in the position she was in before the actions of the Post Office.

I agree that people individually must take responsibility. Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is there to identify who was responsible, exactly what they did or did not do and how that contributed to the scandal. Where possible, those individuals should be held to account by any means, including prosecutions. Certainly, it seems to be an obvious opportunity for those who have received honours for service to the Post Office to return those honours voluntarily.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If individual employees of the Post Office face serious criminal charges for malicious prosecution or criminal conspiracy, how would the Minister feel if it turned out that the Post Office proposed to pay for their legal defence costs, given how it treated its own sub-postmasters?

Kevin Hollinrake: I would not feel good about that at all. My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I will take it away and take advice on it. That would not seem to me to be an appropriate thing to do at all.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): On 19 August 2008, my constituent Michael Rudkin, in his position as chairman of the National Federation of SubPostmasters, visited Fujitsu's headquarters in Bracknell and inadvertently witnessed IT engineers there secretly altering the accounts of sub-postmasters in Horizon. When the managers at Fujitsu realised what my constituent had seen, they ejected him from the building, and he travelled back to his post office in Ibstock, where his wife Susan was his office manager.

The next morning, Mr and Mrs Rudkin were subject to an early morning raid by the Post Office's inspectors, who declared that a £44,000 deficit had appeared on their computer overnight. Criminal convictions resulted. I never believed it was a coincidence that the Post Office found this massive deficit shortfall on my constituent's computer the same day he uncovered what Fujitsu was doing. When I challenged Fujitsu, it said that Mr Rudkin had never been to its premises and it had lost the visitors' book for the day in question. My constituents want to know who will be held to account for more than a decade of false incrimination and humiliation suffered by my constituents.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his work on this matter. He has been a constant contributor to these debates to make sure that we see justice for his constituents and other people affected by this scandal. Mr Rudkin was one of the stars of the show in the dramatisation, and I am so sorry to hear what happened to him and his wife through the Post Office's actions. It seems incredibly coincidental that those two things coincided—the visit to Fujitsu, what he discovered at that point and then what happened the next day in discovering a £44,000 shortfall in his accounts. We all now know that Fujitsu and the Post Office were able to amend the post office accounts. It seems incredibly coincidental, but also, as I said, brutal and cynical in terms of what might have happened. We should let Sir Wyn Williams determine exactly what has happened and who is responsible before we judge and blame. I am just as keen as the hon. Gentleman to see individuals held to account for what happened in this scandal.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I echo the point made a few moments ago by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel)? The Horizon computer system, which has been the cause of so much misery to so many postmasters and their families—including my constituent, Mr Alan Bates—was supplied by Fujitsu, which continued to be paid to maintain it. Fujitsu is also the recipient of multimillion-pound contracts from many public bodies, including Departments. Indeed, it has recently had contracts awarded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Home

Office and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Can my hon. Friend say why a company that has been the cause of such distress to so many of our fellow citizens continues to be the beneficiary of public sector contracts?

Kevin Hollinrake: Once again, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's constituent, Alan Bates, who was very much the star of the show, both in the dramatisation and in reality. It is because of his tenacity and his commitment that this has come to light. The Horizon system is being rebuilt. Fujitsu is not rebuilding it, so the Post Office will move away from the current Horizon system, but it needs a system today to cover one of the largest retail networks in the world. We need to make sure that it has a system it can use right now, but it will no longer be Fujitsu's responsibility.

As for other Government contracts, we are of course looking at those. Whether it is contributing to compensation or looking at access to Government contracts, our view is that we should let Sir Wyn Williams complete his inquiries and report, and then make a decision on what happened, who is responsible and exactly what we will do about individuals or organisations at that point in time.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for recognising the work that I and others have done to highlight this scandal over many years. Of course, the recognition should go to the many sub-postmasters, including my constituent, Chris Head, one of the 555, for their tireless campaigning for justice.

I want to pick up the point made by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). Last October, I asked the then Minister whether, in light of the Horizon and sub-postmaster scandal, he would pause existing contracts with Fujitsu and undertake a review. I am pleased to hear that that is happening. We should pause existing contracts and stop awarding Fujitsu multimillion-pound contracts. Fujitsu continues to take billions of pounds in profits, including £10 billion a year in Government contracts, while our sub-postmasters await compensation. Will the Minister agree to stop awarding contracts to Fujitsu, and can he tell me how many contracts have been given to it since this scandal came to light?

Kevin Hollinrake: Again, I thank the hon. Lady for her work on this, both in the House and in her engagement with others who have taken a particular interest in the scandal. I also thank her constituent, Chris Head, who is a regular commenter on various points on Twitter, and I read his contributions all the time. He gets his message across very effectively.

Let me be clear that we think that the right process is that we use Sir Wyn Williams's statutory inquiry to identify exactly who is responsible and what they are responsible for. At that point in time, we will decide whether it is right to give any organisation access to Government contracts. That is the right process. Of course we have concerns about what has happened in the past and about that particular organisation, but we have to follow the process in order to make a decision about how we move forward.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we should create a special legal process to more rapidly overturn these wrongful convictions, and to accelerate compensation, including for those who have not come forward? Will he take steps to stop the Post Office prosecuting and fighting victims in court? Does he agree that it would be right for Paula Vennells to hand back her CBE, given her role in this disgraceful miscarriage of justice?

Kevin Hollinrake: To answer: yes, yes and yes. Yes, we want a rapid legal process, and that is exactly what we are discussing today. I am keen to deliver that as quickly as possible. The Post Office has stopped prosecuting—it has not prosecuted since 2015—but the Justice Secretary will look at the wider aspects of private prosecutions. My thoughts on Paula Vennells are exactly the same as my hon. Friend's. It is a perfect opportunity for her to hand back her CBE voluntarily. Further down the line, if the Williams inquiry is able to assign blame, other potential avenues could be taken.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): One of the most chilling parts of the dramatisation revealed that dozens, if not hundreds, of people were told, "This is only happening to you. You are the only one who is reporting a problem with this system." It is safe to assume that someone, or some individuals, oversaw and dreamt up that particular corporate spin. May I push the Minister further, and ask whether he agrees with many in the House that the Government now need to recover the bonus payments made to the executives who oversaw that corporate lie?

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with that description. The dramatisation was indeed chilling, not least that part of it. It made you feel physically sick to keep hearing those words spoken to individual postmasters: "It is only happening to you." That was very disturbing, and it clearly must have been a corporate position.

I share the hon. Gentleman's ambition when it comes to what he regards as sanctions, and indeed other sanctions that are applicable, but I think we need to follow a process, particularly in respect of individuals. We believe that the best route towards identifying who is responsible and holding those people to account for what they did is Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement and his hard work in this area. Like many others, I have been written to by people who will welcome the Minister's comment that he supports the removal of the CBE from the former chief executive of the Post Office, but does he agree that removing a gong does not deliver justice, and nor does compensation? It is not a question of retribution but a question of justice, so does he agree that if Post Office employees have erroneously accused others of wrongdoing—whether negligently, recklessly or deliberately—they must feel the full force of the criminal law that they wrongly imposed on others?

Kevin Hollinrake: Let me be clear about this. I am not taking the position that we should remove the CBE, and that should not be our position, because we have not yet assigned blame to individuals. However, given that during that critical period the Post Office clearly

[Kevin Hollinrake]

failed in so many areas and in so many shocking ways, it would be sensible and reasonable for the former CEO to hand back an honour that was given for services to the Post Office. There may be other avenues, and my hon. Friend was right to identify some of the potential avenues, but we think that Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is the best way to identify who was responsible.

I agree with my hon. Friend that this is not about retribution but about justice. I have spoken to some of the victims of this scandal and others, and there are two things that they want. Obviously they want compensation, but they also want people to be held to account, and I entirely share my hon. Friend's ambition for that to be done.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We have all been appalled by the fact that the Post Office went on and on, for so many years, prosecuting and ruining the lives of sub-postmasters. It certainly makes us ask who knew what. As the Minister said, we want to ensure that this type of scandal can never happen again, so perhaps he will understand how disappointing it was that in December the Government stopped short of agreeing to introduce a Hillsborough law to ensure that victims could secure the disclosure of crucial information and to place a duty of candour on all public servants. Will he now talk to ministerial colleagues about reconsidering that decision?

Kevin Hollinrake: We are very keen to find out exactly who knew what, and Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry was made statutory so that people could have access to all the information. There is nothing to which they should not have access, and all the disclosures should be available to the inquiry. That should lead to people being held to account, and the exploring of other avenues in respect of what might be done at that point and the evidence that is uncovered. I am not aware of the issue that the hon. Lady raised about what happened in December, but I am happy to take it away and look at it.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Horizon scandal is exactly that: an appalling scandal, which could potentially be continuing today but for the commitment, dedication and efforts of a small group of people who were determined to get to the truth. I hope that one of those people, Alan Bates, can finally accept the honour he deserves, but he will do that only when Paula Vennells does the correct thing and either hands back her CBE or is rightly stripped of it.

In the context of wider convictions, in Scotland the prosecution of individuals rests solely with the Crown Office, and criminal case reviews are a devolved matter. What discussions have the UK Government or the Lord Chancellor had, or what discussions do they plan to have, with the Scottish Government and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to ensure that Scottish victims of this scandal secure the justice that they deserve?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right that Alan Bates has said he will not accept his OBE until Paula Vennells' CBE has been withdrawn. That is another good reason for her to hand back her CBE, because it would allow Alan to be recognised, quite rightly, through the honours process.

My hon. Friend raised a good point, and we are keen to ensure that anything we do is UK-wide, not just England-based, so I am sure that those conversations will take place. The conversations we have had with the Lord Chancellor have really only happened today. We need to get to a position that would resolve this situation and meet the requirements of the advisory board and others across the House. I am sure that that conversation will be going on between the Lord Chancellor and his counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): In recent days, I have been written to by many constituents expressing their horror at the extent of this injustice and, indeed, their outrage that honest, innocent sub-postmasters such as Mr Noel Thomas were not only convicted but imprisoned for a crime they did not commit—indeed, a crime that had not in fact happened. Those constituents will be glad to hear about some of the actions the Minister has outlined to accelerate not only the exoneration of those who were wrongly convicted but the payment of compensation.

The Minister referred to those who are impacted by this scandal but who might not have been convicted themselves. One sub-postmaster in my constituency paid up for a shortfall that had not actually occurred, because of the pressure and the fear of conviction. Do we have firm information about, and a grasp of, how many sub-postmasters and former sub-postmasters might find themselves in that position? Is it not now for the Post Office to reach out to those individuals to ensure that they come forward for compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his points. Yes, as I say, we are keen to exonerate more people more quickly; that is exactly what we intend to do and what we have been looking at today, and we hope to give more information as quickly as possible. We want there to be quicker, easier exoneration and also easier compensation. That is exactly the opportunity that the scheme for overturning convictions delivers. People can take a more detailed assessment route, where it takes time to compile and respond to a claim, or they can simply move past that system and take a fixed award of £600,000, which is available to anybody who has an overturned conviction. That should encourage more people to come forward.

In terms of other people who had shortfalls but have not been convicted, there is the Horizon shortfall scheme. Some 2,417 people applied to that scheme within the timescale. About another 500, I think, applied after time, but they have still been accepted into the scheme. Anybody in that position should have access to compensation. One hundred per cent of the people in the original cohort—the 2,417—have had offers, and 85% have accepted, so we are making significant progress. All postmasters should have been communicated with and written to, but if the hon. Gentleman is aware of any postmaster affected who has not been, I am happy to work with him to make sure they can access compensation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This is the worst scandal in the history of the Post Office since it was first established in 1660. That was the year of the restoration after the English civil war. In that same year, Parliament passed an Act of Oblivion, which exonerated

all those who had previously opposed the Crown and which facilitated, through Parliament, a blanket royal pardon. Might not that sort of mechanism, together with swift compensation, be the most appropriate way to bring justice to all the affected sub-postmasters?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend's knowledge of history is greater than mine, but the essence of what he says is something we concur with. Whether by means of the route he mentions or other routes, we are keen to ensure that we make it easier to overturn convictions, ideally without the postmaster having to do anything. That is something we are looking at now but, again, we need to have conversations with the judiciary and other elements of the system to make sure that there are no unintended consequences from what we are doing—in terms of precedents, for example. However, our ambitions are exactly the same as my hon. Friend's.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Following on from what the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said, the chair of the independent advisory board, Professor Chris Hodges, is also suggesting that a simple piece of legislation could be introduced to the House, which would ensure pardons en masse and quickly. Will the Minister speak in particular about compensation for bereaved families where former sub-postmasters or sub-postmistresses took their own lives?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and again pay tribute to the work of the advisory board, including the chair Professor Chris Hodges, Professor Richard Moorhead, Lord Arbutnot and the right hon. Member for North Durham. It has done fantastic work and I hope to attend its meeting on Wednesday, where we will discuss some of these issues. It is a further tragedy, of course, for the bereaved families. I have a family in my constituency in exactly that situation. The same amount of compensation should be made available to the family. I know that that is cold comfort for many people in that situation, but it is the least we can do to ensure that at least some compensation is paid to the family, who will also have been affected by this scandal.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): There is one aspect that has not been touched on yet: the role of the National Federation of SubPostmasters. Mark Baker, a former sub-postmaster, was elected to the executive council in 2001. He later gave written evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in March 2020, stating that the NFSP had

“been aware of the issues with the Horizon system for many years”,

but effectively successive CEOs have been compromised by a grant funding agreement with Post Office Ltd. Will the Minister, whose own determined persistence on this matter I much admire, confirm that the role of the NFSP is being looked at by the Williams inquiry? This should have been the union that spoke up for the sub-postmasters. I suspect that there are many lessons to be learned, as well as finding out who knew what in the NFSP.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I engage with the NFSP, Calum Greenhow and others. I think there is a better relationship now between

the network and the NFSP, but it is important that it is a representative relationship. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend raises a very important point. There is nowhere that the statutory inquiry cannot look to identify responsibility. He points it in a certain direction that I am sure it will be aware of, but it may well listen to his comments on the Floor of the House today and look at it as a consequence.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Only last year, when the sheer scale of the scandal had already been uncovered, the CEO and senior Post Office leaders were awarded tens of thousands of pounds in bonuses for their work on the inquiry into Post Office failings. Meanwhile, some of the victims of the scandal have died while waiting for compensation. This has outraged my constituents, constituting as it does incompetence and insensitivity on stilts. The Minister has today committed to ensuring and expediting justice for the victims of this scandal, and that is widely welcomed, but what steps is he prepared to take to ensure the recovery, in full, of all bonuses paid to Post Office leaders?

Kevin Hollinrake: Certainly in terms of what the hon. Lady regards as the sub-metric—the work of the Post Office contributing towards the inquiry—we accept that should never have been the case. All the people who received bonuses at senior leadership level have voluntarily returned the bonuses that were attached to that sub-metric.

I share the hon. Lady's concern about the number of people who have passed away while waiting for compensation. That is a tragedy in itself. We are keen to deliver compensation as quickly as possible and make sure that the families of those individuals who have passed away get access to compensation as quickly as possible.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): In April 2022, I was contacted by a former Guildford constituent, sub-postmaster Abdul Sathar Abdeen, through his wife Vanessa, both now located in Sri Lanka. Between 1999 and 2005, they spent thousands of pounds settling shortfalls, including selling a property in Sri Lanka. By the time news of compensation reached them in Sri Lanka, the scheme had closed. Will my hon. Friend confirm that those who have been impacted and now live abroad are able to apply for compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am sorry to hear what has happened to Mrs Abdeen. I assume that my hon. Friend is talking about the Horizon shortfall scheme, and my officials and I are very happy to work with her to make sure that any late applications are considered. It sounds like this was a late application, and I am happy to work with her offline.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his work and for his constructive statement. When can we expect Fujitsu to be held accountable and to pay significant compensation to those affected?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words. We should not prejudge the outcome of the inquiry. It is a statutory inquiry, and we should respect the processes it is undertaking. It is due to conclude later this year, and we hope for a report very shortly afterwards. At that point, we should be able to determine who is responsible and what action should be taken to

[Kevin Hollinrake]

make sure that their actions are properly dealt with in terms of individual responsibility or corporate responsibility, which may include a contribution to the compensation funds.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The excellent TV drama brought home to millions of people what I and many Members of this House already knew, which is the trauma caused to individual people. On a wider scale, it surely means that the Government must look again at the accountability of many of these arm's length agencies, which are operationally independent. We need to look again at governance, management, ministerial responsibility and how Members of this House can hold them to proper account.

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree that accountability is key. I think it is fair to say that my Department has learned lessons on governance. I spend a lot of time meeting the Post Office and, indeed, the Government's representative on the Post Office board, UK Government Investments, to make sure that we have proper oversight of this arm's length body. My hon. Friend is probably referring to something wider than the Post Office—other arm's length bodies—and he raises a very important point to which we should certainly give consideration.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I understand how complicated it is to calculate compensation for individuals. My constituent's numbers disappeared off their screen as transactions were being put through. Will the Minister ensure that more resources are put into supporting the process so that compensation can be paid more expediently?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. These are complex matters, and there are two ends to the compensation journey. One is the compilation of a claim by the claimant, which may include legal advice and assessments of health conditions, for example, so it can take time to compile a claim.

Under the GLO scheme, which is the most recent scheme, we have committed to responding to 90% of claims within 40 days. We believe we have the right level of resources at our end to make sure we can respond fairly and quickly. The assessments are made on the compensation side by independent individuals and panels. We think it is a good process and we think it is resourced properly but, of course, we will continue to give it proper oversight.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): No current or former sub-postmaster in the Waveney constituency had been in touch with me before today, but I have received two emails today from constituents whose lives have effectively been destroyed. This raises two questions. How many people were simply bullied and intimidated into keeping quiet and paying up? And what justice and recompense will be available to them?

Kevin Hollinrake: Although it is tragic to hear that anybody has been involved in these kinds of cases, it is good to hear that people are coming forward. Again, one of the added benefits of the dramatisation is that people are more willing to come forward, and we have

seen a good number coming forward. I am very happy to make sure that my hon. Friend's constituents are pointed in the right direction and that they have access to the appropriate scheme to get compensation, because they should be compensated to the degree of both their non-pecuniary losses, for any impacts on, for example, their health or any distress or reputational issues, and of their financial situation, as we return them to the position they were in prior to the episode taking place. We are keen that his constituents get access to those schemes.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): As both a defence agent and as Justice Secretary, I was aware that even a postie who failed to deliver the mail, let alone a sub-postmaster who stole the mail, faced a custodial sentence. That was viewed as correct and I accepted it, because there are occupations where probity is essential and where exemplary sentences are required to be imposed. But this is worse and it is wider. This is a conspiracy to silence. It is a conspiracy by those with reputational, financial and institutional interests to bury the little person and to obtain convictions. They knew convictions were coming. I believe that the integrity of our justice system and indeed of our society requires that nobody is above the rule of law and that, where such actions take place, exemplary sentences are imposed. Will the Minister seek to ensure that?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is exactly what we want to do and that is why we set up the statutory inquiry to try to identify culpability and responsibility. Whether that leads to corporate sanctions, in terms of contributions to compensation schemes, or individuals who might face prosecution or other sanctions, that is absolutely right. Of course there will be different agencies looking at different things that the inquiry uncovers as part of its process, including not only crime agencies, but the Honours Forfeiture Committee. We are very keen to ensure that that happens. The hon. Gentleman mentions financial incentives—as Charlie Munger once said, “Show me the incentive and I'll show you the outcome.” I am sure that played a part in some of the terrible mistreatments of postmasters.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): As I have stated previously in this House, the Horizon scandal was an absolute travesty. My thanks, as should all our thanks, go to Alan Bates, for his relentless work to stand up for victims—and they were victims of one of the worst miscarriages of justice this country has ever seen. While I am very aware of the legal complexities and the challenges around righting these wrongs as we go through the various stages, will my hon. Friend, who I know is passionate about getting this right, confirm that he is working at the very highest level of Government to ensure that any blockages, delays or stutterings in this process are cleared through? Does he agree that every single current Member of Parliament—all 650—and every Member of Parliament in the future should make sure not only to watch the ITV drama series, but to read “The Great Post Office Scandal” by Nick Wallis, which originally helped to shine a light on this appalling scandal?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work as one of my predecessors. He was an excellent postal affairs Minister—for all too brief a time, I think

it is fair to say, but he did a great job, and I know some of the things he put in place in this area are important to the whole process. Of course we are working at the highest level: the Prime Minister is taking a personal interest in these matters, so I see no barrier in terms of willingness to right these wrongs from anywhere in Government, right to the highest possible level. I had a meeting with the Justice Secretary today, who offered some positive ways forward in the next few days.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we should all watch that programme to learn lessons about not only this particular scandal, but the potential for future scandals based on the same kind of motivations. He mentions the “The Great Post Office Scandal”, written by the excellent journalist Nick Wallis, who has been such an important part of uncovering the truth of this horrendous scandal.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Harjinder Singh Butoy, my constituent, not only lost his business, lost his home and was bankrupted, but had the agony of being sentenced to 18 months in prison for something he knew he had never done. Justice, for Mr Singh Butoy, is not just getting him the compensation he still waits for; it is seeing those who sat by, knowing that he was the victim of an injustice, and watched him go to prison face justice themselves. While it is absolutely crucial that the statutory inquiry takes on all the information it needs to, it is important that we get justice as quickly as possible. What can the Minister say about how we can ensure that the importance of getting all the information does not mean that this process goes on for years and years, as with other miscarriages of justice we have seen in the past?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is tragic to hear about what happened to Mr Singh Butoy; I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work in drawing awareness to that case. As I said, people in these situations want two things: rapid compensation and the holding to account of the people responsible. We are keen to deliver on those two key things. We want to make it easier to overturn convictions and, once that has happened—from what the hon. Gentleman has said, it seems that Mr Singh Butoy’s conviction has been overturned—we want there to be access to rapid compensation, which we can deliver through the fixed-sum award or the full assessment route.

We also want to make sure that we hold people to account. Sir Wyn Williams’s inquiry is responsible for identifying exactly what went wrong and who was responsible. It is due to report later this year; we do not want it to carry on for years, but we want to give it the time and breathing space to do its job properly and we do not want to put any artificial limits on its ability to do that. We hope that the inquiry will end this year and report shortly after. We are keen that any actions against organisations or individuals can be taken at that time.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows from meetings and debates, my constituent, sub-postmistress Nichola Arch, moved me to tears when she described the public shaming and abuse that happened in our usually kind Stroud constituency at the time of the scandal. Her grown-up child has only ever known her as the post office lady fighting faceless corporations who lost jobs and her house in the meantime.

Given how people were treated and their losses, there is no one type of victim. That makes the issue hellishly complicated and it is really difficult to compile evidence. Will my hon. Friend use the national energy now behind this case to work with his excellent officials, who have worked incredibly hard on this, to simplify the schemes yet further? For example, could the £600,000 lump sum be done at levels that require limited and defined evidence, so that people are not exhausted yet further?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and her work on behalf of Nichola Arch, whose case is one of the most prominent in this scandal. She is right to say that assessing loss is complicated, which is exactly why I work with officials. I agree with her description of them as excellent; they are just as passionate about delivering compensation as Members of this House. We are working on a daily basis.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that the fixed-sum award for overturned convictions simplified things significantly. A significant number of people have full and final settlements on an overturned conviction—30 people have chosen that route so far. But I hear what my hon. Friend is saying about a simplified process in other areas of compensation. That is certainly something we are working on and looking at wherever we can.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): ITV and the power of drama deserve our praise for galvanising Government action far faster than the questions I have been asking here since 2020. As well as Mr Bates there was Mr Patel, who was forced to give a false confession to avoid prison. He had the humiliation of attending the graduation of his son, my constituent Varchas, while electronically tagged. Despite Mr Patel’s conviction having been quashed in 2020, he has had zilch compensation and suffered huge ill health. Can the Minister sort that, make sure that heads roll and make good on Paula Vennells’s promise to me in 2018, when she pulled the plug on Acton crown post office, that we will get a post office again? We are still waiting.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and work on behalf of Mr Patel. If Mr Patel’s conviction was overturned in 2020, he should have received £163,000 in interim compensation, which was made available to anybody with an overturned conviction. He can also access two routes: either a fixed-sum award of £600,000 or the full assessment route. He can make a decision based on whatever level of compensation he and his advisers think he is due. One route is undoubtedly quicker than the other due to the complex nature of assessing claims. I agree with the hon. Lady about people being held accountable, as I said in my statement and in response to other Members. Picking up her point about Acton post office, Paula Vennells does not have much influence over that any more, but we can ask questions about that on the hon. Lady’s behalf.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): When I first became an MP, I met two constituents who had suffered as a result of the Horizon scandal. I was struck by the utter betrayal they felt. They had lost the job they loved and that they had seen as a form of public service, serving their community for many decades. I welcome everything that the Minister has set out on future action, but may I push back gently on his suggestion that the network is

[Derek Thomas]

in a good place today and that there was no reputational damage? In the town of Porthleven and in Newlyn, a large village, we cannot get a business to touch the Post Office. Can the Minister do more work to restore the reputation of the Post Office, so that people have the service of a sub-postmaster or sub-postmistress where they need them?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right to point out the nature of the public service provided by sub-postmasters. The great passion and the store set by sub-postmasters, such as Jo Hamilton, about their role in the community and the service they provided to that community came across loud and clear in the ITV broadcast. It was not just about losing a job, but about losing their place in the community, so my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to that.

It is important to resolve these situations quickly now, for the reputation of the Post Office, overturning convictions and getting compensation out of the door to everyone affected by the scandal, and we are working towards that every day. The post office network is still revered across the country, so I believe it still has a strong reputation at an individual level, but we must make the network more sustainable and viable. If the network is more lucrative, that will attract more people into becoming sub-postmasters. We are working on that all the time, through initiatives such as the banking framework and other opportunities.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Many constituents have contacted me looking for swift and straightforward action. I am interested in what the Minister has outlined, but it will be important to see further flesh on the bones as we progress, and very quickly. I would like to hear more from him about how we can best deal with those hard-to-reach cases, such as people who may have walked away absolutely scunnered and significantly out of pocket, who may not come forward without the concerted action that they deserve.

The protracted nature of the issue has dampened people's enthusiasm for taking on a post office—we cannot shy away from that and our communities deserve that we do not do so. In my constituency, the post office in Neilston will close on Saturday in what is known as a “temporary closure”, but it is only temporary if someone will come forward to take it on. Too many communities in East Renfrewshire and further afield do not have post offices, which are essential. I take on board what the Minister has said, but what more can be done, over and above what he has set out? Much more is needed to make sure that people have the confidence to take on the post offices that our communities need so much.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right that we need to make the compensation schemes and the overturning of convictions swifter and more straightforward, and she is right to point to the fact that some people are reluctant to come forward in the first place. We are keen to deliver a solution that does not require sub-postmasters to come forward in order for us to overturn a conviction, as has been called for by Members of this House. We have been looking at that and we are working on it right now.

I represent a rural constituency and the Government provide significant financial support of £50 million a year for rural post offices. We are determined to restore the reputation of post offices through this work and make them more financially stable generally, by increasing the remuneration opportunities for postmasters. We think that is the route that will ensure people will come forward and run post offices in rural locations, which is as important to me as it is to the hon. Lady.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I apologise because this will obviously be repetitive, but the actions and governance of the Post Office have been incomprehensible. Many people will only have realised what has happened because they saw the ITV programme—I encourage them all to come to me or to any other MP if they do not know where to go to. I first engaged with this situation as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee along with colleagues in March 2020, and it shocked me then as it does now. For me, the most shocking aspect, as has been repeated across the House, was the number of people who were told they were the only one. The obvious cover-up from people within the Post Office delivering those statements is wrong, shocking and outrageous. Can I encourage the Minister to do everything he can to ensure that those people feel the full force of the law so that the sub-postmasters, who are the real victims, feel like they have got some justice at the end of this outrageous situation?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I reassure him that repetition is no barrier to contribution in this place, as he will recognise. I also thank him for his work on the Select Committee, which is hugely important. We heard the words “You're the only one” time and again in those dramatisations. It was horrific. It was a blatant lie, and somebody must have known that it was a blatant lie. Those lies led to some people going to jail and others suffering other forms of financial detriment, and detriment to their health and that of their families. Should prosecutions flow from that wherever possible? I would say yes.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I share the thoughts of almost everyone—there has been almost cross-party unanimity on this issue—but I am still worried about the ongoing treatment of sub-postmasters and their liability. In 2018, my local post office was subject to an armed robbery. Those who ran the post office were hauled up to the regional office, where they were interrogated. They felt like criminals. They were not allowed to bring their reps from the Communication Workers Union; they were told they could bring reps only from the National Federation of SubPostmasters, which they had no trust in. In the end, although of course they were found not to have given over the money willingly, they left and handed over the post office to someone else. There is a problem with the liability of sub-postmasters, and particularly the fact that the Post Office has closed Crown post offices, which would not have such liability. Will the Minister look again at how liability works for sub-postmasters?

I echo the calls that we should look again at private prosecutions. The CCRC said in its 2020 report that the private prosecutions process is haphazard and the fact that the Government do not even know what private

prosecutions are going on, because there is no central register, is detrimental to the very reforms they might need to make. Will the Minister at least look at having a central register of private prosecutions, and a regulatory overview, possibly of the Crown Prosecution Service? It was created for the very purpose of separating prosecutions from the police, and we now need to do that for other public services as well.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member for raising that troubling case, which I am happy to look into on his behalf, if he would like. I think he said that case was in 2018, since when I feel there has been a change in relationship between the Post Office and the network—I am not saying that it is universally good or universally supported by the network, but there has been some improvement—including the recruitment of 100 regional managers, so there is more of a relationship-based approach between the network and Post Office Ltd.

On private prosecutions, as I said earlier, we should look at that in the context of this particular scandal as well as the wider connotations of private prosecutions. The Justice Secretary has committed to do that, and I am sure that he will report to the House in due course and take on board the Justice Committee's important recommendations on this matter.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Minister has today provided the House with what I see as three key assurances: namely, that compensation will be paid quickly to all victims; that wrongful convictions will be overturned; and that those responsible, whether from the Post Office, Fujitsu or elsewhere, will be held to account, ideally with criminal prosecutions. Does he agree? Can he reassure my constituents in Bracknell that a judicial system that presided over so many wrongful convictions will also be reviewed?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right; rapid and fair compensation is exactly what we are seeking to deliver. It has to be seen to be fair. We also need an easier route to overturning convictions, and we are determined to take that forward, as well as individuals being held to account. He raises an important point on the judicial system, and potentially the trust we place upon computer records seems to have played a part in this case. That is a lesson we potentially need to learn across the legal framework, and I know the Justice Secretary has that in mind.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister is aware that this is not just about those who were wrongly accused and convicted; it is also about those who were falsely accused, were not prosecuted but who still experienced consequences. I have a constituent who believes she was a victim of Horizon false accusations. She lost her post office franchise as a consequence, but the associated pressures led to her losing her main business as well. Can the Minister confirm whether she would be eligible for compensation? How does she go about accessing compensation? For similar victims of false accusations without prosecution who sadly have died, how does the deceased's family access compensation?

Kevin Hollinrake: There are three compensation schemes for good reason—it is not ideal to have three different schemes, but we are where we find ourselves. We have

the Horizon shortfall scheme, the group litigation order scheme and the overturned conviction scheme, and it sounds as though the hon. Gentleman's constituent would fit into the Horizon shortfall scheme and should be able to apply to that. I am happy to make sure that he is aware of the route that his constituent can take. In assessing financial loss, consequential losses are a part of that assessment, and it sounds as though there is a case for consequential loss in that particular case. It can certainly be something that financial compensation takes into account. With regard to the families of deceased individuals, they can still claim to the same compensation schemes and should be compensated in exactly the same manner and to exactly the same degree.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): The building on Queens Road in Craig-y-Don in my constituency, where Alan Bates served the community as sub-postmaster, is now a charity shop. It is one small reminder of the damage that has been done to lives and livelihoods across the country. I welcome the Minister's statement and his tone. I welcome the progress that the Government are making, but I also know that he has seen the interim report from the inquiry. He has heard the mood of the House this evening, which is that a great scandal requires a great response. Does he agree with me that, in addition to prompt payment of fair compensation, now is the time to consider legislation for the overturning of unsafe convictions, to consider the powers of the Post Office and to consider Fujitsu's status as a framework provider for Government contracts? Does he agree that we need to see justice where actual wrongdoing has occurred, and soon?

Kevin Hollinrake: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he has done on this, and I share his ambition on delivering. This has been a great scandal and we need a significant response to it. Our discussions today with the Lord Chancellor were very much along the lines of attempting to do something unprecedented in this space, and we are working on that right now. I hope to give my hon. Friend something more definite in that regard in the coming days.

With regard to Fujitsu and individuals, we think it is right for the inquiry to be given time to ascertain who did what, who did not do what, and who is responsible for the scandal. When the inquiry reports in due course—it should be concluded by the end of this year, with a report hopefully soon after—we should be able to make decisions on those areas at that point. Certainly, our prosecution authorities should be able to make decisions with clearer sight of the information and the evidence that has been ascertained.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his clear commitment and dedication to this issue. On both sides of the Chamber, we are impressed that he wants to find a solution and a way forward. I commend the ITV drama, which clearly illustrated the impact on the ordinary, normal, wee people—as they said themselves—and the brutality of the Post Office Horizon scheme on good people who were so badly wronged. All of us in this Chamber are here as elected representatives to speak up for those people who were badly wronged.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Having seen some of the horrific effects—in particular, a 20-year-old girl was imprisoned because of the defective scheme and had her entire life marred by that system—I seek clarity about the possibility of the Minister overseeing not just a vital and necessary reimbursement scheme but an official pardoning scheme to have the records wiped in England, Scotland, Wales and for us in Northern Ireland. As the only MP from Northern Ireland in the Chamber at the moment, I wish to see the same justice and compensation for those people as well.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution and his kind words. Even though I was very familiar with all the detriment that postmasters had experienced due to the scandal, the most shocking part of the dramatisation was the brutality shown by some of the Post Office managers—it was inconceivable. I completely share how appalled he is by what he saw in the programme. Anybody who has not seen it should watch it.

Across the board, we are looking very closely at overturning convictions. We are determined to do that not just for England but UK-wide, and we are working with the devolved Administrations to make sure that we do something right across the piece. Although there are different prosecution authorities in different parts of the UK—in Scotland, for example—the Post Office seems to have been involved in the compilation of those files in every part of the United Kingdom, so it makes sense to have a scheme that covers every part of the United Kingdom.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for all his efforts on this issue over a long period. I echo his tributes to all those who have campaigned on this issue for many years. The Post Office Horizon IT scandal was an outrageous miscarriage of justice, affecting so many innocent postmasters and their families. Many constituents have contacted me to express their concerns and outrage over this miscarriage of justice. Will my hon. Friend reassure me, the House and the country that this Government will do all they can to compensate all the victims as soon as possible, including by looking at exonerating them all collectively, so that this wrong can be made right both swiftly and compassionately?

Kevin Hollinrake: My constituents have also written to me, appalled and outraged at what has happened. Again, we should pay tribute to the people behind the programme who have brought it to the public's attention. I agree; we are looking for a process where all victims can be compensated quickly. We have compensation schemes in place already, and 64% of those affected have been compensated. On overturning convictions, we are looking at a collective exoneration to see what is legally possible. That would open the door to rapid, immediate compensation of £600,000 for people who choose that route. The full assessment takes more time, and people would have to choose the right route for them. It should deliver on all the ambitions that he sets out.

Michael Shanks (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): This disgraceful scandal reached every single part of the country, including in Scotland, where the

Crown Office held prosecutorial power rather than the Post Office. In 2020, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission identified 73 potential victims, of whom only 16 have come forward to date. Clearly, there is still work to do to get the message out to people that they are entitled to have their conviction looked at. Of course, the scheme only reaches the people who had a conviction in the first place—many affected by the scandal never had their case taken forward but still lost their reputation and their livelihood.

Today, the First Minister of Scotland said that he will look at a mass exoneration in relation to these convictions, and I think that is the right approach. I wonder whether the Minister will confirm that he and the Lord Chancellor will take that forward in England, because across the whole of the UK, we need a system where everyone understands what will happen next, so that no victim anywhere in the country who was affected by this scandal is left with justice not served.

Kevin Hollinrake: Again, I share the hon. Member's ambitions in every part of his remarks. We, too, are disappointed that we have not had more people coming forward to have their convictions overturned, for a number of different reasons. Those people have been written to several times by different bodies, including the CCRC. We are keen to get the message out, but we do not think that that is the whole problem. We think there is a confidence issue for some of those people in coming forward after so many years, after what has happened to them, so we are very keen to say to them, "You will be treated fairly and dealt with as quickly as possible."

A mass exoneration scheme, as the hon. Member described it, is something we are looking at. I cannot confirm that today on the Floor of the House, but we certainly think that that kind of blanket overturning of convictions, together with a rapid compensation scheme, will mean that more people get access to justice more quickly. That is something we are very keen on, and to deliver it UK-wide would absolutely be the right thing to do.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): As a former sub-postmaster, last week's drama brought up many emotions from my time serving from 2014 to 2019. I have mentioned Fujitsu five times in this Chamber, asking five times about its involvement. We now know, finally, that it had a back door into the live system. Minister, when will Fujitsu face justice for its utter incompetence in all of this? How can it be made to contribute compensation for the many postmasters with claims, instead of that being done the taxpayer, who is not responsible for this scandal?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for being a constant contributor to these debates. He brings real-life experience of these matters, which we very much value and appreciate. I would be very happy to keep up our regular engagement on these issues. He is not shy of informing me of different things that I need to be aware of and I appreciate that engagement.

Of course, the back door into the sub-postmasters account seems to have been a key contributor to this scandal, and Fujitsu seems to have had that back door. We are yet to establish how much of that was Fujitsu

doing it unilaterally or whether it was being done on the instruction of the Post Office. The inquiry is there to give us those kinds of answers. The inquiry is committed to concluding by the end of this year and reporting shortly after. At that point, we will know who was responsible for what, and we should then be able to identify who can be made responsible through potential financial contributions, rather than the taxpayer alone having to pick up the tab for this very significant compensation package. I am just as ambitious as my hon. Friend is to make sure that those who are responsible pay for what they have done.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I, too, pay tribute to the ITV drama—many constituents have written to me about how powerful it was—and to the BBC's podcast, "The Great Post Office Trial", which I listened to a couple of years ago. *Horizon* is accounting software, yet at every turn it seemed that it lacked the very principles of accounting that those who study the fundamentals in accounting recognise. Where were the checks and balances in the system, and why did the governance of the Post Office also lack the same checks and balances? It appears that no reconciliations were done to cross-check the software, and the principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care were clearly not applied to this critical software in the way that accountants are held to them in the code of ethics. After many years, why are we only now hearing that there was a failed pilot and that that could have averted this disgraceful abuse of power and miscarriage of justice?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member for her contribution. I, too, have had many constituents contacting me who are appalled by what they have seen on television. She is right to draw attention to the fact that this was not the first time that this had been publicised. There is Nick Wallis's book, "The Great Post Office Scandal", and his podcast, which is well worth listening to. He goes into these matters in even greater depth, and she is right to pay tribute to those broadcasts and publications.

All the questions that the hon. Member asks are valid. When was it established that this was going wrong? Where were the checks and balances? Where was the duty of care? That is what the inquiry is there for. The inquiry was established after the court case and there was vigorous debate in this House about the type of inquiry it should be. It was ultimately settled on that it should be a statutory inquiry because of the greater powers that a statutory inquiry has, so it should be able to get to the bottom of the questions she rightly asks. Once we have got to the bottom of those questions, we can start to identify who was responsible specifically for what and make sure that those people are held to account.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his work on this really important issue. It is a really heartbreaking story of injustice, and I am

sure we would agree that it has been allowed to drag on for far too long. It was incredibly heartening for me that so many constituents were moved by the powerful ITV dramatisation to write to me about this injustice and ask what I will be doing about it as their MP, but it is also tragic to see that it had to come to this, after years of powerful and brave campaigning by some of the postmasters affected. We owe it to them to act with the urgency the situation requires.

While I acknowledge that the Minister has set out some challenges in giving certainty about timelines today, can he at least provide a timeline for when we will be able to say with certainty that everyone affected will have received compensation and that all those who were wrongfully convicted will have their convictions overturned? Alongside that, accountability is such an important issue here, and I would welcome some details from him on how he will work with colleagues from different parties to make sure that all those who are accountable, including Fujitsu, are held to account.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I agree that it has taken too long to get to this point. If it was not for people like Alan Bates, some of the journalists who were referred to earlier, Lord Arbuthnot, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and many others, this may have never come to light, but it has taken too long. We need to act with pace and as quickly as possible to expedite many things here, as we have referred to already. We are keen to overturn convictions very quickly. It may require legislation, and I am sure we will get support from both sides of the House for any legislation we may need.

The hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) is right to push us on timelines. As we have said, we are keen to deliver compensation, wherever possible, by August this year. We want to overturn convictions as rapidly as possible. Ideally, we would like it to take weeks, not months, to do that, but it will obviously be dependent on a number of factors. The compensation will come through all three schemes. The first scheme has practically been delivered for the 2,417 people who applied within the appropriate timescale. One hundred per cent of those people have been made offers, and 85% of them have accepted. There are some people who applied to the remaining schemes out of time, so we are working on those applications right now and hope to deliver them as quickly as possible. I think 75% of them have been made offers, but we are left with the GLO scheme and the overturned convictions scheme. We hope to overturn the convictions by August this year, if not far sooner than that.

Mr Speaker: That was a very important statement and was much needed. I thank the Minister for staying at the Dispatch Box for so long. I also thank ITV, because it has certainly made the country aware of this absolute scandal against innocent people.

Point of Order

9.13 pm

The Treasurer of His Majesty's Household (Mr Marcus Jones): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The urgent question and statements today have run for significantly longer than anticipated. The Horizon statement has been given significant time, which is right given the seriousness and gravity of the issue. The Second Reading of the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill will therefore not take place this evening. It is a significant piece of legislation that is crucial to the UK's energy security, and it cannot be properly debated between now and 10 o'clock. The Leader of the House will update the House in the usual way on the date for which the Bill will be rescheduled. However, I fully expect it to be within the next two weeks.

OFFSHORE PETROLEUM LICENSING BILL

Bill to be read a Second time tomorrow.

Rural Transport

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

9.14 pm

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): How nice it is to see you come back to the Chair, Mr Speaker, when your instincts must have suggested that you go elsewhere. I want to raise with the House a bizarre issue. For some reason, the Order Paper seems to have been misprinted. For example, it has given me an "s" on the end of my name. Also bizarrely, the presentation of the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill seems to have disappeared. I cannot understand what happened to the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), and why he would not want to be here—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just to help, that might be the case, but it is not a matter for the Adjournment, as you well know, so get on with your Adjournment debate instead.

Sir Bill Wiggin: I was clearly far too nice to you, Mr Speaker.

Let us start with the fact that 21.3% of the English population live in a predominately rural area. That is 12 million people who can contribute even more towards economic growth. Yet without greater thought about investment in infrastructure and innovation for transport in rural regions, that untapped potential is not being maximised. The Government have done much to support transport links with the north and in the devolved nations, despite the vibrant though poorly connected local economies in areas such as North Herefordshire. To maximise our growth and ensure that we meet our climate ambitions, as a nation we cannot afford to leave anyone behind.

Rural residents are distinctive because they are absolutely reliant on roads. Some 96% of journeys are made on local highways in the UK, and local roads make up 98% of the highway network in England. Road improvements can, unsurprisingly, have a significant impact on rural areas. In Herefordshire, the town of Leominster would benefit immensely from a northern link road—a brilliant £12 million investment that I raised some time ago. Of course, nobody should ever forget the tragedy and vandalism of the famous and now much-missed Hereford bypass. It would have made a phenomenal improvement to the city's air quality and congestion. Everybody should remember that the opportunity for funding our bypass was idiotically thrown away by Herefordshire's previous Green and independent council—a phenomenal failure for which they must never be forgiven.

Today, in trying to rectify that, we are limited by the cyclical nature of Government funding cycles. I live in hope that a funding window for the future Hereford bypass will open before 2030. The long cycles benefit civil servants, but leave vital short-term developments at the mercy of local authorities, which may themselves face funding constraints. Local projects are of course dependent on local planning rules; however, central Government can do much more to facilitate those projects by providing capital for roads to local authorities at shorter notice periods. I was delighted to learn that

Herefordshire Council will receive an additional £1.8 million to help to repair the county's roads. I praise the Government for redirecting funds from HS2 in that way. The importance of such funding cannot be overestimated in rural regions where car dependence is so high.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is right about rural roads and transport. At my advice centre, just this Saturday past, one issue that local people brought to my attention was the contact between villages and local towns, and the rural transport reduction there has been. As the hon. Gentleman and I know, it is so important for people who live out in the rural community to have connectivity with villages and towns such as Newtownards in my constituency. Does he agree that there needs to be more rural transport on the roads to help people get to big towns and have a normal life?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I believe the hon. Gentleman was named as one of the busiest parliamentarians, so I am very pleased that my Adjournment debate has not missed his attention. Of course, I agree with him.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this Adjournment debate on such an important topic. Like his Herefordshire constituency, my East Devon constituency has running through it an A-road that is potted with dangerous potholes. I was pleased to hear that we might soon receive additional money for dealing with those potholes, but does he agree that levelling up is not just for villages in rural areas such as ours but also a concept that needs to be applied to the road surface?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I noticed that the hon. Gentleman kept looking at notes. That is how it is in the countryside: we have to keep looking for the potholes all around us. I absolutely agree.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It strikes me, as my hon. Friend describes the situation in Herefordshire, that he could be talking about Wales. I know that some three quarters of the population there lives within 90 minutes of Cardiff, but the reality of life for many across Wales is that it is a rural country. Does he agree that the policies being pursued by the Labour Government in Wales—the curtailing of road development, the constant attacks on drivers, and now the 20 mph speed limit imposed across pretty much most parts of the country—are hindering economic growth and hurting rural economies and communities that depend on road transport?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I do not agree with my hon. Friend that the roads in Wales are worse—in fact, I will talk about that in a moment—but I do agree about the 20 mph speed limit. The people of north Wales are lucky to have Members such as him looking out for their interests when their efforts to get to work, see their families and go shopping are completely sabotaged by the lunacy of the Welsh Government, who seem to think that people should be going even slower than they already are. There is an image of a wonderful scene in “Pretty Woman” where Julia Roberts is leaning into the car, and the caption says: “No, I’m not looking for a good time. I’m just following the 20 mph speed limit.” I think that says it all about the madness of the Welsh Government. Members will remember that image later.

Safer roads mean less congestion and therefore fewer emissions. That is really important. Drivers can save up to an estimated £440 on their vehicle repair bills when roads are properly maintained. I hope to see continuous Government support for road maintenance in rural communities. I am not usually keen to ask Ministers to spend a single penny of taxpayers' money, but as a road tax payer I believe that car drivers have every right to expect that their hard-earned money will be used to maintain the infrastructure for which it was levied. The misspending of that funding means that hypothecation is justified for road tax.

The Treasury takes money from car drivers to fund overpaid train drivers and an inefficient Network Rail that could have been privatised years ago. More money is wasted on bus lanes, cycle paths and not-very-smart motorways, yet the wretched potholes escape unrepaired. In Herefordshire, we have more roads per capita than any other county. Our rural roads are so neglected that the need to fill potholes has been superseded by the need to resurface the entire road as the damage is beyond patching. Drivers can tell when driving over the border into Wales, because the noise they hear while bouncing and lurching disappears as the Barnett-funded highways allow them to glide along the Heads of the Valleys road. Of course, we do not want Wales's 20 mph speed limits or NHS waiting lists, but its roads are a source of great envy. There is room for much more innovation in rural communities.

Robin Millar: I rise briefly to make the point that my hon. Friend describes the roads in south Wales.

Sir Bill Wiggin: The Heads of the Valleys road is indeed south Wales.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate on such an important issue. He is talking about the roads as vital capillaries that keep people connected. I am sure he will be well aware of the report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee last year on rural mental health. One of the key findings was that connectivity is pivotal to people's health and wellbeing in rural communities, and part of that is our rural bus network. Often, that is run by volunteers, such as the Fellrunner and Border Rambler services in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that our rural bus network must be supported to keep people connected and well in our rural communities?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I will come to buses in a moment. I am not convinced that the very fat buses that we have nowadays that hardly fit down rural lanes and are usually empty are necessarily the best way to transport people around our rural communities. However, my hon. Friend's point about mental health is fundamental to the wellbeing of our constituents, so more innovation, better delivery and better transport will be at the heart of that issue.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Just to expand on the importance of the bus solution, I have villagers in Trimdon, Fishburn and Sedgefield who want to get to employment. It is not just about mental health; it is about employment and the whole gamut for people living in those places. The roads need to be flat so that

[Paul Howell]

the buses can run on them, and we must find solutions, whether it is little buses, thin buses, big buses or whatever. They need to be in place and use the funding that is available from the Government.

Sir Bill Wiggin: I will get on to the subject of buses, but my hon. Friend is right and his constituents are truly blessed to have such a diligent Member of Parliament.

Let me come on to the Government's "Future of Transport: rural strategy", which I hope will contain some of the answers for my hon. Friends. In this instance, it highlights the opportunity for rural residents to move to electric and self-driving vehicles. The latter might be one of the solutions for people. I am always astonished whenever I see a picture of a self-driving vehicle—why do they have wing mirrors? It is extraordinary. A constituent once asked what happens if a self-driving vehicle is stolen, and I said that it would probably come back by itself.

The transition requires reliable charging point infrastructure. To match demand, 300,000 charging points will be required by 2030. Currently, rural areas have only one sixth of the public charging points for electric vehicles that are available. In Herefordshire, there are only 12 public charging points, despite the fact that rural areas constitute 90% of England. The limited range of electric vehicles is also problematic for rural residents who may need to travel longer distances. That is not to mention the need for four-wheel drive, which is essential when the roads are covered in snow and are not cleared, as they are in London.

The real solution for rural communities for the future is hydrogen. We have plenty of water, and we need and use heavy machinery. There will never be an electric digger that is even half as good as the hydrogen-powered JCB backhoe. Brilliantly, JCB has developed its direct-burn hydrogen fleet, which substitutes hydrogen for diesel and means that already heavy plant does not need giant batteries. With machines such as the JCB Loadall telehandler, we can continue to fight climate change from the farmyard—something we do best.

But help is needed so that farmers can move to hydrogen-powered JCB-manufactured machinery. At the moment, hydrogen is not a recognised road fuel. We need to license it for road use, and that means that regulation 94 of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 needs to be amended so that that barrier to hydrogen is removed. I hope the Minister will tell us that he will make that happen immediately, in conjunction of course with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

We also need to recognise that farm machinery is getting larger as we have more people to feed. Some common sense is required by the Department for Transport, which should allow the police to fight rural crime rather than escorting combine harvesters over 3.5 metres wide. And that is if the police have been given five days' notice, which is especially difficult during harvest time when rain is beckoning. We need uniform rules so that combines can cross police force borders without needing to go through these applications again and again. The current system of dispensation orders is a good first step, but we really should catch up with the times and deliver a better way to cut corn.

Meanwhile, heavy goods vehicles pose a challenge for the winding roads in rural regions. Although the use of drones is a possible solution in some cities, that is unlikely to be true in the countryside. Such problems mean that it is important that the Government provide some sort of oversight and policing so that green activists do not try to disrupt or destroy national infrastructure in the way they did in Hereford.

To increase productivity, we should ensure that people get to work around the country more quickly. Increasing speed limits on motorways would help to do that but, as Lord McLoughlin told me many years ago, there is no evidence available about the safety implications. That means that we need to test and trial increased speed limits along with safer cars and better brakes. An excellent place to test these things would be the M50, which is the perfect motorway on which to try to increase the speed limit. It is short and safe, and is a truly excellent motorway, where we could easily monitor the safety of a higher speed limit.

Road maintenance is also vital from a safety perspective, particularly for cyclists and motorcyclists. That is often forgotten by those who advocate cycling, but it is especially important that this safety angle is not forgotten as people consider the potential uptake of electric bikes and micromobility solutions such as e-scooters in rural areas, although I would not recommend that particular form of transport, because a small-wheeled scooter is ill-equipped to cope with the muddy and mucky roads.

Rural roads pose significant dangers for all motorists. There are overhanging trees, and there is green plant growth on the road signs. Worst of all is the gravel that is washed into the road by rainstorms, which is an absolute nightmare for motorcycles, and the hazards can of course be fatal. Rural roads were the site of over half the cyclist deaths that occurred between 2016 and 2021, and between 2018 and 2022 rural roads were the site of an average of 66% of motorcyclist deaths. Cycling is also not a solution for the 25.5% of the rural population who are over 65.

The Government could also look at the advice from IAM RoadSmart, which is campaigning for VAT-free status for air vests. Motorcycling airbag vests and jackets can prevent certain types of injury in the event of a collision. Although there is a stated maximum intervention time of 200 milliseconds to achieve British standard EN 1621-4:2013, there is currently no requirement to comply with that standard. Helite, a manufacturer, confirms that air vests provide injury mitigation, saying that they maintain

"the cervical vertebrae and the head"

and the

"Rigidification of the trunk to stabilise the vital organs: thorax, lungs, pancreas, abdomen, stomach, liver."

They also offer

"Complete protection of the spinal column"

and

"Kidney and hip protection. The trunk is maintained to...resist hyper-flexing."

Separate research by IAM RoadSmart discovered that nearly two thirds of motorcyclists believe that the cost of safety wear has prevented them from purchasing items that would enhance their safety while on a motorcycle.

Turning to public transport, rural residents are heavily dependent on their cars because public transport is not widely available to them. Limited travel options may restrict residents' ability to find a job. Businesses also rely on transport infrastructure for access to rural talent pools and customers. When I spoke to the Minister—then the employment Minister—and branch managers at Leominster Jobcentre Plus last March, the need for improved transport links to the largest employers in Herefordshire was a particularly useful point that was raised.

I must commend the Government for the progress they are making with the pilot schemes for demand-responsive transport, which has seen 17 local authorities being granted £20 million to pilot schemes in rural and suburban regions for on-demand buses. An interim report found that the use of the schemes in the areas analysed was increasing, and that in respect of those that began before October 2022, the average number of monthly passengers had been between 282 and 1,725. It is important for public transport to be affordable as well as convenient, and the Government's capping of bus fares was generous, but traditional buses are themselves facing decline. Between 2022 and 2023 nearly 20% of bus routes were reduced, and, according to the County Councils Network, bus services are now at a "historic low" in rural regions.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I should be delighted. I could do with a breather.

Sarah Dyke: I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. In my constituency, I have been campaigning to keep vital rural bus routes in service for those who cannot or do not wish to drive. Somerset Council is awaiting the outcome of its bid for the Department for Transport's zero emission bus regional areas scheme, which, if successful, would bring crucial and environmentally friendly transport to our communities. Does the hon. Member agree that these funds must be released as a matter of urgency to improve the lives of our constituents, so that they can have access to services, jobs and education?

Sir Bill Wiggin: The Government are being very generous—the hon. Lady may have forgotten to mention that—but the important point is that buses are not the success story that I wish they were. I am very lucky in that Bromyard has Dave Morris's fantastic DRM transport business, but I think we need to think carefully about how we can make public transport affordable, reliable and efficient. Simply throwing money at the challenges has failed so far to deliver a sustainable long-term solution, although "buses on demand" is certainly a good idea. I therefore hope that the national bus strategy will help bus companies to compete with trains and continue to deliver better public transport.

And now for trains: oh, dear!

Paul Howell: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I will, before I steam on to trains.

Paul Howell: I just wanted to make a final point about the bus agenda, and the importance of those buses. When people are evaluating a bus service, if the service is poor and becomes worse and worse, they will abandon it. Durham has seen the biggest drop in bus use in the country. We need not only a good road but a good service, whether it is demand-responsive or not. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to take a long-term view and ensure that there is a service offer that encourages people to use buses until we get the best service out of our bus routes?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend: he is quite right. People do "wise up" to inefficient public services—and there is no better example than the train service.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I apologise for arriving having missed his opening remarks. Does he agree that community bus services, which are demand-responsive and help to supply services to remote rural communities that are not served by regular buses, may well be the solution that he seeks, as they provide access for people who cannot travel on their own account?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend—a friend, neighbour, and brilliant Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee. Not only is he right, but that is particularly true in Herefordshire and Shropshire, where the most vulnerable people, the children and the elderly, need public services more than anyone. They are the ones who are missing out. So bus by demand is definitely where the future lies because, turning to the railways, the train service has a lemming-like determination to kill itself off. The number of trains in service is reducing and that is particularly problematic for rural residents who rely on train lines to access their workplaces.

Many of my constituents have highlighted issues concerning the train line between London and Ledbury. It is difficult to leave Ledbury at a time when normal people would hope to travel to work. Returning to Ledbury is also a random experience as the last train leaves at about teatime from London, and then it is fingers-crossed that the driver does not give up in Worcester.

So while the Government are aiming to increase rail freight by 75%, for residents to utilise such a boost to service frequency the road network needs to be in place to facilitate access to the stations. That is important because the midlands offers a unique opportunity to enhance connectivity through the heart of the country. Midlands Connect has called for the midlands rail hub to improve connectivity in the region. This hub would mean that the largest urban centres in the midlands would no longer be more than an hour's reach through public transport to an extra 1.6 million people.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): On that point, in Northumberland we have the Northumberland line which is going to connect Ashington through Blyth and Seaton Valley into Newcastle, and that will go two ways: it will take people into Newcastle and it will also bring people into the area so that they can use the beach and the park. It is a fantastic way to use those train services and that has been delivered by this Conservative Government.

Sir Bill Wiggin: I am delighted, and all I can say is that the people of Blyth Valley are lucky to have such a marvellous MP, such a marvellous rail service and such a positive step forward, and, as potentially I suppose that is funded by the HS2 decision, a marvellous Prime Minister as well. So all good, but let us hope that they are not getting the same train service that my poor constituents get between Paddington and Hereford, which is woeful.

I have campaigned for many years on the issue of accessibility to the train stations in my constituency and was pleased when improvements for people with disabilities were made to the station in Leominster, but accessibility continues to be problematic at Ledbury. The station has a B3 accessibility rating and an eastbound platform that is not accessible to those with limited mobility. The station is also difficult to navigate for those carrying luggage and those with prams. All of these issues contribute to an unpleasant travelling experience, which discourages rural residents from making use of public transport.

As I said, the railway seems determined to put off the travellers who most need trains to get about. I hoped that common sense had finally trickled through when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) told me at Prime Minister's questions that Ledbury was in line for disabled access, but, alas, that dream was shattered shortly afterwards by a junior Minister in the Department for Transport.

In October I brought this problem to the attention of the Secretary of State for Transport, who informed me that Ledbury station has been nominated for the Access for All scheme. While that is welcome news, we have been there before. I am concerned that I had to raise this issue at all given that disabled users of public transport should be protected by the Equality Act 2010. Unfortunately, it appears there are many stations like Ledbury in the UK; I was appalled to learn that step-free access is in fact not available in three quarters of the UK's train stations. A 2019 study found that the only disability measure in approximately 190 stations was a hearing induction loop.

Accessibility is also relevant to the building of new rural homes. In November the Government announced that £2.5 million will be made available to support affordable housing developments in rural areas, yet without efficient transport connections the successful uptake of these new properties is also likely to be limited. I therefore ask the Government to do all they can to insist that local authorities ensure that public transport is accessible for all rural residents.

In conclusion, I want to praise the Government for doing something I would not normally approve of. The Air Balloon pub has been completely destroyed. There is nothing left of it. Normally that would be a tragedy, but not when the A417 is being improved. It is so long overdue and so welcome that the loss of the pub is a small sacrifice to pay, and I must thank and encourage the Government for that vital progress.

The advantages of better rural transport are not limited to rural communities. By unlocking the productivity and connectivity of rural residents, we can enhance our efforts towards prolonged sustainable growth as a country. For far too long there has been an unfair divide between our rural and urban communities. It is time we

closed that gap, and the way to do that is by delivering rural transport, just as we would expect to see in urban areas.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): That was a tour de force, by any interpretation, from my gallant and hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin). It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government on the vital issue of rural transport and to his thought-provoking speech this evening. I know his constituency well; I rode my first winner as a jockey there at Garnons point-to-point, back in the 1840s, and he understands that, as a Member for a rural constituency myself, I share his concerns and his desire to have better transport in rural areas.

It is a measure of the importance of this debate not only that my hon. Friend took a very considerable time to make his case, but that many parliamentary colleagues came in for an Adjournment debate in circumstances where there is much to answer. Rural transport is an issue that has been transformed by the Prime Minister's decision to cancel the second leg of HS2 and attribute significantly larger amounts of funding, which I will go through, to transport infrastructure across the country, and in particular to support rural communities.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the points made by several hon. Friends are utterly right. As part of Network North, we have announced £8.3 billion of funding to fix potholes and maintain our roads. We have already commenced paying that money, and I will go through the Herefordshire funding, because it matters to see the transformation in funding that has taken place.

We should bear in mind that in 2008-09 and 2009-10 less than £10 million in funding was allocated to Herefordshire Council. That, in reality, has now doubled to £18.76 million this year, up 31%, by reason of the announcements that I will go through. There is the baseline funding of £14 million, on top of which there was an increase of £2.56 million as part of the 2023 budget. On top of that there was a further £106 million in additional funding as part of the Network North 11-year period of funding up to 2033-34. Finally, Herefordshire has already received the first instalment of £1.8 million, in December 2023.

I think I am achieving a parliamentary hat-trick by responding to the Adjournment debates on the second-to-last day of the winter term, on the last day of the winter term and on the first day of this term. I commenced with a robust No. 10 in my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on 18 December, an interesting but genuine No. 11 on 19 December, and then an opening bat in the Graveney mould on the first day of this term.

The particular relevance of this is that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) stated in this and previous debates that Devon was not getting any funding. He will be aware that it received in excess of £6.6 million over the next two years to combat potholes in his constituency, over and above the baseline funding and the 2023 budget. For context, in this year alone that equates to a 16.6% uplift in his county council's pothole budget.

Richard Foord: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will move on. The—

Mr Speaker: Order. One of us is going to sit down, and it will certainly not be me. Minister, it is a bit naughty to mention the Member while he is here but then not allow him to come back. You take him personally to task, which is not a problem, but then when he stands up you want to move on, which I think is a bit unfair. Minister, it is up to you.

Guy Opperman: Mr Speaker, with respect, I was going to allow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton to intervene. I have a lot of Members to deal with and I was going to address pothole funding first, but I will of course allow him to respond.

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I appreciate his point about the money being released to places such as Devon, but I speak to constituents who think that one reason why speed restrictions are being imposed on rural roads is because of potholes. That is clearly not the Government's intention, so is this a form of speed restriction?

Guy Opperman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the copious answer I made on those points on 19 December.

The reality of the situation is that, in addition to the Herefordshire funding, there is a further £4.7 billion for local authorities in the north and midlands through the new local integrated transport settlement, which will allow authorities to deliver a range of new transport schemes to help reduce congestion and upgrade junctions, as well as to invest in active travel and zero-emission buses.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire specifically raised the Hereford bypass, which did not proceed under a previous local authority. I am happy to meet him and the present local authority, because clearly there are opportunities through the local integrated transport settlement, and other forms of funding, for local authorities to bring forward proposals in relation to potential bypasses. It is for the county council to make that case, and I look forward to hearing from it.

As the House has debated in detail tonight, buses have a key role to play in improving connectivity and supporting rural areas to develop and grow the economy. That is why the Government have invested so heavily in buses over the past few years. Following the introduction of the national bus strategy, the Government are providing over £1 billion of support to help local authorities to deliver their bus service improvement plans, and this support will remain in place until at least April 2025. It is up to local authorities to determine how this bus funding should be spent, including by assessing the needs of local communities.

In addition, Herefordshire, like many rural areas of the north and midlands, will benefit from hundreds of millions of pounds that the Government have allocated from the HS2 moneys, through Network North, to help level up bus services. That includes £1.9 million of bus service improvement plan funding, and it will receive further money through Network North funding.

As part of our regular funding, we also support buses through the bus service operators grant, which is worth over £259 million a year to bus and community transport operators. My hon. Friend spoke about particular

bus services, and the demand-responsive services mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) are a good example. I totally agree, and I strongly believe that it is up to local authorities to drive forward successful operators.

I am aware of the Border Rambler and Fellrunner bus services mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). And my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) rightly made the case that it is up to his local authority to ensure that bus services, particularly in the southern part of his constituency, are made available to his constituents.

I deprecate those individual providers that have not taken up the £2 bus fare, which is a key change we have made. With great respect, the introduction of the £2 bus fare has been transformational in my Northumberland community and across the country. I am delighted that, following the launch of Network North, the £2 bus fare will continue to run for a considerable time.

We know that rural bus fares can be expensive, for obvious reasons. Before the introduction of the £2 cap, many users of rural bus services found themselves having to pay more than £5 a trip. I am particularly pleased that we have extended the cap, which clearly supports local communities and local economies by making travel to employment, health and leisure services in our beautiful rural regions more affordable and more accessible. On a local level, it has been utterly transformational in places such as Haltwhistle in Northumberland.

I share the disappointment that some bus operators, including some in Herefordshire, have not signed up to the £2 bus fare, and I would urge them to do so. Over £600 million has been made available for the scheme to reduce the cost of bus travel. Although participation is voluntary, the Department for Transport has encouraged as many operators as possible across the whole region to continue to participate.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a similar point in respect of his rural community, which I know very well, having been to Newtownards and around his parts and having lived in Northern Ireland, just outside Moy, for the best part of a year. I accept his point, which he makes as eloquently as ever—it would not be a proper Adjournment debate without his outstanding contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) rightly made the point that the Welsh Government have got themselves into a bizarre situation. The petition against the 20 mph limit, which is clearly an attack on drivers, is probably the most successful petition in the history of this country on any particular issue. I fear that the Welsh Government will rue the day that they went down that particular route on something so extremely unpopular.

On speed limits, my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire raised the issue of the M50 and whether there is the potential to introduce a change of speed limit. I accept that he makes the point for an increase. The point I would make to him is that it is a matter for him, and more particularly his local authority, to sit down and discuss that with National Highways, which governs the strategic network, and then set speed limits on individual roads. They have the local knowledge

[Guy Opperman]

and are best placed to do so, but it is for the local authority to drive that forward with National Highways in the first instance.

Sir Bill Wiggin: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister's excellent speech, but the motorway does not seem to be a local authority issue because it will travel through a great number of local authority areas. Is there anything the Government can do to assist that discussion, because he knows very well that most public servants, of all sorts, are risk averse?

Guy Opperman: I do not think it is for me to comment on the nature of public servants and their willingness to embrace risk or otherwise, whether on a motorway or off a motorway, at speed or not at speed. What I would say is this: all major roads are part of the strategic road network run by National Highways. However, local authorities—there are not many that cover the M50; I think it is just Herefordshire and Worcestershire—

Sir Bill Wiggin: And Gloucestershire.

Guy Opperman: And Gloucestershire. Local authorities can come together and sit down with National Highways and potentially drive forward change if that is what they wish to do, but it starts, fundamentally, with the local authorities.

My hon. Friend rightly raised, and has been an ardent campaigner for, rail station accessibility. I know, because I have discussed it with him, that he has made a considerable effort over many years to make Ledbury station much more accessible. That point has been heard very loudly and very clearly. He met my boss, the Secretary of State for Transport, and made that point to him in October. He will be aware—I am not the Minister in charge of disabled access to trains, but I will

go away and try to get detail on this point—that the Access for All budget is presently being considered. The bids are in and considerations are being made. Ledbury is one. He is right to make the point that, slowly but surely across the country, we are upgrading and improving railway stations. We are going as fast as we possibly can. We would like to go faster and we would like to include Ledbury. I promise him that it is on the list to be addressed and I totally accept his point.

Dr Hudson: Having worked with me on an area shared by both of us, the Minister will know Gilsland station. I urge him to really make the case from within, as part of his ministerial portfolio, for the reopening of Gilsland station.

Guy Opperman: I wondered when the issue of restoring a railway would feature in tonight's debate, and I was not disappointed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy) made clear, we have the amazing example of the best line in the country: the Northumberland line. It is seeing multiple stations being restored as we take a massive step forward in restoring transport connectivity in Northumberland.

I have campaigned on Gilsland for only 14 years; in Herefordshire, there is Pontrilas and there are other stations—whether they were killed by Dr Beeching or others down the years—that are sought as an opportunity for a reopening of our railway infrastructure. As we have seen with the Waverley line in Scotland, there is a definite desire for such railways to be reinvigorated and for new stations to return. Without a shadow of a doubt, I will personally take the issue up with the trains Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

10 pm

House adjourned.

**Recall of MPs Act 2015:
Member for Wellingborough**

Text of notification received by the Speaker:

Recall Condition

The petition started because Peter Bone MP had been suspended from sitting in the House of Commons for a period of 6 weeks for breaching the code of conduct for MPs.

Petition signing period

From 9 am on Wednesday 8 November 2023 until 5 pm on Tuesday 19 December 2023.

The Outcome of the Petition is as follows:

In accordance with section 14(3) of the Act (determination of whether recall petition is successful) the petition was	Successful
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Number of registered electors eligible to sign the petition	79,402
Number of registered eligible electors who validly signed the petition	10,505
Percentage of registered eligible electors who validly signed the petition	13.2%
Number of rejected signing sheets due to:	
Want of official mark	0
Unmarked or void for uncertainty	82
Total number of rejected signing sheets	82

Signed:

Adele Wylie
Petition Officer

Dated:

Tuesday 19 December 2023

Written Statements

Monday 8 January 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Cheese Market Access: Canada

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Under the UK-Canada trade continuity agreement, the UK agreed a time-limited market access arrangement on cheese, guaranteeing ongoing access to the EU portion of Canada's WTO cheese tariff rate quota for three years. UK access to the EU portion of Canada's WTO cheese TRQ for tariff-free access expired on 31 December. Going forward, imports will need to take place under the reserve for non-EU sources.

Over the last six months, UK negotiators have made multiple efforts to retain our access to Canada's dairy market. We were unable to reach an agreement due to Canada's insistence on UK concessions that would not have been in the interest of our agricultural sector.

The Departments for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Business and Trade have been engaging for several months with stakeholders that will be impacted by these arrangements, at both senior official and ministerial level. We will continue this engagement to ensure a smooth transition for business to the rest-of-world pool. Further information for businesses is available on www.gov.uk.

While this development is disappointing, it comes following an increase in the UK's total dairy exports. According to UK overseas trade in goods statistics: October 2023, UK dairy exports grew by 13.7% between 2018 and 2022, from £1.8 billion to £2 billion in current prices. In addition, other agricultural exports such as beef and pork increased significantly over the same period, by 25.1% and 15.3% respectively, in current prices.

Working jointly with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, officials are also supporting dairy producers through a range of avenues, such as through the Dairy Export Programme, which is the result of the £1 million committed by the Prime Minister to boost UK dairy exports, especially among SMEs. The programme was agreed following consultations with UK dairy businesses and industry bodies. It is UK-wide and designed to unlock new opportunities for our dairy exports in growth markets around the world.

The Government are determined that any agreement must work for consumers, producers, investors, and businesses alike. We remain committed to upholding our high environmental, labour, public health, food safety and animal welfare standards.

[HCWS166]

Electric Vehicle Rules of Origin: Extension

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): On 21 December, the United Kingdom and the European Union jointly agreed an extension to the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement's rules of origin for electric vehicles and their batteries, until 31 December 2026.

To access zero tariffs under the TCA, businesses must prove that their products include a minimum level of EU or UK-manufactured content. These requirements are known as rules of origin and help determine where products originate rather than where they are shipped from, to ensure lower tariffs are correctly applied to eligible products and to support market competition. The TCA included a staged approach for electric vehicles and batteries, which required phased increases in these rules of origin requirements. The first increase was due to take effect on 1 January 2024, before a final increase from 1 January 2027. The agreement with the EU cancelled the 2024 changes, meaning the existing rules of origin will last until the end of 2026.

This extension of the rule set for these commodities has also been replicated in the UK-Turkey preferential trade agreement. This agreement has been amended by Joint Committee Decision to ensure consistency between the preferential trade agreement and the EU-Turkey customs union.

The agreement avoided a cliff edge which could have seen consumers and manufacturers in the UK and EU hit with £2 billion to £4 billion-worth of tariffs—on average over £3,000 per car—and it safeguards the position of UK manufactures as they transition to net zero, protecting thousands of British jobs. This is a pragmatic change which will help economic growth, UK consumers, and the environment; it recognises the disruption caused by the covid-19 pandemic, global supply chain pinchpoints and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

This Government are determined to ensure the UK remains one of the best locations in the world to build zero-emission vehicles, and we have taken action accordingly. At the autumn statement, as part of the advanced manufacturing plan, we announced over £2 billion in capital and R&D investment for the automotive sector to support the manufacturing and development of zero-emission vehicles, batteries and supply chain—building on existing support.

The UK and EU remain determined to develop domestic electric vehicle battery capacity, so we have also agreed to remove our ability to amend further these rules of origin again until 2032. In November we published the UK's first ever battery strategy, outlining our plan to attract investment and achieve a globally competitive battery supply chain by 2030.

The UK's approach has already attracted landmark investments in gigafactories and electric vehicle manufacturing. This includes the recent announcement of a £2 billion Nissan-led investment to produce two new electric vehicles in Sunderland; Tata's investment of over £4 billion in a new 40 GWh gigafactory; BMW's investment of £600 million to build next-generation Mini electric vehicles in Oxford; Ford's investment of £380 million in Halewood to make electric drive units; and Stellantis's £100 million investment in Ellesmere Port for electric vehicle van production.

[HCWS165]

Wine Quantities and Units of Measurement

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I can provide further details today of a new package of measures around the sale of wine, benefiting from the opportunities of leaving

the EU. This announcement forms part of the Government's Smarter Regulation programme. It will reduce burdens on business and deliver greater choice to consumers through an update to the quantities in which wine can be sold. The Government have also published a response to the units of measurement consultation.

Updating the fixed quantities that prepacked wine can be sold in

We plan to give businesses and consumers greater freedom by introducing changes for prepacked wines sold by shops, pubs and restaurants. These plans will support growth and innovation in the thriving UK wine industry.

At present, the permitted quantities for still and sparkling wine are different, and this update will enable both to be sold in 500 ml and 200 ml sizes as well as a new 568 ml pint quantity to be introduced. Sales of sparkling wine were permitted in pint-sized bottles before we joined the European Common Market in 1973.

The changes are backed by businesses, which are supportive of, and have been asking for, these new sizes. We will use the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 to reform existing regulations to minimise regulatory burdens and ensure our regulations are forward-looking.

Newly packaged and produced wines brought to market in line with these reforms will be able to be sold by bars, restaurants and retailers in Northern Ireland. Wines developed in accordance with these new regulatory requirements will be able to move in what is known as the retail green lane, under the Northern Ireland retail movement scheme. This is possible only because of the Windsor framework. The introduction of new wine measures and sizes was requested by industry and provides new options and flexibility for businesses and suppliers.

The changes are optional, and so businesses and suppliers can sell in the new sizes if they choose to do so. Wine sold by the glass in pubs and restaurants is not affected by this update or new legislation.

Government response to units of measurement consultation

In addition to announcing the deregulatory measure on wine, the Government have published a response to the consultation choice on units of measurement: markings and sales. This consultation closed on 26 August 2022 and received over 100,000 responses.

The Government have analysed all consultation responses received and reviewed the arguments for and against expanding the use of imperial units in domestic consumer transactions. The results showed 98.7% of respondents were in favour of using metric units when buying or selling products, either as the primary unit of sale, as currently, or as the sole—purely metric—unit of sale. While the Government have decided not to introduce new legislation at this time, we will carry out a wider review of EU-derived metrology legislation in line with the commitment to identify opportunities for reform of retained EU law.

The Government have also given consideration to the argument that increased use of imperial units could provide greater inclusivity for those more familiar with them than metric. Therefore new guidance will be published to promote greater awareness, understanding and use of the current freedoms to display imperial units.

[HCWS168]

DEFENCE

Red Sea

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps):

On 19 December, I updated the House on the maritime security situation in the Red sea. The situation remains extremely serious, and I would like to provide a further update.

The United Kingdom and our international partners condemn the illegal and unjustified attacks on commercial vessels in the Red sea by Houthi militants. These attacks, which increased 500% from November to December, risk innocent lives, exacerbate the humanitarian suffering in Yemen, threaten regional security and harm the global economy.

Our message is clear: we call for the Iranian-backed Houthi to immediately cease these illegal attacks.

The UK has joined the United States and other partners on Operation Prosperity Guardian to ensure the freedom of navigation in the Red sea and gulf of Aden. On Friday, Royal Navy frigate HMS Richmond set sail from Plymouth to provide resilience to the UK's presence in the gulf.

We are working with allies and partners to protect freedom of navigation and remain committed to holding malign actors accountable for unlawful seizures and attacks. The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives and commercial shipping in these critical waterways.

As you would expect, while planning is under way for a range of scenarios, no decisions have been made and we continue to pursue all diplomatic routes.

Together with our allies and partners, we call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and the release of unlawfully detained vessels and crews. The UK will not hesitate to take further action should the Houthis continue to ignore our warnings.

[HCWS167]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) has been appointed as interim leader of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and nominated as the UK's candidate as a vice-president of the Assembly.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) has been discharged as a substitute member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. A replacement substitute member will be appointed in due course.

[HCWS169]

JUSTICE

HMP Wandsworth

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I wish to inform the House that the independent investigation into the alleged escape of Daniel Khalife from HMP Wandsworth on 6 September 2023 has concluded.

Escapes from the prison estate are extremely rare—there were 16 escapes from establishments between April 2010 and March 2023, compared with 146 escapes from establishments between April 1997 and March 2010. However, it is vital for both public protection and confidence in the criminal justice system that our prisons are secure.

On 7 September, I committed in the House that, in addition to the immediate internal investigations and reviews into the circumstances of the alleged escape, the categorisation decision, the placement and categorisation of all prisoners in HMP Wandsworth and the location of all those in the custodial estate charged with terrorism offences, I would commission an independent investigation into the incident.

I appointed Keith Bristow QPM to lead this and asked him to consider whether the relevant protocols were in place at HMP Wandsworth and whether there were the means to apply them, including whether staffing was sufficient to do so, and whether and how they were applied at the time of the event. I also asked Mr Bristow to consider the facts of the case, including the categorisation of the prisoner, risk assessments and decisions around

employment in the prison, the processes and actions that enabled access to materials that might have facilitated the alleged escape, the implementation of the counting protocol, and relevant security measures, including checks relating to the delivery vehicle. I asked him to produce findings and recommendations which can be implemented at HMP Wandsworth and, where relevant, in the wider prison estate. On behalf of the Government, I would like to thank Mr Bristow for his rapid, clear and thorough work.

Due to the ongoing criminal proceedings, and the need to protect prison security, it would not be appropriate for me to provide a detailed account of the investigation's findings and recommendations at this time. The criminal investigation could also uncover further evidence and we will keep this under close review.

However, I can assure the House that I, and the Government, take the findings and the recommendations of the independent investigation extremely seriously and I am committed to minimising the likelihood of any such incident occurring in the future. Mr Bristow has made recommendations of both an operational and strategic nature. In addition to the measures taken immediately after the alleged escape to ensure the security of the prison, and further improvements in the weeks since in response to internal investigations and reviews, I have asked HMP Wandsworth, HM Prison and Probation Service and the Ministry of Justice to take forward the independent investigation's recommendations as a matter of priority.

I am committed to sharing what further information I can when the criminal proceedings conclude.

[HCWS164]

Petitions

Monday 8 January 2024

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Home to school transport in Thrapston and surrounding villages

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that under North Northamptonshire's current "Home to School Transport" policy, parents sending their children to Prince William School in Oundle may be required to pay for a substantial bus fare, which is currently free; further declares that parents in Thrapston and Islip have historically sent their children to Prince William School, a link which is appreciated and cherished by parents and schools alike; notes that the new policy will fund school buses for secondary school students to their nearest suitable school, rather than "linked" schools like the Prince William School.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure that North Northamptonshire Council makes special arrangements outside their adopted policy to duplicate the current provision for home to school transport for Thrapston and Islip children.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 7P.]

[P002862]

Observations from the Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds):

Our home to school travel policy aims to make sure no child is prevented from accessing education by a lack of transport. The law requires local authorities to arrange free travel for children who attend their nearest school and cannot walk there due to the distance, their special educational needs, disability or mobility problem, or because the nature of the route means it would be unsafe for them to do so. If a child's nearest school is full and unable to offer them a place, the nearest school that can offer them a place becomes their nearest school for transport purposes.

Where a parent chooses a school for their child that is not their nearest, they will normally be responsible for arranging their travel. There is an exception to this for children eligible for free school meals or whose parents claim the maximum amount of working tax credit. Children aged 11 to 16 are entitled to free transport to one of their three nearest schools provided it is between 2 and 6 miles from their home, or to a school their parents have chosen on the grounds of their religion or belief that is between 2 and 15 miles from their home.

Local authorities have the discretion to make travel arrangements, free or otherwise, for other children, but they are not required to do so. We know that budget pressures mean local authorities often have to make difficult decisions to balance the benefits of discretionary travel with their other priorities.

North Northamptonshire Council uses its discretionary power to provide free transport to Prince William School for children living in Thrapston or Islip. The council had proposed withdrawing this transport but, on 26 October, it posted a notice on its website to say that it will not be doing so: "Secondary school children in Thrapston and Islip to keep statutory free bus travel to Prince William School" (North Northamptonshire Council, northnorthants.gov.uk).

Further information about home to school travel is available in our statutory guidance for local authorities here:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-to-school-travel-and-transport-guidance.

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Botley West Solar Farm

The petition of residents of Witney and West Oxfordshire,

Declares that the large scale solar farm application known as "Botley West Solar Farm" is detrimental to the local community, notes that its scale and design are incompatible with the current infrastructure of the area; further declares that preservation of farmland for food security, local amenity, rural character and green belt preservation must take precedence when considering solar farm applications.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reject the application when it is presented and immediately update the National Planning Policy Framework to give clearer, stricter guidance on the appropriate location, scale and design of solar farm including the definition to be used when sites are declared to be "temporary", furthermore that this updated guidance give weight to factors such as the preservation of farmland for food security, local amenity, overall scale and impact upon the local community, rural character and green belt preservation.—[*Presented by Robert Courts, Official Report*, 24 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 804.]

[P002866]

Observations from the Energy Security and Net Zero (Lord Callanan):

The proposed Botley West solar farm is currently in the pre-application stage of the planning process set out under the Planning Act 2008. This stage of the planning process, including the consultation process, is developer-led. The Planning Inspectorate's project page for the proposal states that the application is expected to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate in quarter 4 of 2023.

Once the pre-application stage is completed and the application is officially received by the Planning Inspectorate, it has 28 days to review the application and to decide whether or not to accept it for examination. It is important to note that when deciding if an application should be accepted for examination, the Planning Inspectorate considers whether an applicant has complied with the pre-application procedure. The adequacy of an applicant's pre-application consultation has a significant bearing on whether an application is considered to be of a satisfactory standard to be accepted for examination. It is also important to note that the panel of inspectors that will conduct the examination of the proposal, should the application be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate

as planned, are appointed by the Planning Inspectorate, without involvement from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

The Department understands that the developer intends to undertake a second phase of community consultation in autumn 2023. We would encourage the petitioners to engage with that consultation process and to utilise it as an opportunity to raise concerns.

Should the application be successfully accepted for examination by the Planning Inspectorate once submitted, we would encourage the petitioners to register as an interested party and to engage with the examination process.

Given the role of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero in determining applications for development consent, to avoid prejudicing the decision-making process the Department cannot comment on specific concerns regarding a proposed infrastructure project. However, the petitioners should be assured that in taking the decision, the Secretary of State will follow the relevant requirements in the Planning Act 2008 and have regard to a wide range of matters relevant to her decision.

With regards to updating the National Planning Policy Framework, we would encourage the petitioners to share their views with the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing, as that is the Department responsible for the NPPF.

TRANSPORT

Public Service Obligation routes

The petition of residents of the constituency of Blackpool South,

Declares that the Government should consider reform of the Public Service Obligation routes to support regional Airports such as Blackpool.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that local airports such as Blackpool are supported.

And the petitioners remain, etc. — [*Presented by Scott Benton, Official Report, 12 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 867.*]

[P002886]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne):

I recognise the importance of regional airports such as Blackpool to the areas that they serve. Regional airports serve our local communities, by supporting thousands of jobs in the regions and acting as a gateway to international opportunities, alongside maintaining social and family ties and strengthening the bonds between the four nations. The UK aviation market operates predominately in the private sector. Airports invest in their infrastructure to attract passengers and airlines, while airlines are well placed to deliver services to their customers by responding to demand for different routes.

I am pleased to advise that on 7 December 2023, the Government announced reforms to our public service obligation (PSO) policy as part of our response to the Union connectivity review by Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill. We have improved PSO policy to allow PSOs to operate to and from different regions of the UK, rather than just to and from London as was previously the case, supporting our connectivity and levelling-up objectives.

I must stress that PSO policy is designed to support, where needed, routes that have previously been operated commercially, or are now at risk of being lost. PSO policy does not support new routes and is only available to routes that have no viable transport alternatives.

The relevant local authority is responsible for identifying the need for a PSO and presenting its case to the Department for Transport. If my Department considers there to be a need for a PSO on a specific route, the local authority must also hold a full and open tender to select an airline to operate the route on an exclusive basis.

My Department has not received any representations from the local authority concerning a potential PSO route from Blackpool airport. My officials remain available and would be happy to guide the relevant officials through the guidance and the application process.

The Department also continues to consider the ways in which PSOs, alongside other policy measures, could help us to meet our regional connectivity and levelling-up objectives.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 8 January 2024

DEFENCE

LGBT Veterans Independent Review

The following is an extract from the statement on the LGBT Veterans Independent Review on 13 December 2023.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for the tone in which he delivered it, and express my pleasure that there will be a memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in my constituency? What discussions has he had with colleagues in the Home Office regarding any convictions that there may have been for servicemen in connection with their military service and their sexual orientation?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend will be aware of the disregards and pardons provisions in part 12 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. They have the

effect of expunging those offences, which are no longer offences. That clearly applies to what we are debating today. The answer to his question is that that expunging of material will be complete in relation to offences that are service offences and go outwith the civilian—then criminal—offences listed in part 12.

[Official Report, 13 December 2023, Vol. 742, c. 905.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Defence People and Families, the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison):

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) in the statement on the LGBT Veterans Independent Review. My response should have been:

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend will be aware of the disregards and pardons provisions in **sections 92 to 101 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, and sections 164 to 167 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017**. They have the effect of expunging those offences, which are no longer offences. That clearly applies to what we are debating today. The answer to his question is that that expunging of material will be complete in relation to offences that are service offences and go outwith the civilian—then criminal—offences listed in part 12.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 8 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	1	DEFENCE—continued	
ARAP Ineligibility: Wellbeing of Personnel.....	16	Protection of Shipping Routes	3
Armed Forces Recruitment	15	Topical Questions	17
AUKUS	12	Ukraine: Military Aid	14
Cost of Living: Armed Forces Personnel	13	Ukraine: Military Support	5
Defence Jobs	1	Veterans	10
Gaza: UK Aid.....	8	Women in the Defence Sector	7
Israel: Terrorist Attacks	15		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 8 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	1WS	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	4WS
Cheese Market Access: Canada	1WS	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe:	
Electric Vehicle Rules of Origin.....	1WS	UK Delegation	4WS
Wine Quantities and Units of Measurement.....	2WS		
DEFENCE	4WS	JUSTICE	5WS
Red Sea	4WS	HMP Wandsworth	5WS

PETITIONS

Monday 8 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	1P	TRANSPORT	3P
Home to school transport in Thrapston and surrounding villages	1P	Public Service Obligation routes.....	3P
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	2P		
Botley West Solar Farm	2P		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Monday 8 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	1MC
LGBT Veterans Independent Review	1MC

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**not later than
Monday 15 January 2024**

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CONTENTS

Monday 8 January 2024

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Recall of MPs Act 2015: Member for Wellingborough [Col. 1]
Speaker's statement

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Defence

Israel and Palestine [Col. 23]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Mitchell)

NHS Winter Update [Col. 47]
Statement—(Victoria Atkins)

Storm Henk [Col. 65]
Statement—(Robbie Moore)

Horizon: Compensation and Convictions [Col. 81]
Statement—(Kevin Hollinrake)

Rural Transport [Col. 120]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Recall of MPs Act 2015: Member for Wellingborough [Col. 133]
Text of notification

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petitions [Col. 1P]
Observations

Ministerial Correction [Col. 1MC]
