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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 19 December 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Flood Protection Funding

1. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What reforms he has made to funding for flood protection. [901869]

5. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Ind): What reforms he has made to funding for flood protection. [901876]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Mr Speaker, merry Christmas to you and all your staff. I put on the record my sympathy with everyone affected by water outages in Southampton; I discussed the matter with the chief executive officer yesterday.

We will have a public consultation in the new year on the formula that allocates flood defence funding, to ensure that the challenges facing businesses in rural and coastal communities are adequately taken into account. Protecting communities from flooding is a top priority, and later today I will have a winter flood preparedness meeting. I thank everyone who will be on duty over the Christmas period.

Dr Gardner: My constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South has many farmers, some of whom are personal friends. On their behalf, I ask the Minister to update the House on the funds that the Government are making available via the farming recovery fund to support farmers impacted by last year's severe weather.

Emma Hardy: The Government recognise the awful impact that flooding has had on the farming community. We are releasing £60 million via the farming recovery fund to support farmers impacted by last year's severe weather—£10 million more than was planned by the previous Government—and £55.7 million has been paid out to over 12,700 farm businesses.

Richard Burgon: While the far right and shamefully even some MPs in this House are busy denying climate change and trying to turn it into the latest culture war, people in our communities are paying the price. More and more severe floods are devastating people's lives, as

we have seen again in recent weeks, and I am afraid it will only get worse. Does the Minister agree that it is an absolute disgrace that the last Government left our flood defences in the worst state on record, and that fixing that has to be a national priority and a key part of preparing for climate change?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The previous Government left flood defences in a state of disrepair—the worst state on record—leaving 60,000 homes exposed. That is why this Government will invest £2.4 billion into defences over the next two years.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): In Fylde, a number of new housing developments over the years have been constructed in flood areas where the developers knew that the construction sites had flooded, yet they still sold properties without disclosing that to buyers, and in some circumstances they had not constructed the flood defence requirements—the mitigations on site—to spec. Both residents and councils have felt powerless to get developers to correct what they should have got right in the first place, and a number of properties have flooded several times since people purchased them. What plans does the Minister have to give residents and councils more power to hold developers to account when they do not properly construct developments or disclose information about flooding?

Emma Hardy: I share the hon. Gentleman's upset about the rules on housing and flooding not being implemented by the previous Government. We need more sustainable urban drainage in more developments, and it is important that it is built into planning applications to begin with. If he would like to contact me, I can look into the matter in more detail for him.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Across Huntingdon, flooding continues to be an issue that impacts a huge number of constituents, with flooding almost inevitable every time it rains. Alconbury flood group is a leading flood group in the constituency, and Charles Dalleywater has been a driving force in implementing flood mitigation measures, such as the recently opened alderman's retention pond at Sallows farm that was planned by the flood group after funding was provided by Anglian Water, Huntingdonshire district council and Cambridgeshire county council. What funding is available from the Government to facilitate the construction of further retention ponds?

Emma Hardy: I thank all flood action groups around the country for doing incredible work for their communities. That sounds like a brilliant example. As I mentioned, we are investing £2.4 billion over the next couple of years. I hope to be able to give more detail in the new year.

Rural England Prosperity Fund

2. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of extending the rural England prosperity fund. [901870]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): Mr Speaker, I wish you and all your staff a happy Christmas, and thank all those who work

in our food system for ensuring that we are fed every day and that, particularly at this time of the year, so many of our constituents can enjoy a traditional, wonderful British celebration.

The autumn Budget on 30 October confirmed the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs budgets for 2024-25 and 2025-26, and funding allocations for individual programmes will be determined in the upcoming months through the Department's business planning exercise. We will update the House on the rural England prosperity fund in due course.

Rebecca Smith: I thank the Minister for that answer. Farmers in my constituency of South West Devon have highlighted the role that the rural England prosperity fund could play in the economic growth of our community. Given the publication of the English devolution White Paper this week, what conversations has the Minister had with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about how funding, such as the rural England prosperity fund, can ensure that devolution is a success for the countryside?

Daniel Zeichner: We are in constant dialogue with our MHCLG colleagues. I was delighted that areas with a significant rural population will on average receive about a 5% increase in their core spending power. That is a real-terms increase. I hope we can continue to work well to address the rural productivity gap of some 18%, which is a real challenge for all of us.

Budget: Family Farms

3. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on family farms. [901871]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): May I take this opportunity to wish a very merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to the hard-working House staff?

The Government have committed £5 billion to the agricultural budget over the next two years. That is the biggest budget for sustainable food production and nature recovery in our history. We are also investing £60 million into the farming recovery fund to support farmers affected by unprecedented extreme wet weather last winter. We understand concerns about changes to agricultural property relief, but the majority of those who inherit farmland after a death and claim relief will not be affected by the changes.

Sir John Whittingdale: Has the right hon. Gentleman seen the latest research, which shows that 75% of commercial farms will exceed the £1 million threshold and therefore will become liable for inheritance tax? Just to give him one example, a family in West Hanningfield in my constituency who have farmed for five generations say that they face a potential inheritance tax bill of £1.5 million. They say that it will put an end to all that has gone before and end the aspirations of their family. I plead with the Government to look at this again.

Steve Reed: Of course we hear the concerns, but I say to the right hon. Gentleman that in the last year for which we have actual claims data available, over 75% of claimants would not be affected. Of course, most farms,

like every other business, can do succession planning in the usual way so they do not have to pay any more than they need to.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker. Our hard-working farmers across Calder Valley want to earn a living from farming, not use their land to avoid tax. After 14 years of neglect by the last Government, which undercut farmers in trade deals, the sector is, however, becoming increasingly unprofitable. I welcome the Labour Government's new deal for farmers and the 25-year road map to making farming profitable again. Can the Secretary of State assure me that Calder Valley farmers will get their fair share in this new deal and in the new improved countryside stewardship higher-tier scheme next year?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend will be aware that the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), and the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), keep telling farmers that they are not in it for the money. We know that they are. They are businesses that need to make a profit, and our new deal for farmers, which includes increasing supply chain fairness, is intended to make farms profitable and successful for the future in the way they were not under the previous Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): The autumn Budget put family farms in jeopardy. Those farms also need biosecurity to protect their futures. With avian influenza spreading, bluetongue still with us and African swine fever at our doorstep in Europe, biosecurity is national security. Central to that is the Animal and Plant Health Agency, whose headquarters in Weybridge needs a £2.8 billion redevelopment to protect farming and animal, plant and public health. The Conservative Government rightly started that work with £1.2 billion committed in 2020. I note that Labour has committed £200 million to support that transformation, but that will not touch the sides. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will complete the project in full, as the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs called for in opposition, and commit the remaining £1.4 billion to protect our nation's biosecurity and prevent an animal disease outbreak catastrophe?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who raises an important point. However, I find it a little ironic that Conservative Members are calling for this Government to commit to spending that their Government never committed to. The Weybridge biosecurity facility is so dilapidated that it faces obsolescence by the early 2030s—that is the legacy that the Conservatives left. The £208 million that we have committed will start the process of improving those facilities, and through the spending review phase coming forward, we will consider how we can commit further funding to ensure biosecurity for farmers, which the Conservatives absolutely failed to do.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to all here and beyond.

Farmers in my communities and across the country are genuinely devastated by the Government's family farm tax, which will affect many in my patch who are on less than the minimum wage, and by the 76% cut in the basic payment next year. Perhaps what dismays farmers across our country and in Westmorland even more is that the overall agricultural policy of this Government and their Conservative predecessors is to actively disincentivise farmers from producing food, despite the fact that this country produces only 55% of the food we need. That is a dereliction of duty by both main parties, and a threat to national security. What plans does the Secretary of State have to change his policy and back our farmers to produce food?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of important points. I will repeat my earlier comments about agricultural property relief: the last year for which we have data available shows that the vast majority of claimants will not pay anything. Unlike the previous Government, who thought that farmers were not in it for the money, we want them to succeed, so we are embarking on a farming road map and a new deal for farming that will consider supply chain fairness and stop farmers being undercut in trade deals such as the one the Conservatives agreed with Australia and New Zealand. Our intention is to make farming profitable for the future; the Conservatives' record is the 12,000 farming businesses that went bust.

Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances

4. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Whether he has made an assessment of the potential merits of putting the Drinking Water Inspectorate's guidance on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances on a statutory footing. [901872]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. The Drinking Water Inspectorate requires water companies to monitor, assess and report on the risks from PFAS. We are aware of concerns relating to that, and officials are working on it.

Munira Wilson: Happy Christmas, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Minister for her answer and for offering me a meeting on this topic earlier this week—I look forward to pursuing it with her. Given the wealth of authoritative evidence on the harmful impact on human health of PFAS in our drinking water, and that Scotland, the European Union and the United States have all put PFAS guidance on a statutory footing, why do this Government appear to have no plans to do the same for England and Wales? Will the Minister consider amending the Water (Special Measures) Bill to that end?

Emma Hardy: As I have mentioned, this is an important issue, and I look forward to discussing it in more detail. Work to assess the risks of PFAS, and to inform policy and regulatory approaches—including banning or highly restricting certain chemicals and addressing issues caused by their historical use—is continuing. The nature of PFAS chemicals and their persistence once in the environment means that there are no quick fixes, but this is a global challenge. Innovation in suitable PFAS alternatives is

needed, and we are working to harness industry leadership in the transition away from PFAS. I assure the hon. Lady that work on this issue is ongoing.

Hunting Trophy Import Ban

6. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What his planned timetable is for the introduction of legislation to ban imports of hunting trophies. [901878]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): May I wish you, Mr Speaker, all the staff of the House, and all those in our public services who will be working over the weekend a very merry Christmas and a safe and successful new year?

The UK has a long history of championing the global conservation of endangered species. We are in the process of extending the Ivory Act 2018 to include four further species—hippopotamus, killer whale, narwhal and sperm whale—in addition to elephants. The Government have also committed to banning the import of hunting trophies. We are considering the most effective way to do so.

Wera Hobhouse: It has been 10 years since the senseless killing of Cecil the lion. It is still legal to import hunting trophies into this country. There has for a long time been cross-party support for banning trophy hunting. In 2023, the Labour party asked the then Conservative Government, "What is stopping you bringing in legislation? Stop the dither and delay." Why are this Government still dithering and delaying?

Mary Creagh: With the greatest of respect, the hon. Lady's party was in government for five years, and the Conservative party was in government for 14 years. It is always good after five months in office to be criticised for previous failures.

I agree with the hon. Lady that the Conservatives cannot be trusted on animal welfare. They failed to pass the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill, which would have stopped selfish hunters who slaughter and display endangered animals' body parts for their own perverse self-gratification, and they dropped the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which would have ended puppy smuggling, puppy farming and pet theft. As I say, we are looking for a suitable legislative vehicle, and we will do it in Government time.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker. This time of year brings festive cheer, but it also brings the Boxing day hunts. Alongside many of my constituents, I am keen to see an end to the smoke-screen that is trail hunting. Following the last Labour Government's historic foxhunting ban, will the Minister confirm this Labour Government's commitment to banning trail hunting once and for all?

Mary Creagh: We have indeed committed to a ban on trail hunting, which will provide significant protections to wild animals, including foxes and hares. Work to determine the best approach for doing so is ongoing, and further announcements will be made in due course.

Pollution of Waterways

7. **Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): What progress he has made on reducing pollution in waterways. [901879]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): The public are sick and tired of the scandal of sewage polluting our rivers, lakes and seas. That is why we are taking immediate action to place water companies under special measures through a new Bill that will give the regulator the power to ban the payment of undeserved bonuses for polluting water companies and bring criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers. We are also carrying out the biggest review of the water sector since privatisation to shape further legislation that will transform how our water system works and clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good.

Mr Rand: Last year, there were 3,366 hours of sewage dumping into the rivers and streams of Altrincham and Sale West, leaving Sinderland brook, the Bollin and other waterways in a terrible condition. Will the Secretary of State outline further how the Government's Water (Special Measures) Bill will ensure the end of sewage dumping into the rivers and streams of my constituency for good?

Steve Reed: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being such a champion for clean rivers in his constituency. As I said, the Bill will ban the payment of undeserved bonuses to water executives who are responsible for this kind of pollution, and will ensure instead that money is spent where it should always have been spent: on fixing the infrastructure, so that we can stop once and for all the kinds of sewage scandals that are creating the river pollution his constituents are so aghast to see on their doorstep.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Merry Christmas to you and your staff, Mr Speaker.

I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on water pollution. While I welcome the limited measures that the Government are taking to tackle pollution from the water industry, there is an elephant in the room, because agricultural pollution is just as important a source of pollution in our rivers, lakes and seas. What will the Secretary of State do to tackle the problem of agricultural pollution with the same degree of urgency and focus, and how will he support farmers—who themselves stand ready to take action to tackle this problem—by providing the funding, support and clear regulatory enforcement that is needed for a level playing field?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Lady for raising such an important issue, and I recognise that over 40% of pollution in our waterways comes from agricultural run-off. Sir Jon Cunliffe and the commission he is leading will look at all sources of pollution into our water. The budgets for more sustainable forms of agriculture that we have committed to will seek to reduce the use of fertiliser, so that there is less run-off into our water. The farming road map that we are working on with the farming community is also intended to reduce the amount of run-off from agriculture into our waterways, and we are

looking at moving to a whole catchment-based model. We are looking at all sources of pollution into water so that we can clean up all of our rivers, lakes and seas, from whatever source the pollution comes.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I take this opportunity to wish you and all in the House a very merry Christmas.

Many customers are rightly concerned about Thames Water and the situation that company finds itself in. For the third time of asking the Secretary of State in this Chamber, will he confirm that he will not issue any regulatory easement to Thames Water in his discussions with that company, so that its environmental obligations and service commitments to its customers will not be reduced?

Steve Reed: The Government continue to monitor very closely what is happening in Thames Water, and indeed in all the other water companies. The only easement I have ever seen given to water companies over pollution was that of the previous Government, who turned a blind eye as sewage was flooding through our rivers, lakes and seas. This Government are putting the water companies under tough regulatory special measures—measures that the previous Government could have enacted, but failed to enact.

Electronic Waste

8. **James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): What progress he has made on reducing electronic waste. [901880]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): As my hon. Friend knows, each week 8 million vapes—such as single-use, pod and big puff—are thrown away or recycled incorrectly, which is 13 vapes a second. That is why we have already banned single-use vapes and created 10,000 extra vape recycling points in store. We will ensure that online marketplaces and vape producers pay their share of electronic recycling costs in order to avoid the fires, which we know are so devastating.

James Asser: Mr Speaker, I wish you and your team a very happy Christmas.

I thank the Minister for her reply. We are all keen to increase recycling, but too often the opportunities for recycling electronic waste are very limited, meaning that it goes into mainstream waste, leading to increased pollution and hazards. We are seeing an increasing number of bin fires starting with vapes, which, as she has highlighted, are a particular problem. Will the Government consider what opportunities there are to work with local authorities to increase recycling opportunities and, in particular, to ensure that the public are aware of the downsides of not disposing of electronic waste properly?

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. My own city council in Coventry has introduced small electrical item take-back points in its libraries, which is an example of an excellent council innovating. I recently visited the Currys recycling plant in Newark, which shows the importance of recycling electricals to ensure

that the gifts of Christmas past can be conserved and used for many Christmases to come. More importantly, last-minute Christmas shoppers will get £5 off a new product—I hear that air fryers are very popular.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Mr Speaker, I wish you and all a merry Christmas.

We know that electronic and similar goods in landfill can leach into our waterways and affect water quality. Will Ministers reintroduce water restoration funding, as part of the package of measures they were talking about earlier, so that the River Tone and bathing stations elsewhere across the country can benefit from cleaner water?

Mary Creagh: Our policy is certainly intended to tackle fly-tipping and stop persistent organic pollutants entering the environment, but I will have to consult the Minister for water, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), before answering on that detailed point.

River Dredging

9. **Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): What steps his Department is taking to improve the dredging of rivers. [901882]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Dredging can be a useful option for managing flood risk, usually as part of a wider approach, where it is technically effective, cost-effective and does not significantly increase flood risk for others. Of course, we need to adopt the best solution for each place.

Richard Tice: I wish a merry Christmas to one and all.

My constituents in Boston and Skegness are very concerned that the Environment Agency is unable to properly maintain riverbanks and properly dredge rivers in order to protect homes and livelihoods because of the very demanding requirements of Natural England regarding the protection of badgers and water voles, which means that the priorities are wrong. Will the Minister meet me and senior people at the Environment Agency to ensure that we get these priorities correct?

Emma Hardy: Dredging used to be commonplace, but some evidence shows that it can speed up flow and potentially increase the risk of flooding downstream. There are currently no plans for any further dredging in Boston and Skegness, but I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and the EA area manager to discuss this further.

High-grade Agricultural Land

10. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential merits of safeguarding high-grade agricultural land. [901883]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): We all know that food security is national security, and most of us also recognise that the impacts of climate change and nature loss pose a significant risk to domestic production, so it is very important that

we use our land carefully. Consequently, the Government will be introducing a land use framework to ensure that we protect our most productive agricultural land.

Blake Stephenson: High-grade agricultural land in Mid Bedfordshire has been farmed for generations, and it is critical for our food security and our freedom, but it is under extreme pressure. We have talked this morning about climate change and flooding, and also about the Government's family farm tax. What has not been mentioned so much is urban sprawl, which is a major threat to high-grade agricultural land. We live in an uncertain world and we need our country to feed itself. Considering the threat, will the Minister guarantee that high-grade agricultural land will be protected by this Government?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his points and refer him to my earlier comments: we see more and more pressure, and there are so many things we need to do on our land to house and feed people, so it is important that we have a proper structure in place. It is widely acknowledged that the current planning system does not necessarily do that. The previous Government promised a land use framework; we will actually deliver it.

Topical Questions

T1. [901887] **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I share customers' anger about the water bill rises announced by Ofwat this morning. Customers have been left to pay the price of Conservative failure after the previous Government let companies spend millions of pounds on bonuses and shareholder payouts instead of investing in our crumbling sewerage infrastructure—if you find cracks in your house and do nothing about it for over a decade, the problem gets worse and the cost of fixing it escalates, and that is exactly what has happened to our sewerage system. We have introduced the Water (Special Measures) Bill to curb unjustified bonuses. Money earmarked for investment will be ringfenced so that it can be spent only on infrastructure, rather than bonuses and shareholder payouts, as happened under the Conservatives. I have appointed Sir Jon Cunliffe to lead a commission into the regulation of the water industry so that the failures that led to today's bill rises can never happen again. This Government will end the Tory sewage scandal once and for all.

Danny Beales: Recent investigations have shown that a lack of investment in drainage infrastructure has contributed to significant flooding in Uxbridge and South Ruislip. How will water companies including Thames Water be held to account where their lack of investment blights communities through repeated flooding?

Steve Reed: The Government of course recognise the importance of and need for a robust drainage system, but my hon. Friend will be aware that the previous Government failed to ensure adequate investment to maintain and upgrade it. Water companies have a duty to ensure that the area they serve is effectively drained. This includes drainage of surface water from the land around buildings as well as the provision of sewers.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I wish a merry Christmas to everyone in the House, and also to everyone in our farming, food, hospitality and water sectors. But not everyone will be able to celebrate Christmas. In recent weeks, a farmer took himself off to a remote part of his farm and killed himself. The message he left his family, who wish to remain anonymous, is that he did this because he feared becoming a financial burden to his family because of changes to inheritance tax. This is the human cost of the figures that the Secretary of State provides so casually. What does the Secretary of State say to that grieving family?

Steve Reed: I extend my heartfelt sympathies to that family, but I think it is irresponsible in the extreme to seek to weaponise a personal tragedy of that kind in this way. Where there is mental ill health, there needs to be support for that, and this Government are investing in it. The right hon. Lady knows from the last year for which data is available that the vast majority of claimants will pay absolutely nothing following the changes to agricultural property relief.

Victoria Atkins: How heartless and how extraordinary that the Secretary of State is more discomfited by being presented with the facts of the consequences of his policy than the reality of what this policy ensures. I was a Minister for seven and a half years, and I have never seen a policy have the consequences that this one has. [*Interruption.*] Members of the public will see Labour Members reacting in that way because I have dared to present them with the facts. We know that there is a tragically high suicide rate among the farming community. The National Farmers Union gave evidence about this, and the Secretary of State has been told repeatedly. Will he collect data on a monthly basis of suicides from farmers, farming families, landowners and family businesses, so that we, the House and the outside community can understand the human costs of this tax policy before it comes into force?

Steve Reed: Mental health services are the responsibility of the national health service, and the former Health Secretary, who broke the NHS, is in no position to lecture anybody about public services. She was no friend of the health service and mental health services, and she is no friend of farming. Some 12,000 farms went bust on the Conservatives' watch. They failed to get £300 million out the door and into the pockets and bank accounts of farmers, and they signed a trade deal with Australia that undercut British farmers on environmental and welfare standards. I hear the posturing, but it is this Government who are standing up for farming.

T3. [901891] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): I recently met farmers in the northern parishes of my constituency, and they told me about the urgent need for improved water management to protect farmland. They want to establish an internal drainage board for flood management, but they cannot take action to set it up until the necessary statutory instrument is in place. Given the importance of establishing an IDB in my area, will the Minister commit to working with me and stakeholders to reduce flood risks, and will she outline when the statutory instrument for an IDB in my area might be put before the House?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I would be delighted to work with my hon. Friend on this important issue. The Association of Drainage Authorities is on the flood resilience taskforce, and the statutory instrument will be laid as soon as parliamentary time allows.

T2. [901889] **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): A farmer in my constituency tells me that even in a good year he is lucky to see much beyond £20,000 in profit. With margins as wafer thin as that, regular farming barely qualifies as investable at all. The risk of losing a huge slice of that farm to inheritance tax at random intervals would not only go to putting this generation out of business, but go a long way towards ensuring that they can never be replaced. Does the Minister agree that this measure—

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to get our act together. This is the shortest set of topical questions and I will not be able to get many Members in. We have to remember what topicals are always about. I hope you have got the gist of the question, Minister.

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The point that farmers need to get a better return from their business is well made, and that is exactly what this Government will be addressing.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to your team and to colleagues across the House. My constituents have long felt the impacts of flooding, and many residents have been isolated in rural areas after a storm. I have recently produced a flooding report. Will the Minister meet me to discuss it, so that I can support the work of the Department?

Emma Hardy: There is a very easy and short answer to that: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

T4. [901893] **Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): North Cornwall has world-class beaches and rivers, but Santa swims have been cancelled due to the constant dumping of raw sewage. Meanwhile, water companies receive millions from bill payers, but then the very next day, they give it away to their shareholders. Does the Secretary of State agree that the best gift he could give my constituents this Christmas would be a total ban on water bill rises until South West Water bosses finally end this scandal?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the scandalous situation that the previous Government left our waterways in, with record levels of pollution and raw sewage filthying our rivers, lakes and seas. I have appointed Sir Jon Cunliffe to lead a commission to review governance and regulation so that we can stop it ever happening again.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I welcome the landmark £5 billion agriculture budget announced in the Budget, which is the biggest-ever budget for sustainable farming. My farmers in North Northumberland desperately need that money. In that context, what more can the Secretary of State do to push for his Department to get that money out the door in a way that the previous Government did not?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was extraordinary, was it not, that the last Government managed not to spend £300 million of the farm budget. We are determined to ensure that we do better. I wish him and his farmers a very merry Christmas.

T5. [901894] **Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): In my constituency we have an incinerator that regularly breaches its air pollution limits, but the Environment Agency does nothing about it. Will the Government tell us what they are doing to give the EA teeth?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Incineration permit breaches are a matter for the regulator, the Environment Agency, but we are reviewing energy-from-waste capacity across the country and will be making a statement imminently.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, and happy Hanukkah to those who are observing.

What action are this Government taking to promote the purchasing of British-grown and seasonal produce through their public procurement framework?

Daniel Zeichner: We are absolutely determined to ensure that we see more British produce bought across our public sector. We will come to the House with our plans in due course.

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

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It would be helpful if the Secretary of State encouraged Sir Jon to engage with parliamentarians across the House. The necessary changes that he has outlined will take time, however. The truth of the matter is that if those who currently have responsibility were to change their culture and focus on outcomes for customers, rather than their own internal processes, we might see earlier improvements.

Steve Reed: There will be an opportunity for Members to engage with Sir Jon Cunliffe's commission in January, and I am sure that the right hon. Member's Committee will want to do precisely that. The Water (Special Measures) Bill, which is going through Parliament right now, is intended to make quick changes to the system. Sir Jon's review will give us the chance to reform regulation and governance for the long term.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I recently met the Alde and Ore Estuary Trust, which has long been campaigning and fundraising to refurbish and secure flood defences on the Alde and Ore estuary. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the trust's projects and the barriers to progress?

Emma Hardy: Each time I come here for questions, I promise that I will not arrange to meet as many Members, and each time I fail. I would of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Last year I visited the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust's Allerton project in Loddington. May I commend the contribution that it can make to defining sustainable intensification of agricultural food production? Perhaps it would be a suitable place for a DEFRA ministerial away day early in the new year, to help with the use strategy.

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his suggestion. I am a great admirer of the Allerton project and have been meaning to visit it for a long time. My officials are working on a visit, and I am really looking forward to engaging with those people, because they do great work.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Presumably it is related to the questions.

Tim Farron: It is related to the questions we just had. Thank you for granting the point of order, Mr Speaker. At 7 o'clock this morning, entirely foreseeably, Ofwat announced bill rises of 36% for water bill payers around the country, which is an increase 14 times larger than current inflation. We know that a large proportion of that rise will be spent on paying off the debt of water companies: a debt incurred simply by paying dividends that were unearned and bonuses that were undeserved. Is it in order for the Government to have known that was coming but not to have come to the House to make a statement, which would have allowed us to hold them to account for their failure to ensure that Ofwat has the teeth it needs to hold the water companies to account?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. I have received no notification from the Government of such a statement, but he has certainly put his point on the record and I am sure that it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

Knife Offences

1. **David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on prosecuting knife offences. [901895]

4. **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on prosecuting knife offences. [901899]

7. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on prosecuting knife offences. [901902]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): Mr Speaker, I will start by taking this opportunity to wish you, your team and Members across the House a very merry Christmas.

Every single victim of knife crime is one too many, and this Christmas there will be some constituents, including my own, facing the heartbreaking reality of a

loved one who is no longer with them due to knife crime. That is why, as part of our plan for change, the Government are 100% committed to tackling knife crime.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Solicitor General to the Front Bench.

David Taylor: Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

I have had reports of people carrying machetes in Livingstone Walk, an area in Grovehill, Hemel Hempstead, with the Dacorum local crime unit investigating one incident of alleged robbery at knifepoint. Knife crime is not our only issue in Hemel; we have the highest rate of antisocial behaviour in the county, and we are the most dangerous town in Hertfordshire. That is a direct result of Conservative Governments taking 20,000 police off our streets nationwide, removing 60p out of every pound from local authority budgets and failing to act on antisocial behaviour. What further steps is the Solicitor General taking to ensure that violent thugs are not allowed to run riot and are brought to justice?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important matter. Knife-enabled robberies surged under the previous Government, which is why the Home Secretary has made tackling these offences an urgent priority. Enforcement is key, and that is why we are putting police back on the beat with a named officer for every neighbourhood.

Jas Athwal: I commend the Government for acting swiftly to ban ninja swords, seize zombie-style knives and crack down on the illegal online sale of these weapons. It will reassure communities such as mine in Ilford South, which sadly knows all too well the deadly effect of these weapons, with a number of heinous attacks this year where teenagers lost their lives. What are the Government doing to support the victims of knife crime and their families?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Many of our constituents will have gone through the same pain as his. That is why we are taking strong action on knife crime, banning lethal weapons and working to ensure that dangerous blades do not end up in the wrong hands. This September, it became illegal to possess zombie-style knives and machetes, and we are bringing forward legislation to ban the ninja swords to which he refers.

Sarah Coombes: Merry Christmas to you and the team, Mr Speaker. A couple of weeks ago, people in West Bromwich were met with the terrifying sight of young people wearing balaclavas and wielding machetes running around the town centre in broad daylight. It was a shocking, dangerous incident that has put people off going into the town centre. What is the Solicitor General doing to work with other Ministers to crack down on these zombie-style knives and ensure our town centres are safe?

The Solicitor General: I am very sorry to hear about that shocking incident in my hon. Friend's constituency, and she is right to raise it in this House. These kinds of weapons have absolutely no place on our streets. That is why this Government took quick action to ensure it was illegal to possess machetes. I hope and expect that there will be timely prosecutions in this case.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I congratulate the Solicitor General on taking up her position. As a former trauma surgeon, I have seen at first hand the devastating effect of knife and other serious violent crime, so I welcome the Government's specific commitment to halving knife crime within a decade. However, on the broader commitment on serious violent crime, no specifics have been provided to date. Will the Solicitor General tell the House which crimes are to be included, and the date by which that will be achieved?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that knife crime is still too high—more than 50,000 instances in the year to June 2024. He is also right to highlight that this Government are taking strong action to combat knife crime. We know that effective local policing is vital to tackling knife crime, which is why we are putting 13,000 more police and police community support officers on our streets, because we are determined to make our streets safe. The Home Secretary has also commissioned a rapid review to understand how these weapons are sold online and delivered to under-18s and identify gaps in legislation and the most effective ways to stop this.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Last month, Thames Valley police's Wokingham neighbourhood team attended Bohunt school in Arborfield, where they presented to young people the dangers of carrying knives. Early intervention is key to deterring children from violence, and police officers play a crucial role in that. What conversations has the Solicitor General had with her Home Office colleagues on the link between police officer numbers and effective recording of the prevention of knife crime? Has the Solicitor General expressed concerns to her colleagues about the potential decrease in the number of Thames Valley police officers?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight these issues in this House. Key to prevention and early intervention is our programme of young futures hubs and prevention partnerships. Our young futures hubs will bring together services to improve the ways that young people can access the support they need, and our prevention partnerships will proactively identify the young people most at risk and map youth service provision to ensure there is a clear understanding of the support available in each area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Speaker, I wish you and your team a merry Christmas and a happy new year. I thank you for all your kindness to everyone in this House in the past year. I wish the Solicitor General all the best in her new role.

I share hon. Members' concerns about knife crime, which is truly horrific. The impact it has on families is great. I have a specific question, so I am happy to receive a written answer. How many under-18s across the United Kingdom in the past 12 months have been: (a) cautioned; (b) charged; and (c) convicted of knife crime offences?

Mr Speaker: Good luck with that one!

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. He will appreciate that I do not have those statistics to hand, but I am more than happy to write to him.

Rural Crime

2. **Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure increased prosecution rates for rural crime. [901896]

10. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure increased prosecution rates for rural crime. [901906]

The Solicitor General: Reliable and effective local policing is the foundation for keeping all our constituents safe, whether they live in a city, a town or a rural area. That is why the Government are putting more police officers and PCSOs on the beat. Our plan for change will ensure every neighbourhood has a named contactable police officer in their community to deal with local issues.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place. Representing a rural constituency, I am aware of the ongoing problem of agricultural vehicle theft. In Calder Valley, vehicle crime counts for one in every 20 crimes committed. The Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, passed by the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) as a private Member's Bill, was restricted to the re-sale of specified equipment. However, 18 months since it received Royal Assent, the statutory instrument needed for it to be enacted has yet to be laid. Will my hon. Friend act where the previous Government did not?

The Solicitor General: We are committed to implementing the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act, which aims to prevent the theft and re-sale of high-value equipment, particularly for use in an agricultural setting, as my hon. Friend describes. He will know that the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention takes this matter very seriously and is working closely with the automotive industry to ensure the most robust responses possible to these crimes. I am also happy to raise the matter with my hon. Friend's local chief Crown prosecutor.

Rachel Hopkins: Farmers across Luton South and South Bedfordshire have frequently raised with me the issue of fly-tipping on their land. I welcome the Government's commitment to implement stronger laws to prevent fly-tipping. Will the Solicitor General, working with colleagues across Government, also commit to review and update sentencing guidelines for courts to make prosecuting fly-tippers more consistent and ensure more stringent fines are applied for the worst offenders?

The Solicitor General: Fly-tipping is a scourge both in urban and rural areas, which is why we are clamping down on it by forcing environmental vandals to clean up the mess they create. We are taking a cross-Government approach, aligned with our safer streets mission. I am sure my hon. Friend will be reassured to know that, working with ministerial colleagues, we are setting out a new strategy that will address antisocial behaviour and fly-tipping, and restore public confidence in policing.

Misdemeanours

3. **Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of perpetrators of misdemeanours. [901897]

The Solicitor General: The Government are committed to tackling criminality of all types. We have set out our plan for change, which includes putting 13,000 more police officers and PCSOs on the beat, and bringing back neighbourhood policing. Next year, the Crown Prosecution Service will receive an additional £49 million of funding to help recruit and train more prosecutors, enabling them to focus on securing justice in all cases, from minor offences right through to the most serious crimes.

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Lady for that reply and I appreciate the additional resources, but what my constituents, and I am sure constituents up and down the country, want to see is robust effective policing and prosecution of what is low-level crime in the great scheme of things, but which can be a real curse, particularly on our housing estates. Can the hon. Lady give an assurance to my constituents that there will be real robust and positive action?

The Solicitor General: I can give that assurance. The hon. Gentleman calls this kind of crime low level. I know from experiences in my constituency that these issues can affect daily life and really blight communities, so yes he has my assurance.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I wish you and your team, Mr Speaker, and everyone in the House a very merry Christmas, and I welcome the Solicitor General to her place. However, I am afraid that it will not be a merry Christmas for all my constituents. Rural crime in North Cornwall is on the rise, from rural theft to increased drug trafficking. County lines drug gangs are grooming and recruiting children as young as nine to traffic drugs, while elderly and vulnerable constituents have been cuckooed in their own homes by the gangs. What steps is the Solicitor General taking to work with the police to increase the number of prosecutions of the ringleaders of these ruthless gangs that blight our communities and expose our young people to violence and crime?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member is right to raise this important and pressing issue. We know that those who commit such crimes, including crimes in our rural communities, are some of the most manipulative criminals in society. The Crown Prosecution Service supplies early investigative advice to law enforcement agencies to build strong cases and ensure the robust prosecution of those involved in county lines. I am determined that we will continue to do everything we can to prevent young people from being drawn into crime and to stop this exploitation.

Crown Prosecution Service: Support for Victims

5. **Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to improve support for victims of crime. [901900]

The Solicitor General: One of my priorities as Solicitor General and the priority of the Director for Public Prosecutions, whom I met earlier this week, is tackling the intolerable backlog in our courts and transforming

the way in which we support victims of crime. The Prime Minister has set out our plan for change, which will restore confidence in our criminal justice system. We have worked with the CPS to make recent changes to its processes in order to improve communication with victims, strengthen the victims' right to review scheme, reduce the rates of victim attrition, and reduce delays.

Sir John Hayes: You will know, Mr Speaker, that Edmund Burke said:

“Justice is itself the great standing policy of civil society”,

but injustice reigns when victims feel that the cause of their plight is being neglected. Such was the case in Sutton Bridge, where a constituent of mine, a six-year-old girl, suffered the dreadful event of indecent exposure. The man was known in the community and was reported by the father of the child, and CCTV footage was available. When crimes of that kind are not investigated properly, people lose their faith in justice. We must deal with those crimes, in the interests of the very justice that Edmund Burke recommended.

The Solicitor General: I am very sorry to hear of the incident in the right hon. Member's constituency; that is indeed appalling. It is vital for this type of conduct to be taken seriously, and policing is key to that. We need more police officers and police community support officers, which is why, as part of our plan for change, we have promised to put 13,000 more police officers and PCSOs back on the beat with a named officer for every neighbourhood. We also need to improve the experiences of victims within our criminal justice system, and that includes better communication between victims and the CPS.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker. I welcome my hon. Friend to the Front Bench, and congratulate the former Solicitor General, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), on her promotion to Minister of State in the Ministry of Justice. It is sometimes difficult to keep up with this Government's pace.

Given that the Crown court backlog stands at over 73,000 and trials are being listed for 2027, victims are awaiting justice for an unacceptably long time, with the consequence that many no longer feel able to support the process. How is the Solicitor General working, through the CPS, to ensure that victims facing a wait of between two and three years for trials stay the course?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his kind words, and I look forward to appearing before his Committee on 15 January. He is right to say that we need to be doing much more to support victims. He alluded to the review of the Crown courts; he will also know that the Lord Chancellor is taking steps to reduce the Crown court case load by increasing funding for sitting days, and further sitting days were announced yesterday—an extra 2,000, I believe.

Violence against Women and Girls

6. **Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates in cases of violence against women and girls. [901901]

The Solicitor General: This Government have pledged to halve violence against women and girls within a decade as part of our plan for change, and securing prosecutions will be key to that. Our commitment to tackling violence against women and girls in this way is unprecedented, and it will require a wholesale change in how we think about and deal with these kinds of offences. Only through a truly cross-Government effort can it be achieved. As Solicitor General, I will work with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to ensure that we deliver on that commitment.

Matthew Patrick: May I welcome my hon. Friend to her place? I know she will do a fantastic job. Crown Prosecution Service guidance recognises that perpetrators of economic abuse harm their victim-survivors not just during a relationship, but long after it has finished. When will CPS guidance be updated to reflect post-separation controlling and coercive behaviour being made a criminal offence, and what training on recognising such abuse is offered to the CPS?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has been working on this issue with survivors of economic abuse, and I know that he cares about it very deeply. Domestic abuse can take many insidious forms, and we must do everything we can to ensure that we are equipped to spot it and tackle it. The guidance to which he refers was updated earlier this year and is under regular review. I can also confirm that the CPS will take part in a further knowledge-sharing event on economic abuse, which will be delivered for police and prosecutors as part of the domestic abuse joint justice plan.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): My family knows what domestic abuse looks like, but the law does not. That is because there is no specific offence of domestic abuse in the law, which means that many abusers are convicted of things like common assault or actual bodily harm. For victims and survivors, that does not reflect the full gravity of the offence, and it also means that abusers qualify for early release schemes. Women's Aid is backing my Bill, which would create a dedicated set of domestic abuse aggravated offences in the law. Will the Solicitor General meet me to discuss my Bill, so that we can better respect and protect survivors?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We are strengthening the law and the criminal justice system to improve prosecutions for violence against women and girls, and to better support victims.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister—welcome.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I wish you and the team a very happy Christmas indeed. I congratulate the Solicitor General on her position and welcome her to her place. I hope to work constructively and effectively with her on this challenging and very important part of Government.

As the Solicitor General knows, rape victims need action now, urgently, given that many rape cases take more than two years to come to trial. There has been much talk from Ministers about opening specialist fast-track rape courts, but disappointingly there has been very little detail to date. How will the Government achieve

that fast-tracking if they do not use all potential court sitting days, as requested by the Lady Chief Justice but refused by the Lord Chancellor?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the shadow Solicitor General for her kind words. She brings an awful lot of experience and expertise to her role, and I look forward to working constructively with her. She raises the issue of violence against women and girls, and refers to Crown court sitting days. I said earlier that I am very pleased that an additional 2,000 Crown court sitting days were added by the Lord Chancellor yesterday. That is very important, because it will allow the fast-tracking that she refers to of the backlog in our courts.

Helen Grant: I fully support the Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls within the next decade, but how will the Government's progress be measured to ensure that they deliver against their target? What assessment has been made of the definition of violence against women and girls?

The Solicitor General: Timeliness is clearly key, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right to refer to our commitment to halving violence against women and girls within a decade. We will take urgent action, building on the urgent action we have already taken. In November, for example, pilots of the new domestic abuse protection orders began with three police forces, enabling them to provide additional protection to victims.

The hon. Lady will know that the police and the CPS have launched their domestic abuse joint justice plan. Improvements in partnership working under the plan have already led to a modest increase in referrals of domestic abuse cases from the police to the CPS, setting a strong foundation for future improvements.

Freight Crime

8. **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase prosecution rates of freight crime. [901904]

The Solicitor General: Freight crime poses significant challenges to the logistics and transport sectors, affecting businesses, communities and our economy. This Government recognise the importance of addressing this issue, and the Crown Prosecution Service will always seek to prosecute serious offending when the relevant legal tests are met. Prosecutors can also apply for compensation to be paid to victims and, in appropriate cases, can seek the seizure of assets that represent the proceeds of crime.

Rachel Taylor: Mr Speaker, I wish you and your team a very merry Christmas, and I thank you in particular for all your support over the last six months. I very much welcome my hon. Friend the Solicitor General to her position, and I know she will be a powerful voice for justice in the Government.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on freight and logistics, I have been listening to businesses across the country, including many in my North

Warwickshire and Bedworth constituency. They have told me that freight crime has reached unacceptable levels and is damaging their businesses and their drivers' welfare, yet organised gangs stealing goods from freight vehicles is classed as the same as someone breaking into a car and stealing a phone from the passenger seat. What does the Solicitor General plan to do to ensure that freight theft is prosecuted as the serious crime it is?

The Solicitor General: I know my hon. Friend has formidable knowledge and expertise in these matters, which she raises very effectively on behalf of her constituents. We are clear that freight crime is a serious threat, and the Government are working closely with the police, the automotive industry and the National Vehicle Crime Intelligence Service to combat this threat. The CPS is, of course, alive to the prevalence of freight crime and brings together expertise to ensure that there is the resilience, skills and flexibility that is needed to best respond to new and changing areas of organised crime, like freight crime.

People Smuggling

9. **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help increase prosecution rates in cases of people smuggling. [901905]

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and I know how much work he did in this area prior to his election to this place. Criminal gangs must not be allowed to undermine our border security by illegally bringing people into this country. That is why this Government are committed to smashing the gangs. We have set up the new Border Security Command, which will bring together law enforcement across the system and boost the Crown Prosecution Service's ability to deliver charging decisions swiftly in international organised crime cases.

Mike Tapp: Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Solicitor General on taking up her position.

Having worked with the National Crime Agency in the past, and having worked in a counter-terror role, I have seen at first hand the effectiveness of counter-terror powers and the difference that they can make. Are the Government working to maximise the effectiveness of the Border Security Command by using counter-terror-style powers, or adapting such powers, in order to take on the smuggling gangs and treat them like terrorists?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Quite simply, the previous Government lost control of our borders. That is why we need a much tougher approach, learning from the success of our world-leading counter-terror measures. Our border security, asylum and immigration Bill will create new, stronger powers for law enforcement agencies to tackle, investigate and prosecute organised crime and strengthen UK border security.

Hospice Funding

10.39 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on hospice funding.

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for asking that important question. This Government want a society where every person receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to the end of life. We will shift care out of hospitals into the community to ensure that patients and their families receive personalised care in the most appropriate settings. Palliative end of life care services, including hospices, will have a big role to play in that shift. Most hospices are charitable, independent organisations that receive some statutory funding for providing NHS services. The amount of funding that each charitable hospice receives varies both within and between integrated care board areas.

On children and young people's hospice funding, the Minister for Care met representatives from NHS England and Together for Short Lives and one of the chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care to discuss children's palliative and end of life care, and that funding stream was discussed at length at that meeting.

This Government recognise the range of cost pressures that the hospice sector has been facing over a number of years, so today I am delighted to announce the biggest investment in hospices and end of life care in a generation. We are supporting the hospice sector with a £100 million boost for adult and children's hospices, to ensure that those hospices have the best physical environment for care, and with £26 million in revenue to support children and young people's hospices. The funding will support hospices and deliver much needed funding for improvements, including refurbishment, overhaul of IT systems and improved security for patients and visitors. It will help hospices in this year and next year in providing the best end of life care for patients and their families in a supportive and dignified physical environment.

Hospices for children and young people will receive that further £26 million in funding for 2025-26 through what was, until recently, known as the children's hospice grant. We will set out the details of the funding allocation and dissemination in the new year.

We completely understand the pressures that people are under. To govern is to choose, and the Chancellor chose to support health and social care in the Budget. The alternative is not to fund. The sector has suffered from 14 years of underfunding, and we are righting that historic wrong. This Government are committed to ensuring that every person has access to high-quality palliative and end of life care as part of our plan for change. We are taking immediate action to make our healthcare fit for the future. I am sure that the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and everyone in the House will welcome this announcement. I thank her for giving me the opportunity to give the House an early Christmas present.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think you might find that I granted the urgent question, but don't worry, Minister. I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson: After the confusion of yesterday, I welcome the fact that further details on hospice funding have been announced, albeit by our dragging them out of the Government on the very last day of Parliament before the recess.

On 30 October, the Chancellor decided to break her election promise by increasing employers national insurance contributions and reducing the threshold at which employer contributions are payable. It was later confirmed that hospices would not be exempt from the increase in costs. Now the Government have announced new funding for the sector, which they have the audacity to call "the biggest investment in a generation".

Let us be clear about what is going on: the Government are taking millions of pounds off hospices and palliative care charities, and then think those hospices and palliative care charities should be grateful when the Government give them some of that back. That is socialism at its finest.

We will look more closely at the funding announced today, but despite many questions from right hon. and hon. Members, to date the Government have refused to give any clear answers on how much their tax rises will cost hospices. I will try again: will the Minister please tell us how much the Government estimate they will raise from taxing hospices more? Was an impact assessment ever produced on how hospices will be hit, and how that will affect the care that they provide? Do the Government expect the funding that they have announced today to cover the additional costs in their entirety?

At the heart of this discussion are charities that provide compassionate care to terminally ill people in their final days, weeks and months. While hospices were left without information, Hospice UK reported that 300 beds have already closed, with many more closures to come. Does the Minister accept any responsibility for that? Ultimately, it is patients who will pay the price.

While we welcome this update for hospices, when will the Health Secretary come forward with more details on the many other health providers who have been hit by Labour's tax increases, including GPs, community pharmacies and dentists? Will they be expected to be similarly grateful for getting back some of the money that the Government have taken from them?

Karin Smyth: To govern is, indeed, to choose. The Conservative party chose neither this sector nor any other health sector and it refused to govern. Within five months, we have not only increased the funding to the health sector to stabilise it but made today's announcement.

Beneath all that, there might have been a welcome for the announcement—I am not entirely sure—whereas the sector is pleased to have the money. The chief executive of Hospice UK said:

"This funding will allow hospices to continue to reach hundreds of thousands of people every year with high-quality, compassionate care. We look forward to working with the government to make sure everyone approaching the end of life gets the care and support they need".

The chief executive of Haven House children's hospice said that it is

“very positive to hear about the government’s plan to invest significantly in the wider hospice sector; we hope that there will be as much flexibility as possible to determine locally how this new money is spent.”

This is an important issue for many hon. Members, and we look forward to working with the sector in the new year on the specifics of the announcement.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): This is a very welcome announcement and I am sure the hospices are breathing a sigh of relief after the level of funding they endured for 14 years under the Tories. If we are to move palliative care out of hospitals and into care situations or people’s homes, the money needs to be passported to the hospice sector for it to play its part. Integrated care boards have been charged under the Health and Care Act 2022 to provide that funding. Will the money go through ICBs or will it be passported straight to the hospice sector?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the need for more people to be treated at home. That is absolutely the direction of travel that we want to see. This money will help, for example, with technology to support more people to be treated at home. ICBs are responsible for commissioning and allocating funding, so that will be done in the normal way.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I wish you and the whole team a very merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

Last week, I visited Hope House in my constituency, where I met beautiful young Esmay, one of hundreds of children cared for by the hospice every single year. She is nearly three and has a life-threatening heart condition. Esmay’s family do not know what the future holds for her, but they know that Hope House will be there to support them, as it has since before she was born.

There are 300,000 people like Esmay treated in hospices every year, and just one third of their funding comes from the NHS. That leaves institutions such as Hope House and nearby Severn hospice reliant on generosity and unable to plan as they wait for confirmation of the funding they will receive from the NHS. That situation has been made more difficult this year because of the increase to national insurance contributions, which Hope House estimates will cost £177,000.

Funding is welcome, and I welcome the Minister’s commitment today. Will she explain whether the increase that she has announced today will cover the NIC hike for hospices and the increase in the living wage that was announced at the Budget? Will she also commit to providing future settlements in a timely manner so that hospice managers can budget effectively for the coming year?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and for welcoming the announcement. She will know that, in the past 14 years, the sector has been neglected, like the rest of the NHS and social care system. As we have repeatedly said, to govern is to choose. We have improved the settlement for the sector this year. Today’s welcome announcement can be used by the sector to manage some of those pressures and deliver the sorts of services it wants for the future.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the amazing staff at Overgate hospice in my constituency should be focused this Christmas on caring for their patients and not on funding? Will she confirm that this funding allows them to do so? Also, in April I will be running the London marathon for the Overgate hospice’s big build appeal. Will the Minister sponsor me?

Karin Smyth: That is possibly one of the cheekiest questions I have ever heard asked here, and I am obviously going to have to say yes. Frankly, rather him than me, but good luck to my hon. Friend on doing that. I know that many hon. Members raise money for their local constituencies and that the marathon is an important part of that.

We understand how different hospices are funded differently throughout the country. We want to make sure that end of life care, with all the different options that people have in their local systems, is well supported. It is really important for people to have some of that security, and I know that this announcement will be welcomed by my hon. Friend’s local hospice, as it is by the sector today.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

The St Helena Hospice in Colchester, which serves my constituency and that of the Labour hon. Member for Colchester (Pam Cox), estimates that the national insurance increase will cost it £300,000 in a full year. Can the Minister now give a guarantee that the hospice will be compensated by the Government in full?

Karin Smyth: It is good to hear the hon. Gentleman supporting his local hospice with his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Pam Cox). We will announce allocations for the whole sector and the NHS in the usual way in the new year.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): St Giles Hospice in my constituency has funding challenges like any other. One thing that staff mentioned to me was the sustainability of when they are contracted to do things. Is the Department considering the timing and not just the funding, to enable better planning and better staff planning?

Karin Smyth: Yes, stability and understanding longer-term planning is important for this sector as well as for many others. Certainly, we want to make sure that we work with the sector and the wider NHS, so that we deliver our longer-term 10-year plan, but get to that process in the next few years.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

St Luke’s Hospice in my constituency covers the whole of Brent and Harrow. I helped to form it back in the 1980s. The staff tell me that the biggest problem they face is that, every time there is an increase in nurses or doctors’ pay, it is never passed on to them, so they have to find the money from charitable giving. The Minister’s announcement of extra money is of course welcome, but she has failed to answer the question: will it cover the national insurance increase, or not?

Karin Smyth: All hon. Members support their local hospices, which I know is important, but I have to remind the House of the parlous state of the sector that we inherited after 14 years of the previous Government. If Conservative Members, many of whom were part of that Government, had wanted to rectify the way in which hospice funding was allocated, or indeed that end of life care was managed, they had plenty of opportunity to do so. This Government have hit the ground running. We have fast-tracked these measures, and this announcement today is clearly a part of that. I hope that they all welcome it; it is just a shame that they did not do it themselves.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

May I welcome this record investment in our hospices from the Labour Government? The Conservative Government had 14 years to do that, but they shirked that responsibility. Will the Minister join me in thanking the amazing staff and volunteers at Saint Michael's Hospice and Demelza hospice in my constituency who do such amazing work all year round to support families and children who need amazing care?

Karin Smyth: I am delighted to support my hon. Friend in the work that she has been doing with St Michael's and Demelza hospices. She is absolutely right to highlight that, and I hope that she will be able to meet the staff in the new year and discuss how they can best use some of this funding.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all the House staff, a very merry Christmas.

Following on from the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), next year I will be taking part in a strictly dancing competition for my local Rowcroft Hospice. However, I am pretty sure that, even if all the Members in this House sponsored me, I would not be able to raise the £225,000 needed by Rowcroft to cover the additional national insurance contribution payments that it will have to make. Will this extra funding, which is very welcome, be additional funding, or will it be just enough to cover the extra costs that have been imposed on the hospice sector through the increase in national insurance contributions in the recent Budget?

Karin Smyth: I have to say that dancing is more my style than marathon running, so I wish the hon. Lady luck with that. At least she did not ask me for any money. I refer her to my earlier answer: this is additional money to support the hospice sector. It is a £100 million boost for adult and children's hospices to ensure that they have the best physical environment for care, and £26 million in revenue to support children and young people's hospices. We look forward to working with the sector in order to best deploy that in the New Year.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you and your team, Mr Speaker.

Our hospices do an amazing job, and I look forward to visiting my local hospice in the next few days, but Scottish hospices have warned that they might have to turn patients away because of the funding crisis that they face under the SNP. Does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government must at least match the level

of investment that she has announced today? They must have a similar level of ambition for Scottish hospices, and provide fresh investment for our hospices, which do an amazing job in Scotland.

Karin Smyth: As my hon. Friend highlights, this is a devolved issue for the Scottish Government. We hope that they match our ambition, as she rightly puts it. I wish her well with her local hospice, and I hope that the Scottish Government take note of what we are doing here in England.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Over 7,000 charities and voluntary groups have written an open letter to the Chancellor warning that the national insurance increase will cost them £1.4 billion and have a devastating impact. At this time of the year, ahead of Christmas, many charities, including hospices, are trying to raise funds. I know that the Chancellor did not go into politics to be the Grinch who stole Christmas for charities, so will the Minister please look at this again, and exempt charities and voluntary groups, including hospices, from this cruel tax increase, which is sucking up good will and donations and really hurting valuable charities?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman was a Government Minister, so he had plenty of opportunities to change the system, had he wanted to do so at the time.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her announcement of a huge funding boost for the hospice sector. Will she join me in thanking all the brilliant staff at Keech hospice, which serves Luton South and South Bedfordshire, and especially all the volunteers who are out fundraising with Smiley Sam and Santa's train across the streets of Luton, including Farley Hill tomorrow and Wardown Crescent on Saturday?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, and wish the volunteers well in their weekend activities. She is right to highlight not only staff but the hundreds of thousands of volunteers across the country who work to support the hospice sector and others with end of life care. That support is so important for people receiving end of life care and their families. It is something that I have experienced; my father died over the Christmas period a number of years ago. It is a hard time of the year to have a death, and I warmly support what those volunteers are doing this weekend.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): The fact that the Minister has come here expecting us to welcome her announcement and congratulate her on giving money that her Government took away in the first place really beggars belief. Mountbatten hospice in my constituency needs an extra £1 million because of the NICs increase that her Government have brought forward. Will she guarantee to Mountbatten and the charitable sector, including hospices—which the last Government increased funding for, before she comes back to me with that answer—that today's announcement will cover the £1 million that her Government have taken away in NICs?

Karin Smyth: What beggars belief is that person after person—man after man—on the Opposition Benches still feels able to get up and defend their record in

government. Not once have we heard that they agree with Lord Darzi's diagnosis, or that they welcome the extra investment that the Chancellor found by choosing to support the health sector in the Budget. I am afraid that, until they reach that conclusion, they are destined to be on the Opposition Benches for a very long time.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you and your team, Mr Speaker.

Compton Care hospice in my constituency provides specialist palliative and bereavement care, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Having previously discussed the lack of funding with the hospice, I am sure that it will welcome the extra funding that has been announced today. Will the Minister please join me in thanking Compton Care hospice and its incredible staff for the care that they will continue to provide throughout the Christmas period?

Karin Smyth: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments, and I am very pleased to thank Compton Care hospice for all its work. He is right to highlight that the care is 365 days a year, around the clock.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Hospices such as St Ann's in Stockport provide really high-quality care to my constituents and others at what is often the toughest point in their lives, but they are struggling in a system that is no longer fit for purpose. It is of course welcome that the Government are providing additional funding for them. One of the challenges that the hospice sector faces is a really high rate of staff vacancies, so I would be grateful if the Minister would confirm whether the 10-year plan for the NHS includes a specific workforce plan for our hospice sector, so that it continues to care for our constituents at the toughest point in their lives.

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point about the stability of the workforce across the piece, from diagnosis to the end of life. We absolutely need to consider support for all parts of that through the 10-year plan. I encourage hon. Members and others to ensure that they keep making those points. We are getting excellent contributions from the public, patients and staff, and we look forward to developing the plan over the next few months and years.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): I welcome the largest funding increase for hospices in a generation. If that cannot bring some Christmas cheer to the Conservative Benches, it will in my constituency of Wirral West where Claire House hospice does such important work all year round. I was there just last week for their Christmas carols. Will the Minister take the opportunity to thank them for the important work they do in my constituency of Wirral West?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and, indeed, for his singing. Those events bring joy to people at a particularly difficult point in their life, and they are very welcome.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Any increase in funding for the hospice movement is of course welcome, but let us be honest: it is giving with one hand and taking with the other. The two excellent

hospices that serve my constituency—St Andrew's in Grimsby and Lindsey Lodge in Scunthorpe—tell me they want certainty. The Minister says they will be told early in the new year. Can the Minister give a categorical assurance that in the first half of January hospices will be told how much extra they are getting from the £100 million she mentioned?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the announcement. As I said, we will be working with the sector in the new year and then we will make allocations accordingly.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Stoke-on-Trent is wonderfully served by the Dougie Mac and Donna Louise hospices. They are part of a healthcare system in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent that the Minister knows has a £90 million projected deficit. What oversight will there be to ensure that the money that goes to the ICBs reaches the hospices and that the team in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent do not try to use some of this welcome new money to fill holes elsewhere?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point—one that was raised earlier. It is vital that ICBs work with all providers to understand the needs and how they are best met. I know he will be diligent, as he already has been, in pursuing what is happening with the funding with his local ICB. We will work with Hospice UK to ensure that that happens across the piece.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) calls for a fresh approach by the SNP Government in Holyrood, but she clearly expects us to do that with fresh air, because part of the £750 million additional cost from the national insurance contributions will fall on hospices. On Tuesday, she had the opportunity to vote against that cost. Will the Minister confirm that there will be Barnett consequential for Scotland? How will she address the problems that Marie Curie in Scotland faces?

Karin Smyth: I admire the hon. Gentleman for keeping on the same wicket. In the Budget, this Government made the greatest allocation to the health sector. What the Scottish Government do with their consequentials and how they manage that is entirely a matter for them, and if they are not doing a good job, the public need to vote for someone else.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I wish you, the team and all the wonderful staff on the parliamentary estate a merry Christmas. I very much welcome this big investment into local hospices, and I know it will be welcomed by my local children's hospice Forget Me Not and Kirkwood hospice, which do invaluable work in my constituency. What assessment has the Minister carried out on long-term sustainable funding for the sector, particularly in relation to statutory funding and the increasing role that hospices play in the community and in people's homes?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that need. As I said earlier, end of life care and its stability as part of the wider system, which is a

[Karin Smyth]

commissioning role for ICBs, was not addressed by the last Government over 14 years. As part of our 10-year plan, that will be important to do.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): We can all agree that hospices, such as St Barnabas in Lincolnshire, do vital and valued work. I hope we can also all agree that every Government—Labour and Tory—have increased national health spending, for that is simply a matter of fact. I ask the Minister to show a little wisdom in contrition in acknowledging that the national insurance increase that was imposed on charities and hospices has done immense damage. We welcome the funding today—of course we do—but she needs to be straightforward: was she, or any of the Health team, consulted before the Budget about the impact of the NI increase on hospices, health charities, pharmacies and so on? May I advise her to put down the folder and tell us what she really thinks?

Karin Smyth: I have scribbled my own note—the right hon. Gentleman says that he “agrees”—but the issue is that his Government did nothing over 14 years to support or make a change. That is why the announcement we are making is so important. I reiterate my earlier point, which I will repeat every time I am at the Dispatch Box: the Conservatives have not read the Darzi report; if they do not agree with the diagnosis, they cannot agree with the solution. That is their fundamental problem.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of additional funding, as will many families across the country. Although it is not in my constituency, Rowans Hospice is used by people in Pompey. Indeed, my nan Pearl and my very dear friend Fiona spent their last few weeks in the hospice’s care, and what a wonderful place it is. At a city council meeting this week, concerns were raised about the future of that amazing service. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are committed to ensuring that every person has access to high-quality end of life care?

Karin Smyth: That is absolutely what we want to do, and today’s announcement is a step towards it. As my hon. Friend highlights, hospices are very special places, but most people want to die at home with their loved ones, in the place they know well, and many parts of the sector will be able to use this money to help more people to die peacefully at home.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This additional funding will benefit hospices serving Westmorland communities—St Mary’s, St John’s, Eden Valley and the children’s hospice, Jigsaw—only if two things happen. First, the Government must provide additional funding to match the national insurance increases that those hospices will have to bear, and secondly, the Government must ensure that the integrated care boards in south Cumbria and north Cumbria pass on that money in full and on time. Will the Minister press them to do so? On the Morecambe bay end, will she press them on the closure of the Abbey View ward at Barrow hospital? The trust is planning to close that end of life ward, which will put additional pressure on our local hospices but without any additional funding to support them.

Karin Smyth: The commissioning of those services is the responsibility of the ICBs, and we expect them to do that. They are responsible from diagnosis to end of life. In the past few months, I have met many hon. Members from across political parties to discuss issues in their ICBs. I know that he will, like others, be assiduous in pursuing the ICB to ensure that funding goes to the right place.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I wish you, Mr Speaker, and the fantastic staff across the estate a happy Christmas.

I thank the Minister for the way in which she and her team have listened to me and colleagues, who arrived in this place with real concern about the state of palliative care after years of under-investment by the previous Government. The funding announced today will be welcomed by Keech hospice and Garden House hospice, which provide fantastic palliative care for constituents in and around my area. Will she join me in thanking them for the fantastic work that their staff and volunteers do all year round to support people in incredibly difficult moments in their lives? Will she also assure them that palliative care will remain at the front and centre of the Government’s mind in the difficult work of getting health services working again?

Karin Smyth: I am happy to support my hon. Friend, who makes an excellent point, in his work with local providers. He congratulates me, but the work has been done mainly by the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), and by the Secretary of State, who have personally taken on this issue. They are visiting hospices today, so they could not be here even though they wanted to. We are committed to supporting people throughout their life, from diagnosis to end of life.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I have been contacted by vast numbers of families and relatives of those who have been wonderfully cared for by Sue Ryder Manorlands hospice in Oxenhope in the Worth valley. They are all concerned about the impact that the rise in employer national insurance will have on them. Those at Manorlands are deeply concerned that it will cost them hundreds of thousands of pounds. In answering the urgent question, the Minister has announced additional funding, but can she confirm whether it will cover the cost of those rises to Sue Ryder Manorlands hospice in my constituency? Did the Government carry out an impact assessment of the negative impacts that the Budget would have on those in the charitable and hospice sectors?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman asks the same question again. Through the Budget, this Government have allocated more money to the health service than the previous Government—a record announcement—and we have announced money again this morning. To govern is to choose. The last Government neither governed well nor chose to support the health sector from diagnosis to end of life; this Government have, and will continue to do so.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Some weeks before the Budget, I visited both St Catherine’s hospice and St Peter and St James hospice, which serve my constituents. I had not expected how quiet and empty those hospices were, because of the empty beds and mothballed wings

that had been closed due to a lack of funding. Evidently, the funding crisis in the hospice sector was very deep before the Budget, but the Budget has only made it worse through the NIC increases. As such, I will try again: will the welcome funding announced today cover the cost of those NIC increases?

Karin Smyth: As Lord Darzi's report announced, the entire sector has been under pressure and struggling since the disastrous Lansley reforms—they were part of the coalition Government—through to when we took over in July. We will fix the NHS and rebuild it to make it more sustainable and fit for the future. That includes everything from diagnosis to end of life care.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): For my sins, I too will be running the London marathon next year. I will be running to raise money for Keech hospice; I know, as do other hon. Members who represent constituencies in Bedfordshire, what fantastic work that hospice does and the care it provides to our county. The Minister has been asked lots of times to comment on the impact of the NIC increases, which are going to hurt hospices in constituencies all around the country, so may I ask the question in a slightly different way? Does the Minister think that Keech hospice, taken in the round, will be financially better off or worse off next year as a result of both the Budget and this announcement that she has been dragged to the House to make?

Karin Smyth: I have not been dragged—I am very happy to be here. The reality is that the health sector in its entirety, from diagnosis to end of life care, will be better off this year than it was last year or the year before under the hon. Gentleman's Government.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I place on record my thanks to all those in my constituency who will be caring for others over Christmas, whether they are unpaid family carers or paid care providers. That includes the registered nurses and registered care providers who have written to me to say that there will be an extra cost of £615 per employee as a result of the changes in the Budget. I will not attempt to ask whether the money announced today will cover national insurance

contributions, but I will ask what the Government will do to help registered care providers. Where will the money come from to enable them to meet their increased national insurance contributions?

Karin Smyth: As the hon. Gentleman knows, this Government have allocated an extra £12 billion in this year for the health and care sector. The full allocation to cover the entire area of health and social care will be announced in the new year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It would be churlish of anybody in this Chamber not to welcome the money that the Government are setting aside. I thank the Minister and the Government for that announcement, but what discussions has the Minister had with Cabinet colleagues to secure exemptions from national insurance contribution hikes for hospice workers? I think of Marie Curie—I spoke about that charity yesterday in Westminster Hall, and the Minister probably has a Marie Curie in her constituency. We know what that charity does. Unlike the mainstream NHS, it will not be exempted, yet it carries out the end of life care that the NHS simply cannot provide. Further, what help will be provided to carers in the community? The withdrawal of their service would leave the care system decimated.

Karin Smyth: The hon. Member makes an excellent point about carers and their support. We made announcements about that in the Budget, and we will make more general announcements about allocations in the new year.

Mr Speaker: May I gently say that I know you welcome being here, Minister, but it would have been easier if the announcement had come as a statement rather than through having to grant an urgent question? When Ministers are going out—quite rightly—to visit hospices, we should be told at the same time. It would be nicer and easier for us all to do it that way, but I thank the Minister for coming.

I would also say to all of us that our hospices matter. In the case of those hospices that serve my constituency—the children's hospice of Derian House and St Catherine's—I wish them all the best for Christmas. I thank all hospices for the duty they carry out on behalf of our constituents.

Business of the House

11.14 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 6 January 2025 includes:

MONDAY 6 JANUARY—Debate on a motion on seizing frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine, followed by a general debate on backlogs in the NHS. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 7 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Crown Estate Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 8 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

THURSDAY 9 JANUARY—General debate on tackling violence against women and girls.

FRIDAY 10 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 13 January will include:

MONDAY 13 JANUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 14 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Renters' Rights Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill.

THURSDAY 16 JANUARY—Motion to approve the draft Deposit Scheme for Drinks Containers (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, followed by business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee (unallotted time).

FRIDAY 17 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

As it is Christmas, Members may also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, following the House rising for the summer recess at the close of business on Tuesday 22 July, the House will return on Monday 1 September. The House will rise for the conference recess on Tuesday 16 September, and return on Monday 13 October.

Jesse Norman: Mr Speaker, may I associate myself very strongly with the remarks you have just made about hospices? You will recall that St Michael's hospice was the topic of a recent discussion that we had at the Dispatch Box in business questions.

Mr Speaker, I must confess that I feel a slight degree of trepidation and nervousness, because at the weekend I received two massively welcome Christmas presents with the result of the Manchester derby and—dare I say it?—the defeat of Chorley by Hereford in a tough, hard-fought game at Edgar Street. I remain worried that I will need all of your legendary reserves of Christmas loving kindness in order to mention this.

This is the time of year when we think of friends and family, of our armed forces that keep us safe here and overseas, of those who care for others wherever they may be, and of the emergency services that protect us all the year round, but especially over the holiday period.

Mr Speaker, I think you will know that, in relation to this House, Parliament's own record is not absolutely unblemished when it comes to Christmas. Fuelled by puritan hostility to public celebration and unseemly revelling, the Long Parliament—Parliament, no less—outlawed the celebration of Christmas in the 1640s. People naturally reacted, notably with the plum pudding riots in Canterbury in 1647, which began with a football game, but ended up with a brawl. How very different from the results at the weekend.

Perhaps the worst moment for this House was during the protectorate, when Parliament sat on Christmas day 1655, and Colonel John Desborough attempted to impose a decimation tax while many royalists were out sensibly celebrating the Christmas season. A punitive and partisan tax, and an unpopular, blundering Government up to various tricks and seeking to rush their business through the Commons while the House's back was turned—how lucky we are that such a thing could never happen today.

However, my personal favourite is 1659, when the supply of French wines was temporarily cut off, creating absolute mayhem in London and other cities across the country. What to do? There could be only one answer: Members of Parliament should drink Herefordshire cider. It was every bit the equal of Burgundy and Bordeaux, as Roger Bosworth, my predecessor as MP for Hereford in the 1659 Parliament, insisted, and it was the ideal remedy for smoothing away troubles. Bosworth was a medical doctor, so he well knew the life-enhancing benefits of Herefordshire cider.

I think the lesson is clear: I doubt the plum pudding riots would have happened at all if the people of Canterbury had had Herefordshire cider to drink after the football. I only hope that the Chorley players were able to do the same after that hard-fought game on Saturday.

Mr Speaker, to you, to the Clerks and the House staff, and to all our colleagues across these Benches and in the other House, I wish a very merry and Herefordshire-filled Christmas and a happy new year.

Lucy Powell: Mr Speaker, I too would like to start by wishing you and everybody in the parliamentary community a very merry and restful Christmas. From the Doorkeepers to the cleaners, the police, the Clerks, *Hansard* and the Lobby, to the hairdressers and the gardeners, there are so many to thank. May I also take this opportunity to thank Katie from my private office who has led all the preparations for business questions for successive Leaders of the House over the last two years? She is leaving for pastures new and we will miss her greatly.

I will not join the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) in mentioning the derby match at the weekend if he does not mind, but as this is the last business questions of the year, let us reflect. It is out with the old and in with the new. I ended the last Parliament paying tribute to outgoing Members from that Parliament and we did lose some very big figures from this place, but come July we gained the biggest intake of new Members in modern history and it has been really energising to see so many enthusiastic, committed and talented new colleagues. They have all got to work so quickly, and many feel like old hands already. It has been a whirlwind for them and all of us arriving in Government and I think we all deserve a proper break over Christmas.

It has been not just a huge change for Parliament but a big change in Government too. It has been difficult, of course, as we face unprecedented challenges and a very difficult legacy. Trying to return Government to the service of ordinary working people, not vested interests, is a big task for us to undertake, but the oil tanker, as they say, has started to move. We are taking on the water bosses to end the scandal of bonuses over investment. We are for the first time ensuring our home-grown energy supplies meet our ambitious targets for clean energy by 2030. We are addressing the housing need and the housing crisis with bold action, bringing in new rights for workers and renters, and creating a transport system in service of passengers not profit. And we are restoring our health and education into world-class services with record levels of investment.

Many hon. Members will no doubt be in Santa's—or perhaps I should say Mr Speaker's—Christmas good books: colleagues who ask short topical questions; those who speak through the Chair and make sure they are in the Chamber for wind-ups; those who wear appropriate shoes; the judges of Purr Minister for crowning Mr Speaker's cat, Attlee, the champion; and, of course, anyone mentioning Chorley or rugby league in a positive sense.

But there will perhaps be some who will not be getting a visit from Mr Speaker's Santa this year: Ministers who do not make statements to Parliament first and instead go on the BBC; hecklers in Prime Minister's questions; Members with pointless points of order; anyone who announces to the media their intention to secure an urgent question; those who cross in front of a Member as they are speaking; and, lest we forget, any Member drinking milk in the Chamber.

As I was, until July, the shadow Leader of the House, I might give the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire a little advice for these sessions, based on some of his previous appearances: if he does want me to answer questions, perhaps he could make them a little less long-winded; perhaps for next year, he might not want to contradict his own previous positions quite so often; and going into 2025, he might want to reflect a little more on why his party lost the election.

If you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, given that it is Christmas time, perhaps we can take one final opportunity to look at the Conservatives' legacy: 12 hour A&E wait times; 11% inflation; 10 Lords defeats on Rwanda; 9 million inactive workers; 8,000 bus routes cancelled; 7 million people on waiting lists; six councils bankrupt; five Prime Ministers toppled; 4 million children in poverty; three broken pledges; two nurses' strikes; and a Prime Minister at a lockdown party.

Mr Speaker: I thank Members for their comments. I hope that Chorley get promoted—that is the gift we need for the new year.

I wish all Members a merry Christmas, and let us hope for a very peaceful year. I thank all the staff of this House for all that they do. They are wonderful; whether they are security or whoever—we can go around—they matter. We must thank those working over Christmas and new year across the country for keeping the lights on and doing all the jobs that need to be done. We must not forget all the people who serve in our armed forces, the police, the ambulance services and the hospitals, who will all be there for us. I want to thank them, and

I would also personally like to thank my team for the support they give me. I wish everybody a peaceful new year when it comes.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Recently, a civil court judge found that Paula Leeson was unlawfully killed by her husband on a holiday abroad. That was a different verdict to that reached in a criminal trial in 2021, with significant new evidence having emerged. Paula's brother, my constituent, is now pushing for a retrial. Paula died in horrific circumstances: drowned fully clothed in a swimming pool with 13 separate injuries, after her husband had taken out multiple life insurance policies on her. Can the Leader of the House advise me on how I might take this issue forward, so that Paula and her family get the justice they so desperately deserve?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the tragic case of Paula and the suffering that her family must be going through at this awful time. My hon. Friend has raised the matter on the Floor of the House today, and I will certainly take it up with Ministers for him. He will be aware that I have just announced a debate on tackling violence against women and girls, which this Government are committed to doing.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I, too, would like to wish you, Mr Speaker, all the Clerks and the House staff a very merry Christmas, and I add my personal thanks to everyone who has shown such support to the newly elected Members of Parliament in their first few months in office.

This week's White Paper on local government devolution was hotly anticipated, but there is a big problem that it did not address. Local government finances are in a desperate state, and yesterday's finance settlement announcement does precious little to correct that. Setting aside local council tax increases, my council, Chelmsford city council, has calculated that its core spending power has increased by only £100,000 in the past decade, yet its costs have gone through the roof and it is constantly being asked to do more with less.

We are in the midst of a housing crisis, and we will not be able to build 1.5 million new homes without the hard work and attention of local government's talented planners, highways engineers and housing teams. We have a crisis in our special educational needs system and no plans in sight for reform. We will not be able to fix it without a huge effort from local government professionals working in children's services and education. Our social care system is in crisis. We will not be able to fix that without the input of the professionals working in local government. There is plenty for local government to be focusing on, but where is the plan?

Instead, the devolution directive, accompanied by local government reorganisation, will drag sparse resources away from those issues, as councils are forced to focus on new structures, on paying redundancies and on spending money on rearranging the deckchairs while services the public rely on are made to suffer. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State to explain why there does not appear to be a plan for fixing these things that are broken, before giving local government more to do?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for those points. First, I welcome her as one of the new Members of this House. We work alongside each other on the House of Commons Commission and many other boards of this place—too many to mention. She certainly has taken to this place incredibly well, and she is making a mark with what she is doing.

The hon. Lady is right. She is describing the absolutely woeful and scandalous legacy that we inherited in local government funding, children's services, education and other vital local services that people rely on. We are beginning the work to turn that around. She was right to point out the record settlement for local government announced in the Budget and set out by the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution this week, with an increase of 3.5% on average for local authorities. She will also be aware that we announced an extra £1 billion for special educational needs.

The hon. Lady is right that we also need to change how we are doing things. That is why the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which will make much-needed change to our children's services, was presented this week. It is only when we work at a place-based level that we can really get the early intervention and support we need to drive down demand and increase outcomes for some of our most vulnerable children. I hope that she will welcome our plans going forward.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I take this opportunity to wish all colleagues in the Chamber and beyond it a very merry Christmas.

Ten years ago, my constituent Claire Throssell promised her sons, who had died at the hands of their domestically abusive father, that no other children would die in the same tragic circumstances. This week has seen the sentencing of Sara Sharif's father and stepmother, who murdered her. Too many children have died at the hands of known domestically abusive parents who have been granted unsupervised contact in the family courts. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on changing the law on presumptive contact in order to prevent further child deaths at the hands of known domestically abusive parents?

Lucy Powell: The case of my hon. Friend's constituent sounds awful. We have all been moved, appalled and shocked in many ways by the case of Sara Sharif and its findings, along with the sentencing this week. She will know that the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that all vulnerable children are safe. We are bringing in reforms, especially to areas such as home schooling and kinship care, and support for children's services and children's social workers. We presented the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill this week, but that is just a start. I look forward to working with her and colleagues so that we can ensure that this never happens again.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House announced on Backbench Business days, we are trying to find a date for the debate delayed from last Thursday because the Government put on three statements and squeezed

the agenda so that it could not be heard. That debate is on the performance of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which I asked a question about some weeks ago.

In addition to those debates, in Westminster Hall on Thursday 9 January there will be a full day's debate on the impact of conflict on women and girls. Also in Westminster Hall, on 14 January there will be a debate on railway services in the south-west, on Thursday 16 January there will be a debate on Government support for the marine renewables industry, and on 21 January there will be a debate on the provision of auditory verbal therapy. We will obviously offer debates in the normal way, and we are taking applications appropriately.

I am not sure whether the Leader of the House has seen the rather excellent report produced by the Henry Jackson Society questioning the number of casualties and deaths in Gaza since the beginning of the war. We seem to be inching towards what everyone wants to see: a ceasefire and the return of the hostages. We wish those hostages the very best at this time of year and hope for their return to their families. Could she arrange for a statement when we return about the true facts on casualties and deaths in Gaza, rather than the fictitious figures made up by the Ministry of Health, which is controlled by Hamas?

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for announcing some of his forthcoming debates. He will be aware that, as I just read out, an extra Backbench Business half-day has been allocated on Thursday 16 January to make up for last week. I hope that satisfies him. When it comes to what is happening in Israel and Gaza, I am sure the whole House will join me and him in wanting to get to that much-needed ceasefire in the conflict between Israel and Hamas—hopefully even over the Christmas period—and to get the hostages returned so that we can start to see a move towards the long-standing, peaceful settlement for the region that we all desperately want.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I wish you a merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, and a happy Hogmanay when it comes. My constituency is home to the rural community of Balquhiddy, where, since 2018, community volunteers have laid more than 36 km of fibre cable to provide the community with a high-speed internet connection years ahead of when a commercial operator would have reached the area. Balquhiddy has achieved this hard work with financial support from the Government's Building Digital vouchers. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the volunteers of Balquhiddy on all their work, and indeed volunteers in all our communities who are working hard over Christmas on all that they do? Will she also make time for a debate on rural broadband provision and mobile telephone coverage so that we can explore how to bring the digital connection that many urban communities take for granted to more rural communities, such as Balquhiddy, as quickly as possible?

Lucy Powell: I would be delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituents on working as a community to get the fibre broadband connection that rural communities such as his so desperately rely on—it really is the fourth utility. He is right to point out

that the previous Government's roll-out of broadband in rural communities was far too slow. We have science questions when we return, but I will certainly consider his request for a debate.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Could we have a debate on putting children at the heart of public policy? In her statement, the Leader of the House mentioned children and the emerging Bill. She will know that there is an equality impact assessment in pre-legislative scrutiny, and that there can be no discrimination on the basis of age. There have been two dominant themes in these business questions so far: Herefordshire—as a Herefordshire boy, I am delighted by that—and children. I hope that the Government, across Departments, will consider a potential new policy that will look at policies, Bills and laws and how they impact children.

Lucy Powell: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments. We are absolutely putting children at the heart of our policy. We have a mission to ensure opportunity for all and that every child has the very best start in life, to really galvanise all the different Departments and places across the country, and Secretaries of State, including the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, are working closely on a child poverty taskforce. Putting children first is at the forefront of this Government's mission. I look forward to working with the right hon. Gentleman on delivering that.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Merry Christmas and a happy new year to you and all the House staff, Mr Speaker, and to everybody out there, particularly in my constituency.

Many of my constituents have contacted me to convey their concerns over the safety of their loved ones and the wellbeing of former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan after the killing of several protesters in Pakistan, with many more injured and hospitalised, in addition to their anxieties over abductions, torture and transnational repression. Will the Leader of the House ensure that our UK Ministers make representations to their Pakistan counterparts to protect democratic norms, press freedoms and the human rights of all?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend will be aware that the British Government and Ministers are in constant dialogue with counterparts in Pakistan and around the world. We do expect democratic norms to be upheld in Pakistan, as we do in other countries. I will ensure that he gets a proper ministerial response on the issues he has raised.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Yesterday saw yet another road traffic accident on Strines Road in my constituency, resulting in injured passengers having to be taken to Stepping Hill hospital. The Leader of the House will know that speeding is a problem on roads across the country. She will also know that for Transport for Greater Manchester even to consider installing a fixed speed camera, there need to have been three serious accidents. The community on Strines Road knows that although it is far too early to determine exactly what caused yesterday's accident, speeding has been a persistent issue on that road for years, and they have been working with local councillors Colin MacAlister and Shan Alexander to tackle it. Will the Leader of the

House ask a Transport Minister to come to this House to explain the progress they are making in tackling speeding across our communities?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises a really important issue for her constituents. I know her constituency well, as we are near neighbours. In fact, my brother is a constituent of hers and was very pleased that last week she raised the problems with the trains in her constituency. Today she raises the very important matter of speeding, which comes up in the House regularly. The Government are committed to tackling road traffic accidents and speeding on our roads. I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard her question today and that she gets a proper reply.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): FSB Wales, the Federation of Small Businesses in Wales, is asking people to join its £10 pledge by spending at least £10 with a small business during December. I am very much looking forward to getting out on to Bangor High Street this weekend to finish my Christmas shopping, and especially to visit the new Obsession Menswear shop that has just opened in the Deiniol centre. Will the Leader of the House join me in taking the £10 pledge and wishing all small businesses in Bangor Aberconwy a very merry Christmas?

Lucy Powell: I will be joining my hon. Friend in the mad dash for last-minute Christmas presents this weekend—I am hoping to get some that cost £10 or less, which is quite difficult in the current climate. I absolutely join her in supporting local businesses in her constituency. Maybe I could try a few Christmas puns, Mr Speaker. There is “noel” time like the present to shop in Bangor.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Many businesses will be severely negatively impacted by the Government's announcement on changes to inheritance tax through business property relief. Those in the hospitality sector, such as hoteliers and breweries, and even the manufacturing, engineering and tech businesses in my constituency, have contacted me with their deep concerns about the effect the changes will have on their businesses. Is the Leader of the House aware of any economic analysis or modelling done by the Government specifically on the negative impact they will have? I see that the Secretary of State for Business and Trade is sitting next to her on the Treasury Bench. Was he, or even the Chancellor, aware of the negative impact of the measures in the Budget on those particular businesses?

Lucy Powell: We fully support family businesses and other businesses, which are vital to our economy. We had to take some very difficult decisions in the Budget to deal with the really severe legacy we were left, which was, I am afraid, a chronic big black hole in economic spending. We had to find ways to ensure that our public services had the investment they needed going forward. He will be aware that when we take into account all the other factors, including personal allowances and so on, fewer family businesses will be affected than the hon. Gentleman might think.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Mr Speaker, a merry Christmas to you and all staff.

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

I put on record that my mam is a WASPI woman. My right hon. Friend will know full well the strength of feeling regarding this week's announcement of no compensation for the WASPI women. The ombudsman was clear that Parliament should make the decision on remedy. Parliament has not. Will my right hon. Friend please find time for a debate so that we can do as the ombudsman has asked us to do?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I know that this is a really big issue for many women right across the country, and it has spanned multiple Parliaments. I know that many will be very disappointed by this week's announcement, and we do not underestimate the strength of feeling and the upset that people will be feeling. I know it is difficult to hear, but paying flat-rate compensation to all women born in the 1950s, at a cost of up to £10.5 billion, would not be a fair or proportionate use of public money. The Government do not accept the ombudsman's findings on the remedy being necessary in this case. Colleagues can apply for debates on these matters in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Law.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am extremely grateful—[*Interruption.*] Oh, I beg your pardon.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I thought there was a doppelganger in the Chamber for a second, Mr Speaker.

A new Government can make political choices, and one would have thought that, in the week before Christmas, they would be positive choices—things that people could take home and feel grateful and happy about on Christmas Day. However, as has just been mentioned by the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), millions of women throughout the country, 1950s-born women, have been affected, quite adversely, in respect of their state pensions. Many are in ill health, and are continuing to work in ill health. They lived in hope for many years during their protracted, passionate and very reasonable campaign for fairness and justice, and on Tuesday this week they were told that they were getting none of it. We have an ombudsman, which has made very clear, very fairly and decently, what amount should be paid in compensation, and has also made clear that the Department for Work and Pensions made errors at the time.

Since Tuesday, not only have we received emails, but Members of Parliament, particularly Government Members, have been deleting pages from their websites and Twitter accounts—the very pages that showed them campaigning out there with WASPI women, getting their photographs taken, doing videos, sending messages and so forth. Now they have no voice. They are frightened even to raise the issue in this House. May I therefore urge the Leader of the House and the Business Secretary to arrange a debate as soon as possible, a meaningful debate in Government time? No ifs, no buts; we all need to have our say on this.

Lucy Powell: As I just said, I understand the strength of feeling about this matter. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions came to the House first to make the

announcement, as is appropriate, especially when it comes to a report from the parliamentary ombudsman which was laid before the House last March. The Government have considered that report in full and given it a great deal of thought, and there was time for Members to ask questions on Tuesday, but of course debates can be brought to the Floor of the House in many different ways, and I am sure that this issue will continue to be debated.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend arrange a debate in Government time in the new year on the funding of political parties? I wonder what it means when a party talks about sovereignty and is then willing to sell itself entirely to a foreign-owned entity, while using slogans like “Take back control”. We have seen the controversy of the Conservative party's fondness for taking a few bob from Putin's oligarchs, and we have seen the recent scandals involving the Chinese trying to influence politics in this country. I think that we, as this Government, must make sure that we are saying that our politics is not up for sale, and I think we should have a debate about it in the House.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has made some extremely valid points about our democracy and our sovereignty in this country. I see that the leader of the Reform party is in his place—

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Deputy leader.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry—the deputy leader. He gave up his leadership role to someone else at some point, I recall. Anyway, the deputy leader.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): For now.

Lucy Powell: For now, yes. I think the hon. Member has made his point.

My hon. Friend will be aware that foreign donations are not permitted in our electoral system, and that is absolutely as it should be. Our democracy does face daily threats from rogue states, rogue actors and others who try to disrupt it and to spread myth and disinformation, and these are issues that we should be very alive to.

Mr Speaker: I think I now have to go to Richard Tice!

Richard Tice: Thank you, Mr Speaker—as the deputy leader of Reform UK.

Along with, I think, millions of other British citizens, I was shocked to read the exposé in *The Times* that Britain has become the “western capital” for the use of sharia courts. May we have a debate on this issue in the new year? In my view, the use of sharia courts to make unofficial rulings about marriages, divorces and family life has no place in the United Kingdom.

Lucy Powell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. I am sure that his leader is somewhere far more important, perhaps in a studio or abroad, getting an airing. I hear what he has had to say, and I am sure we all agree that the courts that are recognised in this country are UK, British and English courts, which is entirely right.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): In West Sussex, the number of education, health and care plans has risen from 3,362 in 2015 to 7,684 in 2024—a 228% increase. With schools increasingly stretched, there is an inevitable cost to children with and without special needs. I have recently met special needs co-ordinator leads from two excellent schools in my constituency, Bishop Tufnell and Edward Bryant, to discuss the funding and staffing challenges that they face. They are not specialist support centres, and local specialist schools are oversubscribed. They are reliant on local charities such as the Rotary Club, which works tirelessly to raise money to improve their facilities, but it cannot assist with the impact of the national insurance contributions rise on staffing levels and staff retention, or with temporary contracts and burnout. Will the Leader of the House commit to granting a debate to consider a sustainable future funding model for schools with SEND provision?

Mr Speaker: I think I would apply for an Adjournment debate.

Lucy Powell: The issue of SEND often comes up in these sessions. I gently remind the hon. Lady that the SEND system that this Government inherited was in crisis, with spiralling costs getting higher and higher, and outcomes getting worse and worse. There is no question but that special educational needs provision in this country is in need of serious investment and serious reform, which is what this Government intend to deliver.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I wish you and everybody across the estate a very merry Christmas and a happy new year, particularly those who will be working over the holiday period.

I recently had the privilege of attending a conference organised by Sikh Women's Aid, at which it launched its report on its comprehensive survey, which looked into domestic abuse, sexual abuse, faith-based and spiritual abuse, and barriers facing victims and survivors. The report details a number of recommendations, including ringfencing funding streams for by-and-for support services, the inclusion of Sikh Punjabi women's experiences in policy advocacy, a legal definition of "spiritual abuse", and a co-ordinated and joined-up response to Sikh Punjabi victims and survivors. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the important work done by Sikh Women's Aid, particularly in view of the threats, intimidation and violence that its trustees and staff have faced, and will she make time for a debate on the importance of by-and-for support organisations?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can you help each other? We have a lot on this afternoon, and I want to try to get everybody in. We need to try to be a bit shorter in asking the questions.

Lucy Powell: I will try to be a bit shorter in answering them, too.

I strongly welcome the work being done by Sikh Women's Aid to highlight some of the barriers that women face in reporting abuse. My hon. Friend will know that this Government treat tackling violence against women and girls as a key mission, and we have just announced a debate on this issue when we return.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): It is now over six months since the autocratic ruler Sheikh Hasina fled Bangladesh amid outcry about human rights abuses, including the killing of hundreds of protesters under her regime. Will the Leader of the House provide time to consider how the UK is supporting the people of Bangladesh in their pursuit of democracy and freedom from oppression, including by assessing the UK's historical role with regard to the deposed regime, working with the Bangladeshi authorities in response to allegations of corruption and embezzlement against members of the former Government who are in the UK, and addressing the misinformation and serious falsehoods being perpetuated, which are currently fuelling violence and instability in the region?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend will know that the British Government engage in ongoing dialogue with Bangladesh and other countries. We expect to see democratic norms in Bangladesh, as we do in every other country, and they include press freedom and everything else. She might be aware that we have Foreign Office questions when we return, and she could raise this issue with the Foreign Secretary.

Sir John Hayes: Mindful of the Leader of the House's advice, I am suitably booted, I am speaking through the Chair and, of course, I have Chorley imprinted on my heart.

In that spirit, may I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on the WASPI women? I know she has said we can apply for a debate, and I was going to ask for something quite different, but given what the hon. Members for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and for Dundee Central (Chris Law) have said, it is essential that when we have an ombudsman report of such seriousness—I have rarely seen one like it in my time in this House—we have the chance to debate it. If the Leader of the House does not offer a debate, I will apply to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, immediately following business questions.

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, and he is a very honourable Member. I am sure he is in the good books of not only Mr Speaker but the Deputy Speakers, and is certainly on their Christmas card lists, because he always has the right attire, always speaks through the Chair and always asks punchy, short questions.

On the serious issue that the right hon. Gentleman raises, I know that the strength of feeling is widespread and that people want to air their views. I am sure there will be time, as I am sure colleagues will apply for debates in the usual way.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Nadelik lowen—merry Christmas.

As we look forward to next year, 2025 could and should be a momentous year for Cornwall, with our unparalleled resources of renewable energy and critical minerals. Does the Leader of the House agree that the time has come to pass from Westminster to Cornwall the powers and support needed to deal with our unique set of challenges and to unleash the Cornish Celtic tiger?

Lucy Powell: I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on regularly attending these sessions and other debates, and on consistently raising critical

[Lucy Powell]

minerals and their importance to Cornwall's future and, indeed, to our mission to be a clean energy superpower by 2030. The Business Secretary is in his place next to me today, and I am sure he has heard my hon. Friend's call. I hope that, through the devolution White Paper that we launched this week, the voice of Cornwall will be heard loud and strong.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Last week, I called in on the drop-in session organised by Alzheimer's Research UK and Prostate Cancer UK. At these sessions, we repeatedly hear appeals for people to go in for early diagnosis, and the message is the same now as it was many years ago. Could the Leader of the House find time for a debate on how we can prevent illness through early screening and diagnosis?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that dementia and other diseases would be much better treated with early diagnosis. This Government are absolutely committed to early intervention, early diagnosis and ensuring that services are out in the community, where people can get the appointments and early diagnosis they need. That is what the Government are continuing to deliver.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Adi Robinson and his hard-working and compassionate team at Rugby food bank? Does she agree that, although they display the best of human nature, their efforts should not be needed in such a rich and civilised country as ours? Does she further agree that this Government are taking action to reduce food poverty and poverty through our child poverty taskforce, free breakfast clubs, the Renters' Rights Bill and the pension triple lock—I could go on, but I will not, Madam Deputy Speaker—and that we are doing this so that, ultimately, people do not need charity for the fundamentals of life? Could time be found to further debate such actions?

Lucy Powell: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. At this time of year, at Christmas, many of us in this House visit our local food banks. He is absolutely right that it is shocking that, in 2024, food banks are still needed at all, let alone so prevalent. He highlights many of the actions this Government are taking to reduce their necessity.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, your fantastic staff, and colleagues across the House a merry Christmas? Bathford village shop and café, a volunteer-run community enterprise, recently won an award for its fantastic work supporting the elderly, lonely and vulnerable, but there is a risk that it will soon lose its premises. The £150 million community ownership fund, which was due to run until March 2025 but was suspended because of the election, would make the vital difference between survival and closure. Can we have an update on the community ownership fund?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the plight of that enterprise in her constituency, and the valuable work that it does to support the elderly in her community. I will ensure that she gets an update in short order on the future of the community ownership fund.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): May I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all the staff, and everyone working across the parliamentary estate a very merry Christmas? This year, Royal Mail's Christmas stamps honour some of the most magnificent cathedrals across the UK, and St Mary's Episcopal cathedral in the west end of Edinburgh, in my constituency of Edinburgh North and Leith, is one of them. The cathedral was consecrated in 1879 and is the only cathedral in Scotland to have three spires. I am sure many hon. Friends will join me in welcoming this recognition for the cathedral, but unfortunately every year many churches are forced to close, with over 3,000 having closed in the last 10 years. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government time to look at the future of churches across the UK?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating St Mary's Episcopal cathedral on appearing on the Christmas stamps this year. She raises an important issue that many hon. Members across the House raise: the future of churches and our places of worship. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is in his place and I am sure that he would welcome an application for such a debate.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Since being elected, I have been contacted by a number of women who have left their partners or husbands because of domestic abuse, and then had that abuse perpetuated during their dealings with the family court when determining access to their children or the maintenance payments that they receive. Given the obvious concern about the prioritisation of access over child safety, the issues that female constituents have raised with me, and the fact that the family court operates in secrecy, which leaves constituents gagged and bound, unable to do anything about these things, can we have a debate in Government time on how women are treated in family court processes, and how we can do better?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises a story with which many of us will be all too familiar as constituency MPs. She will know that this Government take domestic abuse and domestic violence incredibly seriously. We have a very challenging target of halving violence against women and girls over the next few years. We have an upcoming crime and policing Bill and a victims Bill, and some of the measures that she asks about will be included in that legislation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I have 17 colleagues to call and around 15 minutes left, so if we are sharp, I can try to get everybody in. I call Johanna Baxter.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): May I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all staff across the parliamentary estate a very happy Christmas? In the last week, my constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire South have received the devastating news that the SNP-controlled integration joint board, running health and social care provision across Renfrewshire, is trying to make £19.1 million in cuts, having already closed Montrose care home in my constituency earlier this year. Given that the Scottish Government have just received the biggest funding settlement since devolution,

does the Leader of the House agree that they should use that money to protect the most vulnerable constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire South?

Lucy Powell: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Scottish Government have received a record settlement from this Government as a result of our recent Budget, and they have no excuse for making the cuts that she describes in health and social care.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Large areas of rural South Hams in my constituency of South Devon are still struggling with almost prehistoric broadband speeds. The company that was tasked with rolling out full-fibre broadband was astonishingly allowed to walk away from its contract after building the easy urban bits, leaving all the hard-to-reach areas behind. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how the Government can underwrite the roll-out of high-speed broadband in areas where it is not commercially viable, because broadband is as important to the rural economy as electricity?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. To rural communities—indeed, to any community—broadband really is the fourth utility. It is vital to her constituents and many others in their daily lives, for doing what they need to do. We have inherited a pretty poor record when it comes to roll-out, but we are trying to speed it up through Project Gigabit and the shared rural network. Nevertheless, I have heard the hon. Lady's request for a debate.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I wish to raise the case of my constituent Mitch Middleton, who has refractory primary central nervous system lymphoma in his brain. Following radiotherapy, the cancer has returned and the NHS has given him six to 12 months to live. The treatment that he needs is called chimeric antigen receptor T-cell therapy, and it is available on the NHS, but not for his circumstances, although haematologists know that it can be used to treat his cancer. The price tag is about £475,000—too expensive. He is having to fundraise to fly abroad and have the treatment. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on licensing and access to treatment for cancer, as there are more people who, sadly, cannot access the care and treatment that they need?

Lucy Powell: My heart and thoughts go out to Mitch Middleton, the hon. Lady's constituent, and his family, who are dealing with that. As my hon. Friend knows, improving diagnosis and treatment for cancer patients, especially those with rare cancers, is something that this Government want to get right. The issue of access to treatment and medicines on the NHS gets raised with me regularly in this House. I therefore encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a bigger debate on the subject.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all a Nadolig llawen—merry Christmas.

The Leader of the House will be aware of the challenges facing Welsh farmers. Around 30% of Welsh agricultural land is rented. Changes made to the agricultural property relief in the autumn Budget will force the sale of family tenancy farms on Ynys Môn, displacing generational

farming. It is disappointing that no Wales-specific impact assessment has been made. Can we have a debate in Government time on the Budget's impact on Welsh farming?

Lucy Powell: This Government support farmers and our rural communities. We have put in an extra £5 billion for the farming budget over two years, which is one of the biggest increases that farming has seen. I will, however, ensure that the hon. Lady's question is heard by the relevant Minister, and that she gets a response.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House arrange for either a statement or a debate in Government time on the regulation of houses in multiple occupancy? Without an article 4 direction in Stoke-on-Trent, we are at the mercy of developers who buy family homes or terraced properties and then convert them, using permitted development rights. That has a huge impact on amenities and on community feeling, and I think we could do a lot about that as a Government.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We all see the impact of permitted development rights and houses in multiple occupation on our communities. Where they go unchecked, they can cause real problems, and also have a detrimental impact on the housing supply in an area. He will be aware that the Renters' Rights Bill covers some of those issues, and we are due to consider the Bill on Report and in its final stages when we return from recess.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): A merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everyone across Parliament and in my constituency.

Thornbury and Yate residents driving home for Christmas will face a second festive season of chaos on local roads, with at least one more still to come, thanks to the ongoing closure of the A432 M4 over-bridge. There is no compensation for the small businesses affected, or for residents living on the now choked local country lanes. Given that hundreds, if not thousands, of such post-tensioned bridges were built in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, this horror could be coming to many constituencies, but I have so far been unable to secure a debate on this important topic. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we can discuss the issue in the new year?

Lucy Powell: I know that the hon. Lady has applied on a number of occasions for a debate on that important matter affecting her constituency. Madam Deputy Speaker is in her Chair and has heard the hon. Lady's appeal again today. Road closures of that kind, where bridges need that sort of work, can be absolutely devastating for local communities and businesses, and I will certainly help her in trying to secure an Adjournment debate on the subject.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Many of my constituents are concerned about the proposed AQUIND interconnector. The planning decision is with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, in consultation, I believe, with the Ministry of Defence, after security concerns were raised about the project. The previous Administration kicked this decision down

[Amanda Martin]

the road, so I can understand why this Government are doing things by the book and ensuring that consultation goes ahead. However, will the Leader of the House allocate time to a debate on ensuring that the two Departments work together efficiently and co-operatively on securing a judgment on this issue, and will she seek clarity on when we can expect the consultation to conclude and a decision to be finally made on this project?

Lucy Powell: I am sure that my hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot comment on a live planning case, but I understand that the Attorney General's Office has appointed a representative to act on behalf of AQUIND Ltd in relation to this matter, and I hope that she will get the answer that she needs soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Happy Christmas, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everybody in the House. I shall probably say that again later, in the Adjournment debate.

On 8 December, in the Partapur area of Meerut district in Uttar Pradesh, the police uncovered a so-called religious conversion meeting, where approximately 50 Hindus were found participating peacefully in a Bible reading session. There was nothing sinister and nothing subversive going on. Pastor Vineet, along with 14 associates, was arrested under sections 3 and 5 of the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act. Prior to his arrest, Pastor Vineet, who converted to Christianity a decade ago, had been organising similar prayer meetings in various locations. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning such violations of freedom of religion or belief, and will she ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to raise this issue with its counterparts in India?

Lucy Powell: May I take this opportunity to wish the hon. Gentleman a merry Christmas? I shall miss him over the next two or three weeks, as we will not be having business questions. He is nothing if not consistent, because yet again he raises another important issue relating to the freedom of religion or belief. He will know that FCDO Ministers recently held a roundtable meeting with a range of faith leaders in Delhi to discuss many of these issues, and we will continue to raise concerns with the Indian Government.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): Last week, Working For Wallacetown, a project in my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, was awarded the Scottish public service award for community engagement. Another project, Tailored Jobs, was a runner-up in the championing diversity and inclusion award category. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising this hard work and commitment to public service over the past year?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those in her constituency, and in everybody else's constituency—especially at this time of year—who do fantastic volunteering and public service work and contribute greatly to public life in their communities.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your team. Hitchin's fantastic festive knitted postbox topper campaign by Sue, Karen and other brilliant local volunteers has raised thousands of pounds for Hitchin Choices, a local special educational needs and disabilities youth group. I had the pleasure of visiting the group last week and, while there, I quickly learned that I need to practise my ping-pong skills a lot more before going back. It was clear how valued the group was by the young people who attended. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging people to back this campaign, and can we have a statement from the Secretary of State about what more we can do to support such youth groups as part of our wider SEND reforms?

Lucy Powell: In the spirit of Christmas, as this was a knitted postbox campaign, I did think that in his constituency, we could perhaps say, "Let it sew, let it sew, let it sew." I am sorry about that; the puns are just getting worse. My hon. Friend has raised an important point about children needing support. That point has been raised many times today. I am sure that if many Members from across the House came together and applied for a Backbench Business debate on how we support the most vulnerable children and those with special educational needs, it would be very well subscribed.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Christmas is the time for musical festivities. One of my constituents in Wolverhampton West runs Revolver Records, which is Europe's oldest indie rock label, having signed acts such as the Stone Roses, the Scorpions and Tony Hadley. It has released 7,000 albums over the past 42 years. My constituent has highlighted the problem of independent music publishers not being paid for the use of copyright music material. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to support our businesses, including those in the music industry, so that they receive the payments that they are due? Will she please make time for a debate in the House about supporting our independent music publishers?

Lucy Powell: May I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Revolver Records? As a Mancunian child of the '80s and '90s, I bought the original Stone Roses record that Revolver Records produced, so I am particularly pleased to do as he asks. He raises a really important matter about copyright and how the music industry is changing with music streaming and so on. I know that these issues are regularly raised in this House, and I will support him in doing so.

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): May I wish a Merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the excellent House staff and of course the Speaker's staff, who have shown extraordinary patience with me as I have asked many questions about how this place works.

In my constituency I am supporting somebody who has a real problem with cyber-bullying. Her daughter has been suffering for over a year now with persistent online abuse. Things have become so bad that doctored letters purporting to be from the NHS and the police have been sent to her, and edited photos have also been sent round her school. Given what has happened, will

the Leader of the House grant a debate on the urgent need to tackle cyber-bullying and online harassment, especially in educational settings?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate my hon. Friend who, as a new Member in this House, has been one of the best attenders both in business questions and for many other statements. He has really got his feet under the table, so to speak. He raises the important issue of cyber-bullying. He will know that this Government are ensuring the effective implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023, and many of those measures are coming on stream in the coming months. A Westminster Hall debate on the subject is also likely to take place soon.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): Livingston has a considerable issue with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in our public buildings, our social housing stock and many private homes, too. For the first two categories, remedies are being put in place, but the same cannot be said for private housing, such as that in Chestnut Grove in Livingston. People bought their homes in good faith and had them surveyed by reputable surveyors, but have now lost half the value of the property due to RAAC. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on possible remedies for homeowners in Livingston and beyond who are in this predicament, and the potential role of the private sector, local government, devolved Governments and central Government in remedying this situation?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the ongoing situation with the slow remedying of RAAC in homes and buildings for many of my hon. Friend's constituents. He will appreciate that this is a devolved matter, but the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is engaging with the Scottish Government on respective approaches to RAAC, and I hope that that will speed up remediation soon.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): Residents in Maltby are furious about new plans for the old Maltby pit. I am joining them to campaign ferociously against the plans, because the environmental risk is too great and the amount of lorries going through the village would be hugely damaging to the community. Will the Government provide time for Parliament to look into this issue properly and to ensure that we can all stand up for Maltby?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot comment on specific plans, but I understand that Rotherham council's consultation on this application has been extended into the new year following concerns that he has raised, and I am sure that he will welcome that. He will be aware that we are bringing forward the planning and infrastructure Bill next year, which is a significant piece of legislation, when he may want to raise these issues further.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): On Saturday, more than 100 veterans gathered in my constituency to pay tribute to the late Sam Morgan, a former Royal Marine who tragically took his own life aged just 36. I met a local group of veterans and the message that I have heard from them loud and clear is that we must do more to address the issue of veteran

mental health. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, the Minister for Veterans and People, who is in his place, for agreeing to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) to discuss this issue with local veterans. Will the Leader of the House give her assurance that this issue will be treated as a priority by this Government?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the tragic case of his constituent, Sam Morgan. The mental wellbeing and support for veterans is a priority for this Government. The Minister for Veterans and People is in his place and has heard my hon. Friend's call today. We have laid on a number of debates around the issues facing veterans, but I will ensure that we give further consideration to future debates as well.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all staff and Members of this House.

Whether it is delays from Bardon Mill station or a patchy bus service cutting off villages such as Heddon-on-the-Wall in Ovingham, public transport in rural areas like the Tyne valley simply was not a priority for the previous Government. Can the Leader of the House assure me that we will make progress on this issue, and will she provide Government time for a debate on the importance of economic growth and commuter wellbeing in our most rural constituencies?

Lucy Powell: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on his recent engagement to our colleague Hana. When I congratulated her, she said that it was about time, so at least he got there in the end.

My hon. Friend raises an issue that has been raised with me on many occasions: how the woeful infrastructure that many of us experience in the north of this country is holding back our regions and our constituents. That is why we are prioritising transport infrastructure. We have huge investment going in, and I am sure that he will work with the Transport Secretary and others to ensure that it takes effect in his constituency.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The honour of asking the last business question of 2024 goes to Tom Rutland.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and a very merry Christmas to you.

Like many MPs, this year I held my first Christmas card competition, and I was blown away by the talent of local primary school children. Will the Leader of the House indulge me, and join me in congratulating the winners, Franco, Akithra and Lauren, and extending a massive thank you to the teachers in my constituency, who work tirelessly, day in and day out, not only to educate our young people but to unlock their potential and creativity?

Lucy Powell: Many of us undertake Christmas card competitions every year. They are one of the most wonderful things that we take part in as MPs. I congratulate not just my hon. Friend's Christmas card winners but my own from Seymour Road academy in Manchester. I also congratulate him on getting the very last business

[Lucy Powell]

question of 2024 under his belt. As you were not in the Chair earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you a very merry Christmas as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the Leader of the House for being so patient; she has been on her feet for over an hour.

Harland & Wolff

12.22 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement on the UK shipbuilding firm Harland & Wolff. I am pleased to inform the House that, subject to approvals, a commercial deal has been reached that will protect jobs, drive investment and secure the future of the workforce. The deal will see Navantia UK, a specialist in shipbuilding, purchase all of Harland & Wolff's shipyards.

As right hon. and hon. Members will know, Harland & Wolff is a major employer in Belfast, with additional important yards at Arnish and Methil in Scotland and Appledore in Devon. For more than 150 years, the firm has built famous vessels for notable shipping organisations and companies, including the Royal Navy, the Royal Mail and the White Star Line. This industry-led deal, which we expect to complete shortly, will secure all four of Harland & Wolff's shipyards, protecting around 1,000 jobs right across the UK. I hope that this announcement will come as some relief to Harland & Wolff's employees. I realise that this has been a deeply worrying time for them, and for everyone affected by the continued speculation over the firm's future. I welcome Navantia UK's intention to work closely with the relevant unions to protect workers' existing terms and conditions. That is important for the hard-working employees and communities who have served the firm over many years.

I was first informed that Harland & Wolff was in serious financial difficulty on day one of the new Government. As the previous Government had open-book arrangements with the company, it was clear that the firm had significant and unsustainable debts. Members will be aware that, at that point, Harland & Wolff was seeking a Government guarantee or liquidity loan. Had that occurred, the British taxpayer would have been put at significant risk of losing millions of pounds, without the safeguarding of any yards, jobs or ships. I believe that the possibility of the Government providing such a guarantee or loan, which was much speculated on in the press, was preventing a market-based solution. The former Government's inability to make a decision left the yards and the workforce in limbo. That is why I made it clear in my first weeks in this job that no taxpayer guarantee or loan would be provided. I was dismayed that when I did so Conservative Members opposed that, knowing as they did that with a guarantee or loan there stood a significant risk of losing an eye-watering amount of taxpayers' money. That was deeply irresponsible.

Crucially, the deal that has been agreed will secure the delivery of the fleet solid support contract of the Ministry of Defence. The Government have worked closely with Navantia UK on the future of the FSS programme. We have agreed the absolute minimum of changes to the contract to ensure its continued delivery. Navantia UK is the prime contractor of the Team Resolute consortium, which is charged with building three logistics support vessels for the Royal Navy, and it will maintain the required portion of UK-only build as part of this deal. It is also worth saying that FSS is a vital component of the UK carrier strike capability, providing munitions, spares and stores. At a time when strategic alignment with our NATO allies is more critical

than ever, the Government fully endorse this deal, which will also see Navantia UK invest significantly on commercial terms in Harland & Wolff shipyards.

Anyone familiar with Navantia UK will know that the firm boasts strong expertise in naval shipbuilding. I am pleased that, thanks to this agreement, it will continue to bring the next generation of technology to its operations here in the UK. This is quite simply a good deal for the Harland & Wolff shipyards, a good deal for its employees, and a good deal for British shipbuilding. It provides the best opportunity to sustain our essential sovereign shipbuilding capacity and capability, now and over the long term. Defence is at the heart of the industrial strategy that we have identified. Defence is one of our eight growth-driving sectors of the UK economy. That industrial strategy is unreservedly and unashamedly pro-business, engaging on complex issues that are currently barriers to growth and investment. National security is one of the foundations of our plan for change. Without it, we cannot deliver on our milestones to raise living standards across the UK, with good, skilled, productive jobs like those at Harland & Wolff.

UK shipbuilding alone supports some 42,500 jobs nationwide and adds £2.4 billion to the economy every single year. We recognise how important it is, as a vital pillar of our civil and defence industrial base. That is why my Department, together with the Ministry of Defence and the National Shipbuilding Office, is doing everything that we can to bolster our world-class shipbuilding industry. That includes the significant progress that we are making on key procurement programmes. We have a major contract with BAE Systems, which has increased the order from three to eight Type 26 anti-submarine warfare frigates on the Clyde, and a contract with Babcock for five Type 31 general purpose frigates at Rosyth. Those projects have already brought significant recapitalisation investment to shipyards throughout the UK, and there are further procurements to be won, ranging from Border Force and local councils to marine in-port service vessels at His Majesty's naval bases.

The Government are absolutely committed to supporting vibrant, growing and successful shipbuilding and fabrication industries across the country, and I pay tribute to the skilled, diligent workforces who have made these industries what they are today. Thanks to the deal that has been announced, workers in Belfast, Arnish, Methil, Appledore and right across the country can be confident that the Government are squarely behind them, that UK shipbuilding is secure, and that together, as a United Kingdom, we will lead the sector into a better future. I hope that all workers in all four yards are now able to enjoy this Christmas with their families, as they should. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.28 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. The famous yellow gantry of Harland & Wolff stands tall, not only on the skyline of Belfast but in the history of our nation. It is difficult to overstate what Harland & Wolff means to people in the communities of Belfast, Appledore, Arnish and Methil. Extended families across the country will welcome today's confirmation that

the shipbuilding contract that we awarded in government will now proceed. There remain, however, many unanswered questions, which I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could answer. If he cannot answer them at the Dispatch Box today, I would be grateful if he or the Defence Secretary would write in the coming days.

First, at a time of enormous geopolitical uncertainty, can the Secretary of State confirm that there will be no change to the in-service date of the three fleet solid support ships, with the first ship entering service as expected in the fourth quarter of 2028? Secondly, what funding or commitment, if any, has been provided by any part of the Government to Navantia to secure this finalised deal? If so, which budget will that be appropriated from? Has he received state aid clearance for the transaction and, if not, could he clarify the process by which that will now be obtained?

The Secretary of State said in his statement that the Department has agreed the

“absolute minimum of changes to the contract,”

but the statement provides absolutely nothing whatsoever as to what that actually conceals. Can he guarantee, as Navantia promised as part of its original bid for the contract, that no less than 60% of the whole supply chain activity will take place in the UK? Will he confirm that there are no additional work packages beyond those originally envisaged moving from Belfast or anywhere in the UK to Puerto Real in Cádiz? Above all, will he assure the workers and their families who are watching that the final assembly and systems integration, which is where much of the high-value work sits for all three of those vital ships, will take place in Belfast, rather than in Navantia's parent shipyards in Spain?

The Secretary of State will appreciate that it is sometimes hard, though one tries, to take him at his word after the number of impacts on business over the past few months. The wider context—though welcome in respect of this particular contract and these defence jobs—is the large-scale uncertainty that our defence companies, contractors, workers and employees face about the timetable for the Government to reach 2.5% on defence spending. They do not have the certainty that Harland & Wolff workers now do this Christmas. We do not even have a timeline for a timeline as to when that 2.5% will be hit, and we have seen a degree of equivocation on exactly when the strategic defence review will be published. Again, I would be grateful if the Secretary of State clarified that or if a colleague wrote to me.

It is, at the end of the day, action not words. We welcome this deal for Harland & Wolff and the certainty that it will provide to workers and their families, and I thank the Department officials for their work on that, but there are still many questions to be answered.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Secretary of State. Having served in his Department, I too will be paying close attention to the answer.

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree with the shadow Secretary of State on the iconic nature of this business; its role in British history and in the community, particularly in Belfast; and the esteem in which it is held. I do feel he could have thanked us for cleaning up another mess that the previous Government left us, although perhaps that is too much to ask. After all, they could have made

[Jonathan Reynolds]

the decisions to allow the market-based solution with support from Government that we have been able to achieve. Despite those caveats, I welcome the fact that he welcomed the news and recognised it as a substantial good news story for many workers as we go into Christmas and for the next years.

I turn to the hon. Gentleman's specific questions. On the delivery of the fleet solid support contract, the issues that the previous Government left us may have some material impact, although there is no large, foreseen delay to the delivery of the project at this stage. On the support to the business, there is no support going directly from Government to the business to subsidise the transaction. There have been amendments to the contracts supported by my Department and the Ministry of Defence. He asked for the details. I will not reveal it in the House because of the commercial sensitivity, but I will find out whether there is a way to share that with him. On whether the deal is compliant with the Windsor framework and our commitments as a country under those arrangements, I am satisfied with all that. Despite the fact that we will always respect those arrangements, we are the UK Government and we make decisions for every part of the UK, with the regulatory approvals, and I seek no one's permission to be the Secretary of State for Business and Trade across all the UK.

On additional work packages, there are no additional promises from the Government, although he will know that there is a 30-year supply pipeline for shipbuilding in the UK and many opportunities, particularly in sectors such as energy, maintenance and fabrication, and a whole range of functions where Members across the House would want to have a strong, diverse and competitive shipbuilding and maintenance sector.

Finally, on defence spending, the hon. Gentleman had a bit of a try-on. He asked what assurances the sector can have. The biggest assurance I can give is that we only ever hit that 2.5% under Labour Governments. The fact is that we have a Labour Government with that commitment to the defence sector and its role—the ability to deliver maximum economic benefits for the UK, as well as that vibrant and important defence role—and we will continue to deliver on the way to that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): Congratulations to the Secretary of State. This is excellent news for the people of Appledore and of Northern Ireland and for workers across the Harland & Wolff supply chain. He might want to confirm that the peril of providing a Government guarantee was the possibility of entailing a huge payout to a US-based hedge fund, which was the largest creditor for Harland & Wolff. What is happening to the contract value for the FSS deal? It was priced at about £1.6 billion. Has that contract value now gone up? Crucially, what does the Secretary of State envisage for Harland & Wolff after that enormous contract is safely and soundly delivered?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the Select Committee Chair for his kind words. I am delighted that we have been able to secure this future for Harland & Wolff. His assessment is right that the largest creditor to Harland &

Wolff when we took office was Riverstone, a significant US hedge fund. He is right to say that had we gone ahead with that Government guarantee or loan, there would likely have been no real return to the taxpayer—no guarantee of jobs, shipyards or ships being built. That money would have gone to the creditors. Actually, in the commercial market-based solution that we have been able to broker, all creditors have behaved responsibly, but, understandably, if anyone thinks the Government will come along and give them free money, they will hold out for that option. That was why it was so important to make that decision early on to secure this far better outcome.

On the specific question, and I should have directed my answer to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), there is no change to the UK-based content of the contract. As I said in the statement, there have been some changes on commercial terms, although they are relatively minor based on the overall value of the contract.

On the future, I can tell the right hon. Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) that the deal we have brokered guarantees not only all four yards, but the jobs in the Belfast yard for three years and jobs in the three other yards for two years. We therefore have a chance not just for new investment coming into those yards, but for the long-term future to be secured for a pipeline of work and energy and defence contracts, which is a vibrant and successful opportunity for the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who has up to two minutes.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): This is an outstanding Christmas present for the 1,000 employees from Devon to the Isle of Lewis who will benefit from this decision and the deal that has been pulled off by the Government. In the west country, we have a low-wage economy, and in the Appledore dockyard, which is not too far from my constituency of Torbay, this will go down extremely well, so congratulations are in order. That is in sharp contrast with the failure of the previous Administration on implementing an industrial strategy, supporting our shipping industry and growing our economy over many years. The position that the Conservatives are taking now is utterly shameful. How can we hardwire that long-term support for our shipping industry so that we see growth in this area and support for industries such as steel manufacturing?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to be able to deliver that outcome for the hon. Gentleman's constituents as a result of the announcement. He is right to say that successful UK Government policy must be about more than one-off solutions to specific problems such as this. That is why we have adopted an ambitious industrial strategy that covers key sectors of the economy and delivers exactly what he has asked for: consistency, long termism, and policy that covers every aspect of government rather than being seen as led by one Department. When we get it right, good long-term and effective public policy—working hand in hand with the private sector—delivers tremendous outcomes for the country, and that is what we are seeking. Ultimately, any strategy is only as good as its delivery, and this statement is evidence that the Government will deliver.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Today's news is welcome. My right hon. Friend knows how vital the FSS ships are to our Royal Navy. RFA Fort Victoria, our only remaining solid store support ship, is due to be decommissioned in 2028, yet even before this rescue deal, new FSS ships were not due to enter service until 2032. Is there any scope at all to accelerate that and close the capability gap?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her expertise and insight on this matter. I understand the point that she makes, but it is perhaps one for my colleagues in the Ministry of Defence. I will ask them to engage with her on those ambitions to remedy the absence of capability, but I believe that that would be challenging.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the statement, and particularly the protection of the fleet solid support programme, but I join my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), in saying that we will have to wait to see the details. In principle, however, the deal sounds very encouraging indeed, and I congratulate the Secretary of State and all his team and officials for getting it over the line. He mentions world-class shipbuilding in the UK. He said from the Dispatch Box that national security is the foundation of the plan for change, and his Department's online statement talked about sovereign capability, but does he accept that without steel, ships cannot be built? Will he take this opportunity to say what more can be done, in a dangerous world, to reduce the UK's increasing reliance on imports from elsewhere, including from Sweden and Asia, so that ships can be delivered in times of conflict or war?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much share the right hon. Gentleman's aspirations. He will know that most defence steels are higher end—they are specialised and tend to come from electric arc furnaces—and one challenge that we have inherited relates to the two remaining blast furnace sites in the UK. We have improved the situation in Port Talbot, but we could not change direction, with the blast furnaces going offline before the arc furnace was installed. We have inherited an even more challenging position in relation to Scunthorpe, but we are working closely with the company to find a solution.

I believe that we are missing real capabilities in the UK. I can see the economic and business case for plate mill, for instance, and for the long-term question of direct reduced iron in steel production. The steel strategy is part of delivering on that. A whole range of horizontal policies, particularly on energy prices, would have to be in a corresponding position for us to do that. The fact that the UK has such a small steel sector relative to the size of our economy makes us an outlier among developed nations and suggests that there is a real evidence base for improving it, and I will work with any Member of the House to deliver that.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is a great Christmas for Methil. I thank the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the Secretary of State for Scotland, and all those in Government who have worked so hard to secure this deal, which has saved 200 skilled jobs and apprenticeships at the Methil yard in my constituency,

and 150 jobs at Arnish in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton). Does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that all levels of Government, trade unions and stakeholders in the future of the Methil yard continue to work together so that, with GB Energy headquartered in Scotland, the yard can fulfil its huge potential in contributing to our ambitions for growth in the renewables industry in Scotland and the UK?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for all his support and repeated submissions to the Department. I know how significant this matter is for his community, and he has fulfilled his role as a Member of Parliament in articulating it at every level of Government. I say the same for our hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—I visited the Arnish shipyard during the election campaign. It is so important in a job such as mine, and in a Department such as mine, to recognise that we must deliver for the whole United Kingdom. The diverse challenges we face do not detract from the fact that we must deliver for every part of the UK, and that is what we plan to do.

I also thank my hon. Friend for his comments about my officials, who worked very hard to deliver this outcome. I agree with him about the huge potential out there not just for shipbuilding, fabrication and maintenance, but for energy in particular. There is real optimism for the future, but it requires the kinds of foundations that we have put in place through this agreement.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I add my congratulations to the Government for getting this agreement over the line, but when will we get their defence industrial strategy? So far we have had only a rather lengthy statement of intent. We need to reindustrialise our defence industrial base in order to face modern challenges, and that is particularly essential given the threats we face from the east of Europe at this time. That is very difficult to do in government, because the Treasury hates his stuff, as the Secretary of State may already have discovered, but we will hold him to account on what he described as leading this sector into future growth, and indeed on reindustrialising our steel industrial base and so on, so that we have the self-sufficiency that is vital for the defence of the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I encourage the Secretary of State to be brave in responding to the point about the Treasury.

Jonathan Reynolds: Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker. I very much welcome the question and would like to put on the record that I have only good things to say about His Majesty's Treasury at all times. [*Laughter.*] It is true; I mean that. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that there is great imperative—with a particular degree of responsibility in the defence part of the industrial strategy—in the challenges we face. It is imperative not just that we work closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence on procurement issues and Government-to-Government sales, in which my Department plays a major role, but that we address wider regulatory issues.

As the hon. Gentleman may know, the Department recently did work on environmental, social and governance criteria to ensure that they do not prevent investment

[Jonathan Reynolds]

into defence companies. There are issues with small and medium-sized enterprises in the defence sector struggling to access bank accounts—not through a prohibition on defence, but perhaps because of a lack of understanding about such commercial contracts being different from those in other parts of the economy. There are a whole range of issues that we must get right, but I think that, in the main, Members across the House share his aspirations and objectives. He has been a voice of expertise and authority on these issues throughout my time in Parliament, and I am grateful for his engagement on them.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Today's announcement will surely be well received by the House, the country, the Royal Navy and the workers directly affected, especially given the previous Government's lack of industrial strategy. Alongside the fantastic announcement for seafarer and worker conditions and protections, the agreement shows the Government's commitment to the vital maritime and industrial sector. Shipbuilding was once a proud industry and the backbone of the community in my city of Portsmouth, but it was decimated by the previous Government. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the deal's wider implications for the UK economy, and specifically for the shipbuilding and defence sectors?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise the role that shipbuilding has played in my hon. Friend's city. I grew up in Sunderland—part of what was once one of the major civil shipbuilding locations in the world—and I recognise the identity and pride that comes with that industrial heritage. In many cases, people feel that it is something of the past, but in this statement we are stressing exactly what she said about the contemporary contribution and the opportunities for the future, about which we should be excited. There are a whole range of increasing needs to shipbuilding expertise, particularly in the energy sector—offshore wind, for example, creates a range of demand for different types of maintenance and supply vessels—so this should be an optimistic story for the future. Sometimes I feel that the wider British public perhaps do not understand the number of jobs or the economic benefit that come from such a sector, so it is always good to make that case from the Dispatch Box—as my hon. Friend does every day from the Back Benches.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Cooper, a member of the Business and Trade Committee.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I congratulate this Front-Bench team and the wider Government on landing this deal in the face of what the Secretary of State has euphemistically called the “headwinds”—I would call them a full-force gale—created by the Budget. Did Navantia raise concerns about the forthcoming Employment Rights Bill? It swings the pendulum very much in favour of trade unions, which, as we know, are very often red in tooth and claw. Was that an issue in landing the deal?

Jonathan Reynolds: No, it was not—it is a good try, but no. First, the employment rights framework in most parts of continental Europe is very different from our own. Secondly, as I have repeatedly said, the changes in

the Employment Rights Bill do raise terms and conditions for some of the lowest-paid workers in the country, but many companies in the UK—particularly larger ones—already operate to a significantly higher level. Shipbuilding is historically a fairly unionised sector, so I do not think there are any concerns or worries in that field—to be frank, the trade unions in that sector often fought harder for the industry than former Conservative Governments. I understand the try-on point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but no, the Employment Rights Bill has not been a problem. In terms of wider UK Government policy, this has been a great endorsement of our EU reset and our willingness not to revisit the arguments of Brexit, but to work more closely with friends and allies in Europe, to ensure that we are getting the maximum opportunities for the UK and always working in our national interest.

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I congratulate the Government on this announcement, which is incredibly welcome news for all those workers who get to keep their jobs as a result. It is a shame that the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman chose to attack the Government over the 2.5% target while responding to the statement, and asked for a timeline for when we are going to deliver 2.5%. Fourteen years is a timeline, and the Conservatives did not meet that target even once. If we are to avoid situations like this in the future, we need to have a modern industrial strategy. What progress have we made towards that strategy? How does it feed into our wider growth mission, and how will it support the UK economy to grow over the next Parliament?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments on the deal and for his observations about the questions from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman about the 2.5% target. On the modern industrial strategy that we are creating, we have had an incredible response to our Green Paper—some 22,000 individual answers to the questions it asked—showing that there is a huge appetite from industry across the board, both in the UK and abroad, to engage with what the Government are seeking to do. Again, I stress that that should always be on a cross-party basis; there is nothing in that Green Paper that anyone of any political stripe should be able to oppose. It is based on our national interest and the goal of being more competitive and business-friendly, succeeding to a greater degree on the world stage.

This week, we had our first meeting of the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council, with some tremendous representatives with expertise across the board—UK industry, academics and business figures. It is an incredibly exciting time. This is just one component of our growth mission, but clearly an important one, alongside areas of work for me such as the small business plan that we are putting together. I genuinely believe that everyone should be excited about the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Alison Griffiths, a member of the Select Committee.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will have noticed that the Secretary of State did not answer one question, which was whether he would clarify that the final assembly and systems integration will take place in Belfast, rather than in the Navantia shipyards in Spain.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am sorry if the hon. Lady missed it, but I was clear that what we have announced today does not change the provisions in the original contract agreed by the former Conservative Government. What has changed is that we have saved all four of these yards, at a time when we could have lost them all through the inability of the previous Government to take the action required, so it is an incredibly positive story. We have saved the position of those yards and guaranteed those jobs, and not for months but for years to come.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I take this opportunity to wish you a merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Secretary of State very much for what is wonderful news for all four sites across the UK. Obviously, I am going to be slightly biased towards the two in Scotland, one in Arnish on the Isle of Lewis and the other in Methil in Fife—that is very welcome news in the week before Christmas. I also thank the Government for their co-operation with the Scottish Government over the past months, particularly in the early days when UK Labour had come into government, and I put on record the work that the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, Kate Forbes, has contributed.

I have a couple of questions. First, given that we are moving forward, are the workers' current terms and conditions going to continue as they are? Secondly, I have listened to what has been said about future contracts. We know that both yards in Scotland will be protected for the next two years, but can the Secretary of State tell us a little bit more about the longer-term sustainable footing, not least because this company has changed hands three times in the past four years?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his observations and questions. It was really important to us that we keep all four yards together—there had been an assessment that, for understandable reasons, the Belfast yard was more commercially valuable, so there was a real chance that any unstructured rescue package could have lost the two Scottish yards. There were question marks about those yards in particular, so keeping the business together and protecting the future of those workers was hugely important to us, and I am delighted that we have been able to achieve that.

The job guarantees for the non-Belfast yards will last for two years. The guarantee is for 90% of the overall job numbers, simply to provide the usual degree of flexibility in running that business, but that guarantee covers the majority of the workforce and keeps them in place. The deal also comes with investment in those Scottish yards, so whatever the future holds, those yards will be even more competitive and more able to bid for the kinds of contracts that will secure the long-term prosperity we are all seeking. I am always genuinely willing to work with colleagues across any part of the UK to secure the kind of outcome we have achieved today, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for recognising that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): As someone who has consistently and regularly called for more shipbuilding to take place in the UK rather than be exported, today's statement is good news, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on announcing this decision. He has clearly said that further orders have been added as a

result of this deal. What further defence and—much more importantly—commercial opportunities are there for Harland & Wolff to acquire contracts from across the world, rather than building elsewhere?

Jonathan Reynolds: I share the hon. Gentleman's aspirations and recognise his calls for UK shipbuilding to have a higher priority in future than it has in the past. To be specific on what I was saying in the statement, there has been a revision to the value of the fleet solid support contract; it has required a little bit of additional support—but not greatly and on commercial terms—in order to deliver it. There are not promises of additional work packages on top of the contractual agreements made by the previous Government, but because Navantia UK is such a world-renowned expert builder of shipping of all sizes, as well as the investment that comes with this deal and the more competitive nature of the yards in future, there are genuine grounds for optimism. I see real opportunities in fabrication and maintenance, but particularly in energy. I also think that a little bit of competitive diversification in the military shipbuilding sector's supply chain is welcome, creating better value for money in procurement. Across the board, this is a positive story for Harland & Wolff and its employees, but as the hon. Gentleman has described, it is also a positive story for UK shipbuilding.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This announcement is really good news, and everybody across the House will welcome it. It is probably time to break out the Christmas cake and the mince pies early, because there is good news coming and the Secretary of State has delivered it today. This morning I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who has worked tirelessly with the company to secure this progress. We all agree that it is great news, particularly for the 1,000-strong workforce in Belfast, and especially in the run-up to Christmas—well done. My right hon. Friend will be at the yard with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland this afternoon, probably in about an hour's time.

If the national shipbuilding strategy is to mean anything, it must be that the Government invest in skills and capacity throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State agree that more could be done to increase research and innovation support across the United Kingdom and, in particular, in Northern Ireland?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking what I think will be my last question of the year. I would particularly like to recognise what he said about his colleague, the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). Obviously, he has a constituency interest and a leading role in Northern Ireland, and I think he understood the decisions we had to make. We had to explain in confidence to all colleagues affected why the initial decision on the guarantee alone was not the right way forward, but that we were committed to the kind of solution we have announced today. I am extremely grateful for being able to work with the right hon. Gentleman on that. It is great news that he is going to the yard today; my colleagues the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Minister for Industry

[Jonathan Reynolds]

are also in Belfast today, and I understand that the Secretary of State for Scotland will be at one of the yards in Scotland too.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about innovation and research and development, that is the basis on which we have to compete. Whether in the sectors of aerospace, automotive or shipbuilding, what we need is high-end, sophisticated R&D, innovation and world-leading products. That is what we have in many of our advanced manufacturing sectors, but it is such a competitive world that we have to maintain that edge. In particular, R&D is an area where core support and core funding between Government and industry has real benefits. We have seen that in lots of sectors—maybe not to the degree we have needed in shipbuilding, but let us look at that for the future and approach the next year with some real positivity.

Ukraine

12.59 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): It is day 1,030 of Putin's illegal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and I would like to update the House on the current situation in Ukraine.

Ukrainians are approaching their third Christmas since Putin launched his illegal, full-scale assault. Russian forces are over 1,000 days into a war Putin thought would be over in less than a week. The Ukrainian people have paid a horrendous price for Putin's aggression, and it is testament to their grit, determination and courage that they have mounted such a heroic defence of their country. The UK has stood with Ukraine since day one, and I can confirm to the House that yesterday the Defence Secretary travelled to Kyiv to meet his Ukrainian counterpart, Defence Minister Umerov, to discuss a joint plan for 2025 and to underline the UK's commitment to support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

It may be useful for the House if I provide an operational update. According to our latest Defence Intelligence insights, the frontline remains unstable. Russian forces continue to conduct attacks and advances at several locations along the front in eastern Ukraine, and have made accelerating gains in recent months in central Donetsk oblast. The conflict is currently classed as attritional, and it is brutal. It is also appropriate for me to confirm to the House that North Korean troops are currently engaged in offensive combat operations in Russia's Kursk oblast, where around 11,000 DPRK—Democratic People's Republic of Korea—troops have been deployed. Our assessment is that it is highly likely they have sustained significant combat casualties, while achieving only limited tactical gains. Our assessments further indicate there have been over 750,000 Russian casualties since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, with the grim milestone of 1 million Russians dead and wounded likely to be reached within approximately six months.

This Government are clear that the frontline of British and European security runs through Ukraine. Our support for the Ukrainian people is iron-clad. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, one of the strengths of the UK approach under successive Governments has been the significant cross-party support from all parties in this House. That characterised our period in opposition, and it has continued while we have been in government, and I am grateful to the Conservative party and, indeed, all parties in this House for their continuing support for Ukraine.

In total, the UK has now provided £12.8 billion of assistance to Ukraine, and we remain a leading donor of military equipment. The Prime Minister has committed in person to President Zelensky that the UK will give £3 billion of military aid each year for as long as Ukraine needs. The year 2025 will be a critical one for the war. President Zelensky has laid out his victory plan, built around timely and effective military support, security guarantees, long-term deterrence and rebuilding Ukraine by unleashing the country's economic potential, and he has spoken of his desire to secure a just peace from a position of strength.

Today, I would like to outline to the House how we will step up the UK's international leadership on Ukraine into 2025, including a new £225 million package of

military support—while in Kyiv, the Defence Secretary pledged that and confirmed it in his meeting with Defence Minister Umerov—and our five priority areas for UK defence support in 2025.

First, we will further increase and strengthen Ukraine's military capabilities. Our new £225 million package of military support includes £186 million of key military equipment through the UK-administered international fund for Ukraine, with £92 million to bolster the Ukrainian navy's fighting power, including advanced reconnaissance drones, the latest generation of uncrewed surface vessels, loitering munitions and mine countermeasure drones. The package also includes £68 million for air defence equipment, including new radars, decoy land equipment and cutting-edge counter-drone electronic warfare systems, as well as £26 million to provide support and spare parts for previously delivered critical military systems to keep them in the fight. Our stepped-up military support package includes £39 million to deliver 1,000 counter-drone electronic warfare systems, together with respirators and equipment to protect Ukrainian frontline forces. We are also gifting explosive charges to equip more than 90,000 155 mm artillery rounds, compatible with the dozens of British Army AS-90 self-propelled artillery guns previously provided by the United Kingdom.

Ukraine's frontline is also the frontline of our security. I know the whole House will recognise that this latest military support package is firmly in the UK's national security interests and that it will strengthen the resilience of our own defence industrial base, too. Yesterday, the House passed, with total cross-party support, the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill. This allows the Government to fulfil our commitment to provide Ukraine with an additional £2.26 billion through our contribution to the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loan scheme, which will be repaid using the profits from the immobilised Russian sovereign assets, enabling Ukraine to buy military equipment to defend itself and its freedom against Russian aggression. Taken together, this represents the highest amount of UK military support since the war began.

Secondly, we will continue training Ukraine's armed forces throughout 2025, adding to the 51,000 Ukrainian troops already trained here in the United Kingdom as part of Operation Interflex, the multinational training programme we deliver alongside 12 partner nations. Having met Royal Air Force-trained Ukrainian pilots at Operation Interstorm and Ukrainian soldiers trained by the British Army and our partners in trenches dug in the English countryside, I know at first hand the difference our training makes. Each person we train—each Ukrainian we train—is a message to Putin that Ukraine does not stand alone. We will continue to provide the training that Ukraine needs and be flexible to meet its requirements.

Thirdly, we will build the defence sector in Ukraine, the UK and across Europe to leave Putin in no doubt but that Ukraine is not alone in this fight and that there is the ability to sustain Ukraine in the fight. In the autumn, I accompanied UK defence companies on a trade mission to Kyiv to discuss opportunities for the long-term co-operation that can reinforce Ukraine's defence industry as a powerful deterrent against Russia and a powerful asset for Euro-Atlantic security. This Government are also delivering on the defence industrial support treaty signed with Ukraine in July, and we have made £3.5 billion of export finance available to buy

military capabilities. We look forward to finalising a series of mutually agreed projects that will simultaneously bolster Ukraine's defences and the UK's defence industrial resilience in due course.

Fourthly, we will continue to work with allies to step up international support. Let me again be clear with the House that this Government will work with Ukraine to progress down its irreversible path towards NATO membership. We are working with the Ukraine defence contact group as well as allies further afield to increase the tempo of support and impose further costs on Russia. I can confirm that there will be a notable gear shift in January, when we commence delivery of tens of thousands of drones through the maritime and drone capability coalitions that the UK is leading with our Norwegian and Latvian partners.

Fifthly, we will reinforce the cross-Government effort to increase pressure on Russia, including close working between the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to increase diplomatic pressure and sanctions. The MOD is working hand in glove with the FCDO through our recently formed joint unit on Ukraine to maximise the impact of UK defence support by starving the Kremlin of the resources it needs to sustain its war effort. We will continue to co-ordinate these sanctions with like-minded allies around the world to deny Russia's war machine the goods, technologies and revenues it needs to sustain its illegal war, and we will continue to expose Russia's malicious cyber-attacks and disinformation efforts, and the hostile operations of its intelligence services.

As we prepare to return to our constituencies to see our loved ones over Christmas, I know the thoughts of the whole House will be with all those Ukrainians unable to do so. Many are facing a Christmas and a new year of ongoing assault and aerial bombardment of their frontline, their homes, their towns, their cities and their critical energy infrastructure. So 2025 is set to be a critical year in the conflict and our resolve will not falter. President Zelensky has spoken of his desire for a just peace, and the Government are in no doubt that a just and lasting peace is only achievable by strengthening Ukraine's hand. That is why this week the Defence Secretary in Kyiv, and I as the Minister at the Dispatch Box, have set out how we will increase Ukraine's military capabilities, how we are committed to training thousands more Ukrainian troops, how we will strengthen defence industrial co-operation, how we will harness the support of Ukraine's allies, and how we will increase pressure on Russia. This is the surest route to a just and lasting peace in Ukraine and I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.10 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the Minister for providing advance sight of his statement, which we on this side of the House warmly welcome.

As the Minister noted, last month marked the grim milestone of the 1000th day of Russia's second unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine. Ever since Russian troops crossed the border, and even before, we have

[Mr Mark Francois]

stood shoulder to shoulder with our Ukrainian friends. Indeed, relative to the size of our Army, we have gifted more military equipment to Ukraine than any other NATO partner, including the United States. As well as training Ukrainians in the UK since 2014, following the first Russian invasion, we have provided them with everything from NLAWs through to Challenger main battle tanks and almost all of our AS-90 heavy howitzers. We have also provided Ukraine with Brimstone and Storm Shadow missiles and a very considerable amount of ammunition, everything from small arms to 155 mm rounds, as well as helping to procure other ammunition on their behalf from around the globe.

When offered a way out of Kyiv immediately after the second Russian invasion in February 2022, President Zelensky defiantly retorted:

“I need ammunition, not a ride.”

We in Britain have subsequently provided quite a bit of it. Even more recently, we provided very high-tech systems such as advanced drones and the DragonFire anti-drone laser, which we initially procured and which the Ukrainians are putting into service. No one can doubt the commitment of Britain in support of Ukraine, and we are pleased to see this bipartisan approach continues under this Government, but we should not lose sight of the fact that at the end of the day Ukraine is a sovereign nation and only Ukrainian people can subsequently determine their own future.

I have five specific questions for the Minister on his statement. First, as he is aware, we have been training Ukrainian troops in Britain since 2014, initially under Op Orbital and now Op Interflex. The key element of this was training troops to operate NLAWs in sophisticated anti-tank ambushes, a capability vividly demonstrated in video footage shortly after Russian forces crossed the border. Without this critical training, it is no exaggeration to say the Russians might well be having lunch in Kyiv today. With that in mind, what further training does the Minister foresee for Ukrainian troops, what additional support will we provide, and will any of this training now be delivered in-country?

Secondly, how much of the £186 million from the international fund for Ukraine, which we co-ordinate, is from the UK and how much is from our allies? What, in other words, is the UK proportion?

Thirdly, as the statement specifically referred to the supply of respirators, can the Minister confirm intelligence reports that the Russians have now even resorted to limited use of blister agent-type chemical weapons in Ukraine? Is that true?

Fourthly, we have been unwavering in our military, political and diplomatic support for Ukraine as well as generous in providing equipment and ammunition. However, this raises concerns about replenishing our own war stocks, as highlighted by the Defence Committee, which I served on in the previous Parliament, including, indeed, on that inquiry. Six months ago the Chief of the General Staff announced clear objectives to double the lethality of the British Army by 2027 and treble it by the end of the decade. What steps are being taken to replenish the UK's war stocks? More specifically, how do the Government plan to achieve the CGS's ambitious commitment?

Finally, the changes the Minister has announced today clearly feed into the ongoing strategic defence review, yet there are emerging media reports that the much-anticipated SDR publication may be delayed until June next year to now coincide with the comprehensive spending review. Ministers now appear to be sticking to a mantra that the SDR will be published in the first half of next year, which is commensurate with that timeline. With the worsening international situation and given that the initial conclusions have apparently already been seen by the Defence Secretary and even the Prime Minister, we cannot afford six months of paralysis by analysis while the Government decide how to respond. So can the Minister end on a positive note and tell the House today when the SDR will be published and assure us it will not be as late as next June?

Slava Ukraini.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before I call the Minister, let me say that, Mr Darling, I can see that you are bobbing, and if you stay in the Chamber, I will make sure to call you at an appropriate time.

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for his party's continuing support for our friends in Ukraine. He is certainly right that the initial provision of anti-tank weapons made a significant contribution in the early days, and the provision of a whole array of capabilities in every month since enables Ukraine to stay in the fight, which is absolutely essential. Today's statement updates the House on the additional military capabilities that we are providing to Ukraine, and on how we will continue to do that.

The Defence Secretary has already announced that we will extend Operation Interflex until the end of 2025. That is good news. We have always been clear that we will flex the provision of Interflex training to suit the needs of our Ukrainian friends. The right hon. Gentleman is right that there was initial skills training, and we now train different skills, and that training is delivered differently. As the Defence Secretary has said, we will need to make the training a better fit for what the Ukrainians need. We need to make it easier for the Ukrainians to access it, and we work with the Ukrainians to help and motivate them to mobilise more recruits. The right hon. Gentleman will understand if I do not help Putin by revealing our plans, and any conversations that we may have with our Ukrainian friends, but we will update the House in due course.

The international fund for Ukraine is a really important part of the mix. I can get the right hon. Gentleman the full details on that, and about our share, and I will place that in the Library of the House. I also place on record our wider support for all our international colleagues who are contributing to that fund.

The chemical weapons assessment has a high classification, and the right hon. Gentleman will understand if I do not go into the full detail of Russian capabilities and any use, but the provision of respirators is a really important part of ensuring that Ukraine's frontline troops are better able to defend themselves.

We have a plan to replenish our stocks; it will come alongside the defence industrial strategy. That intent was published by the Defence Secretary a few weeks

ago, and that will be part of the strategic defence review. The mantra that the SDR will be published in the first half of next year is not, I am afraid, new; it is the existing Government position. However, I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the intent is to publish it in the spring. Work continues on that, and I am grateful to Lord Robertson and his review team for the thorough work that they are doing. The aim is to make sure that the review is not just Labour's defence review, but is a defence posture that is supported cross-party, so that we can ensure that our national security is strong, and so that we can deter aggression and defeat it if necessary.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Defence.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I am grateful to the diligent Minister for advance sight of his statement. It was good to chat with the Secretary of State on his return from Ukraine, and I welcome his pledge, while there, of a £225 million package of support for Ukraine, because as the Minister rightly highlights, Ukraine's frontline is the frontline of our own security. Can the Minister provide further detail, however? After the UN Secretary-General's statements last week about turbocharging defence, can the Minister provide further details of discussions with NATO and other allies, in particular our US friends, including recent discussions between the Prime Minister and President-elect Trump, on the international defence steps being taken at this critical juncture?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for the military package outlined today. The UK Government will increase defence spending to 2.5% of our GDP, and a path for that increase will be laid out in due course at future fiscal events. We will publish the strategic defence review, which will set out, perhaps more importantly, what we seek to spend any money on; we can then look at what capabilities we need to develop and how that takes us further. We continue to speak with our NATO allies through the SDR process, to make sure that the UK's defence offer is a "NATO first" offer that allows more interoperability and supports our NATO allies, especially on NATO's eastern flank. I look forward to being able to speak more about that in due course to my hon. Friend's Committee.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Thank you—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, I was just trying not to step on the right hon. Jennie. It is absolutely right that we give our brave Ukrainian allies the support that they need to resist Putin's war machine. I am proud of how our country has stood shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine in defence of freedom and democracy, yet with the looming threat of a Trump presidency, America's ongoing commitment to Ukraine looks increasingly uncertain. It should serve as a wake-up call to us all. If the United States pulls back its support, Europe must step up.

The Liberal Democrats want to see the UK take a lead within Europe. That must begin with concrete action, such as seizing frozen Russian assets to bolster Ukraine's defences, as I and others spoke about in this

House just yesterday, and reversing damaging Conservative cuts to our armed forces. Those steps will strengthen Ukraine's hand and Britain's security. Robust financial and humanitarian assistance is also vital. Just a few weeks ago, Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs, Defence and Home Office spokespeople met a delegation of Ukrainian MPs, who stressed the urgent need for ongoing tangible support. Their message was clear: Europe's role has never been more important. The Liberal Democrats stand firmly behind these measures.

The impending Trump presidency puts the safety of Ukraine and Europe in doubt. Does the Minister agree that it is time for the UK to take a lead within Europe on defence and security, and will he commit to working with his European counterparts to make sure that Ukraine is supported fully? The Minister also mentioned Russia's attacks on Ukraine's energy network. Can he outline what work the Government are doing to support Ukraine in getting electricity generators and solar panels installed across the country to keep it functioning?

Luke Pollard: If we are seeking to protect anyone in this House, it will certainly be the right hon. Jennie. The hon. Gentleman asked a number of questions. It is right that we seek to further strengthen sanctions against Russia. The Government have made a number of further developments, such as sanctioning the Russian shadow fleet, seeking to cut off its oil flow. As the Bill set out yesterday, we are taking further steps in legislation on frozen Russian assets. We will continue to support our armed forces. The strategic defence review will set out the future shape of the armed forces, and the path to 2.5% will be laid out by Treasury colleagues in due course.

This is a cross-Government approach. The hon. Gentleman's final question about energy infrastructure is profound, and it allows me to echo the words from our colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, who have provided additional support for Ukraine's energy infrastructure and energy production. It is vital that we continue that support, because it is not just with missiles and ammunition that we need to support Ukraine. We need all the support to keep that country going, to keep it in the fight, and to enable its people to get through a tough winter.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I once again commend my hon. Friend on his ongoing support for Ukraine and his important trade visit to Kyiv recently. From that visit, he will know that this war has advanced military technology, particularly in the area of loitering munitions and anti-unmanned aerial vehicle technology. I note that we have the defence industrial support treaty, as well as our own defence industrial strategy. What progress are we making on joint ventures with Ukrainian defence companies, and on basing some of that defence capability here, for our future security and the security of Ukraine?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in support of Ukraine. He is a consistent champion, working cross-party, too. It is right that we seek to improve and grow our technology, especially around drones and in autonomy. The treaty we signed with Ukraine enables it effectively to use Defence Equipment and Support as its own procurement agency to initiate more contracts,

[*Luke Pollard*]

more quickly, not only enabling support for Ukrainian industry, but allowing UK industry to work with it to deploy more capabilities faster. He is absolutely right that the pace of change in Ukraine means that we need to continue to invest in research and development, and to learn the lessons. That is one reason why the Defence Secretary made the announcement about retiring the British Army's Watchkeeper system—a 14-year-old drone—in favour of more modern systems that we hope to be able to announce in the SDR.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): This is a great opportunity for me to wish the Father of the House a happy Christmas.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): When Russia cruelly invaded Finland in 1940, she not only took territory with force majeure, but imposed neutrality on that country for 50 years. There was a phrase for it: Finlandisation. I know our influence is not overwhelming, but when it comes to the Trump presidency, will the Minister assure me that the Government will stiffen the sinews of the Trump presidency and ensure that there is absolutely no question of any war aim of Russia's being achieved, namely taking territory and neutralising Ukraine? We therefore must fast-track NATO membership.

Luke Pollard: I thank the Father of the House for his question. He is right that we need to continue our support. That is why—from this Dispatch Box today and in Government statements since we came to office—we have made it clear that we will support Ukrainians for as long as it takes, including on their irreversible path to NATO membership. It would be wrong for me to speculate on the policies of the new US Administration, but it is certainly true that the safety of the United States, as well as the safety of the United Kingdom, relies on Putin not winning in Ukraine. That is why we are continuing our support for our Ukrainian friends. When the new Administration takes office, further such discussions will be able to take place directly.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): May I just say how strongly I welcome the statement? Our commitment across this House to defend Ukraine must be firm. Does the Minister agree that the cross-party nature of the UK support has been and will remain a critical feature of our support for Ukraine as a staunch ally?

Luke Pollard: The way that this House has come together on Ukraine—not just the provision of military equipment, but our diplomatic efforts and our support for Ukrainians—is a testament to all parties in this House. We are making sure that we are putting our national security and that of our friends ahead of any partisan desires. I expect that the Government and every single party in the House will continue that, because gaps in our position are where Putin will seek to prosper. That is why maintaining cross-party support is essential for our overall UK approach. I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members for continuing that today.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Minister's confirmation of the Government's support for Ukraine's eventual membership of NATO. As a step

along that road, will he look at the UK taking a lead in further integrating Ukraine into the joint expeditionary force?

Luke Pollard: The joint expeditionary force is an important part of the complementary military alliance with NATO, enabling the beer-drinking nations of northern Europe, as they are often described, to come together. It is important that that geographical centre point in northern Europe is maintained, especially in the Baltic sea and the high north. However, there are discussions around learning lessons by Ukraine having more participation alongside JEF nations. It is certainly true that many of the JEF nations have been the most forward-leaning of all our NATO allies in providing support for Ukraine, and I expect that to continue.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, and I urge him onwards. I rise to demonstrate my support for the stand we are taking in supporting Ukraine. My thoughts are with the people of Ukraine, who are entering their third Christmas in this conflict. Europe has learned the harsh lessons from dealing with dictators in the past. Does he agree that at a time when there is potential for change in America's policy towards Ukraine, Europe needs to stand together, and to make sure that we do not allow Putin to succeed in any way, because the consequences of that for future generations could be damaging indeed?

Luke Pollard: It is certainly true that this Government will continue to support Ukraine, and to encourage more of our NATO allies to donate to Ukraine and to improve their own defences, so that we act as a deterrent, and so that the experience of Ukraine is not inflicted on any other NATO members. I hope that more Ukrainian people will hear the Christmas message of peace and hope as we go into next year, but it will be a very tough Christmas and new year for many of them. I assure my hon. Friend that there will be no change in UK support for Ukraine, whatever happens over the coming year. We will continue to work closely with our European and NATO allies to make sure that what we are providing to Ukraine, including in training and support, will enable them to stay in the fight and be in the best possible position for the future.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): We have seen the proliferation of drone warfare in Ukraine as never before. I was struck by how the Minister referred to drones repeatedly in his statement; it is a massive change in how war is waged. With a Trump presidency on the horizon, Europe needs to look to itself and for its strengths. One of our strengths is the automobile industry and component parts, which can easily be repurposed for the development of drones for the war in Ukraine. Will the Minister advise us on how he is working with European colleagues to enhance that to support Ukraine to the hilt?

Luke Pollard: I thank my fellow Devon MP for his support for Ukraine. It is certainly right that the increased proliferation of drones is a hallmark of the conflict. Between 500 and 1,000 drones—a substantial number—are used every day on the frontline, and they are being used in an incredibly intense environment of electronic warfare and jamming. That is why we need to continue to iterate

and evolve in the support we provide to Ukraine, making sure that those drones can fly through EW jamming, reach their targets and project power in those areas.

We are continuing to strengthen support for developments not only in Ukrainian drone production, but in the production of drones across the rest of Europe. That is why we work so closely with the drone capability coalition among our European partners, to create that enhanced industrial base as well as learn the lessons of what technology is working, bearing in mind that that iteration on the frontline means that we need to keep adapting and enhancing our drone offer to Ukraine every few months.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you and the team, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As other hon. Members have done, I commend the Minister for the statement, and especially the funding announcements made today. I thank him for reminding my constituents and all our constituents of the urgent need to support Ukraine and for reminding us that our national security is very much bound up in Ukraine's national security. It is fantastic that this new money has been announced. Do the Government have a further update on the proceeds of the sale of Chelsea football club and the £2.5 billion? I am sure that the Minister will agree that the sooner we can get that money unlocked, the more military and humanitarian support we can unleash.

Luke Pollard: The Government are working hard to ensure that the proceeds of the sale of Chelsea football club reach humanitarian causes in Ukraine as soon as possible. The proceeds are currently frozen in a UK bank account until a new independent foundation is established to manage and distribute the money. Officials continue to hold discussions with Mr Abramovich's representatives, experts and international partners, and they will double down on efforts to reach a solution. We are fighting every inch of the way to ensure that money from Russian assets goes straight back to supporting Ukrainians.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I also welcome the new funding for Ukraine today and the Minister's statement. With an unstable Government in France, new elections in Germany, foreign influence operations in the recent Romanian presidential election and a new Administration in the United States, what recent discussions has the Minister had with NATO colleagues about how NATO will continue to support Ukraine to the very end, to steel its resolve and work towards the just peace that he referenced?

Briefly, on other NATO members, the Minister will know that Denmark's policy on defence for Ukraine is to allow Ukraine to grow its own industrial base. That is being supported by Norway and some other Baltic countries. I get the transparency point and support the Government on that, but, to come back to an earlier question, is there any potential of joint ventures to allow Ukraine to grow its own industrial base?

Luke Pollard: It is certainly true that in a period of more instability on a political level, our NATO allies value the United Kingdom's certainty and stability. For that reason, we are pushing forward on our efforts to

co-ordinate more NATO activity. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that NATO has stood up a number of additional capabilities, especially in supporting the training functions that Ukraine desperately needs, and we are supporting those efforts wholeheartedly.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that one of the Ukrainian objectives is to create more joint ventures to develop and iterate technologies, especially missiles and drone technology. That has the support of the UK Government, so we have been supporting our Ukrainian friends to do so not only in-country, but with UK industry at the same time. How we do that is being worked through. The new treaty that we signed is really beneficial in enabling some of that work to take place. It is certainly true, though, that to keep Ukraine in the fight, we not only need NATO allies to provide more resources, but we need to create the environment in which Ukraine can develop more of its resources in-country to be used on the frontline.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I warmly welcome the Minister's statement, which demonstrates again the ironclad commitment of this country to the defence of Ukraine. Ministers will have detected nervousness across the House regarding political changes in January, so may I change tack? There are 6 million Ukrainian refugees across Europe and millions of displaced people within the country itself. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to communities across the United Kingdom who have supported the Ukrainian people, and indeed in many cases opened their homes to Ukrainians coming to this country?

Luke Pollard: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those families across the country—those in his constituency, those of everyone here, and those in Plymouth—who have supported the Homes for Ukraine scheme and those Ukrainians getting to safety. As of 16 December, 218,600 Ukrainians have arrived in the UK, including just under 160,000 via the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Our new Ukraine permission extension scheme will open on 4 February 2025, as announced at the end of October. That will provide an additional 18-month permission, and access to the same rights and entitlements as the current Ukraine schemes. It is really important that as well as lending support to Ukrainians in Ukraine, we support those Ukrainians in the United Kingdom. I thank all the people who are working so hard in particular to ensure support for those families in the United Kingdom today.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Could we be completely realistic? The outcome of the conflict is likely to be determined by President Trump and what he chooses to do. Therefore, it is essential that the British Government engage as positively as possible with President Trump and resist the temptation that somehow his arrival is an invitation for we Europeans to withdraw into ourselves, with our limited defence capability, our diverse political and foreign policy objectives and varying degrees of willpower to sustain the effort. Can we take the arrival of President Trump as an opportunity to leverage change in whatever field, never underestimating how much the United Kingdom has to offer the United States and how joined up and integrated so many of our defence capabilities are?

Luke Pollard: It is absolutely true that, as the United Kingdom has provided a bridge across the Atlantic between the United States and Europe in the past, we continue to do so today. We will need to work closely with our NATO allies, including the United States, with which we have a very close and deep security relationship. That is the case whoever is in the White House. We look forward to beginning more of those discussions with the Administration once the US legal period that stops international discussions expires at the point of inauguration.

I dispute just one aspect of the hon. Gentleman's question. This war could come to an end because of Putin. He could decide to withdraw his troops. He could decide to stop inflicting pain on the Ukrainian people. He could choose to end the war today. That is why we must continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes, so it can get the peace and security that its people so desperately need.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome the latest British military support for Ukraine. I welcome that there is cross-party support in the House and that the civilised world stands united with Ukraine; long may that continue. Does my hon. Friend agree that the most important voices regarding this illegal invasion and how to end it are not ours or those of our allies but those of President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people at home and abroad, including in constituencies such as mine? The Ukrainian people have suffered so much due to Russian aggression, and their fortitude and bravery is an inspiration to all of us who value freedom and democracy.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is certainly right that the courage, grit and determination of the Ukrainian people is something we should be enormously proud of. It is for that reason that we continue to support them, because their fight is our fight. He is also right that the decision on the future of Ukraine is not for the United Kingdom, but for the Ukrainian people and Government. It is for the Ukrainian Government to decide their future and their objectives in the coming year. It is our job to help to strengthen Ukrainian hands so that they are in the best possible position for any outcome in 2025. That is what this statement and the additional military equipment we have announced today seek to do.

I know the cross-party support from this House is felt in Kyiv. I also know that videos of this House showing the United Kingdom's support for their fight are shared on the frontline among Ukrainian soldiers. Although I am not sure that every video of this place is precisely what Ukrainian soldiers on the frontline need, what they can take from today's debate is our cross-party support for keeping them in the fight for as long as it takes for them to secure victory and peace for their people.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): We on the SNP Benches stand united in that cross-party support for Ukraine and welcome the package that has been brought forward today. I have a few specific questions for the Minister. First, he talked about the profits that have come from the frozen assets. What discussions has he had with EU counterparts on that? Some have been quite vocal about the sale of those assets, which could rapidly accelerate the strength of the Ukrainian forces.

Secondly, on sanctions, more than 50% of the components of Russian drones come directly from China. There are negotiations next month between the Minister's

own Government and China on increasing economic co-operation. More specifically, we have a loophole in the law just now that allows British shipping and shipping insurers to work outside the UK to deliver gas from Siberia to other parts of the world, which aids and abets Putin in his war of aggression against Ukraine. I would like an update on those things.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman and his party for their support for Ukraine and for the united front this House has presented and continues to present for Ukraine. Discussions with our European friends on frozen assets are a matter for the Treasury, but I know that Treasury colleagues are continuing conversations to ensure that when the United Kingdom makes a move on particular areas of sanctions or assets, it is replicated by our friends. Indeed, the sanctions we have implemented on Russia's shadow fleet have been replicated by a huge number of our European and other international allies, to ensure that there is no place for that trade. I am concerned by what the hon. Gentleman says, but I know that the Treasury has been working further with the Foreign Office on how we can strengthen sanctions. However, I am very happy for him to write to me with further details on that.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned technology coming from further afield. It is not just technology developed in Asia that we need to worry about; we also need to worry about technology developed in Iran, which goes directly to the frontline and is used by Russian forces to target civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. That is why we continue to take action against Iranian weapon transfers to Ukraine, too.

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I start by welcoming the Minister's statement. It is incredibly welcome to hear that we still fully support the people of Ukraine and will back them financially for as long as it takes. I have two questions for the Minister. First, he mentioned the 11,000 North Korean troops in the Kursk region. He said that they had made little progress—that they had had a few tactical victories, but that it had come at great cost to them. How did he arrive at that assessment, and does he expect North Korean troops to contribute more in the conflict?

Secondly, I increasingly find myself in debates with people who ask why Britain is spending this money in Ukraine—why is it not being spent in Britain? I use the argument that many in this House will be familiar with: when people like Vladimir Putin are given what they want, they always come back for more, whether there is a deal or not. Will the Minister restate at the Dispatch Box why it is in Britain's direct national interest to ensure that the people of Ukraine win this conflict?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. It is certainly true that the assessment we have made of troops from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea engaging in combat is a concerning development. It is a dangerous escalation and expansion of Putin's illegal war against Ukraine, and is further proof that he has no interest in peace. We will continue to monitor what takes place there. My hon. Friend will understand if I do not go into the precise collection methods as to how we came to that assessment, but it is certainly a sign of further Russian weakness that it needs to rely on North Korean troops in the operations it is undertaking in Kursk oblast.

Secondly, on why this matters, I would pose a question that is always useful when thinking about this conflict: do we think Putin would stop if he won in Ukraine? I think we all know the answer. His illegal war would continue against the Ukrainian people, as would his threats against NATO allies, especially those on NATO's eastern flank. His malign influence would continue to extend to subversion of democracies through attacks on critical infrastructure and cyber-attacks on NATO allies, including the United Kingdom. That is why we have cross-party unity in our support for Ukraine: Ukraine's security is the United Kingdom's security.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The war in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the nature of warfare in the 21st century. We are now a generation away from the operations I conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan, and even the conventional warfare I trained for throughout my time in the infantry only a decade or so ago. We have seen how the use of drones has revolutionised the battle space in Ukraine—by that, I very much mean the handheld disposable end of the spectrum, rather than a platform like Watchkeeper—with the pace of their development necessitating a more agile approach to procurement and development. Given that the conflict has evolved over just 1,000 days to be unrecognisable from its initial phases, to what extent are we ensuring that the forthcoming strategic defence review keeps pace with the rapidly evolving nature of aspects of contemporary warfare?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his service to our country. He is right that we are seeing huge changes in the way that war is conducted in Ukraine, but we are also seeing developments in how technology and different skills can be brought together. A few years ago, I am not sure that many in uniform would have welcomed the suggestion that playing on a PlayStation could train people for military combat, yet we do now see gamers in Ukraine applying their skills to flying first-person view drones through difficult scenarios on the frontline in support of their freedom. It is precisely those lessons that the SDR is seeking to capture. We are using not just lessons from the war in Ukraine, but experience with Russian malign influence elsewhere around the world to inform the SDR. My hon. Friend sitting next to me on the Front Bench, the Minister for Veterans and People, feels—how shall I put it?—incredibly strongly about drones, and I am absolutely certain that the SDR will include a greater role for not only drones warfare but training around drones and modern warfare, as well as a greater role for autonomy in all domains.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the announcement on our ongoing military support. It is critically important that those who wage Putin's illegal war face the legal consequences for their actions. With that in mind, will the Minister set out the steps that the Government are taking to support the Ukrainian domestic legal system to ensure that these cases are prosecuted in their own courts?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important issue. The horrendous activities of the Russian forces in Ukraine should be subject to the fullest extent of not only domestic but international law. The previous Government and this Government have provided not

only military and economic support, but legal support. We are supporting the international effort to seek to prosecute not only Putin, but all those who have perpetrated hideous crimes against the Ukrainian people, especially Ukrainian civilians. The effort is ongoing, and I encourage him to table some written questions to the Attorney General's office, which might be able to provide a more thorough update.

I can assure him that our support for Ukraine extends across the whole of Government and that we will continue to pursue all those responsible for crimes in Ukraine, up to and including the President of Russia. We need to be absolutely clear that this illegal, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine carries consequences. If we do not, and it carries no consequences, it will be a green light for other dictators around the world to seek to change their borders and to attack people simply because they want to. That is not acceptable in an international rules-based system. We must uphold the law. That is why the UK effort, from people in uniform and civilians who support our armed forces, as well as the lawyers seeking to prosecute those crimes, is so essential for the long-term peace and security of Ukraine.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his statement; there is nobody in this House who does not support what he has said today. It encourages us as MPs and it encourages my constituents, so we thank him very much for his commitment.

Hailing from a nation that has had to have the most highly trained police in the world, I personally know of multiple ex-Royal Ulster Constabulary and ex-military personnel who were stationed in Northern Ireland who train other military forces and police forces across the world. It is right and proper that our forces are able to help our allies—indeed, they should help our allies. Will the Minister confirm that there is no intention for our forces to see direct action in Ukraine, and that our role is that of training, military provision and support?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and, through him as a Northern Ireland MP, I thank all those families in Northern Ireland who have welcomed Ukrainians into their homes and continue to support them, and the industry in Northern Ireland that is supporting Ukraine. It is the position of the UK Government that we do not have and will not provide UK troops for combat roles in Ukraine. However, we will continue to support our Ukrainian friends through the provision of training and the military equipment they need to determine their future. The training in Operation Interflex will continue throughout the entirety of next year, and will continue to flex and adapt to the changing needs of the Ukrainian fight. It is certainly true that Ukraine needs more people on the frontline to deter the aggression, and our ability to improve and update our training offer, alongside our international partners, will be critical to keeping Ukraine in the fight in the months to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Saving the best Back-Bench contributor till last.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour and a novelty to follow my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

[John Cooper]

The cost of a new year's dinner in Russia is up over 11%, interest rates are up, taxes are up and the rouble is down. That is largely down to the fact that the previous Government introduced a punitive range of sanctions against Russia. The famous military phrase is "in all domains" and the economic domain is absolutely critical. Can the Minister assure us that we will continue to ramp up economic pressure, as well as military pressure?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is absolutely right that in addition to military support we use all levers available to us as a Government to put pressure on Putin, the Kremlin and his illegal war, and that includes economic measures. It is certainly true that Russia is seeking to find ways to circumvent and evade some of the sanctions put in place not just by the United Kingdom, but by our international allies, too. It is for that reason that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Treasury are updating the sanctions on a regular basis, not only to expand them where we see a revenue stream from activity that directly supports the war, but to put further pressure on the Russian economic system so that staying in the fight becomes a harder and harder choice for them. Ultimately, the war needs to be brought to an end as soon as we can. Our levers, not only military but economic and diplomatic, are essential to being able to bring the pressure to bear on Putin to stop his illegal invasion, withdraw his troops and give all the people in Ukraine, who just wish to get on with their lives free from attack, abuse and intimidation by the Russian state, a decent future. Let us hope that 2025 brings a better year than 2024 was for our Ukrainian friends.

Syria

1.53 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement about the current situation in Syria.

Ten days have passed since Assad's departure. The Government welcomed the fall of his cruel and barbaric regime, and the opportunity it offers for Syrians. However, while there is some cause for celebration, fighting and violence continue across the country.

The situation in Syria has developed rapidly over the last week. In the north-east, the US-brokered ceasefire between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Türkiye-Syrian National Army has been temporarily extended, but the situation remains highly fragile. In Damascus, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham—or HTS, as I will call them for the rest of the speech—have appointed a Prime Minister to lead an interim Government until March 2025, but they have given very little detail on the shape and focus of that Government.

The UK Government remain committed to the people of Syria. We support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition process based on the principles of UN Security Council resolution 2254 and leading to an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative Government. We are hopeful that anyone seeking a role in governing Syria will demonstrate a commitment to: the protection of human rights, including for women and girls; unfettered access for humanitarian aid; the safe destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles; and combating terrorism and extremism. The UK urges the transitional Government to adhere to those principles to build a more hopeful, secure and peaceful Syria.

On Saturday, Jordan convened an Arab Foreign Ministers' discussion, followed by a meeting with EU, French, UN, US and UK representatives. All involved, including the UK, reiterated their support for an inclusive political transition process. It is critical that the international community works together in a co-ordinated and complementary manner to ensure the best outcomes for the Syrian people. Along with our partners, we want to see a new political process that is comprehensive, representative, inclusive and, most importantly, determined by the Syrian people themselves. We must also ensure that chemical weapons stockpiles are secured, not used, and that the transition to new governance is peaceful.

For all those reasons, it is right that the UK seeks to use all the channels available to us to deal with HTS where we have to. To that end, senior officials from the FCDO have travelled to Damascus. They have underlined the UK's support for the Syrian people and discussed the pathway to a more hopeful, representative and peaceful future for Syria with the new interim Syrian authorities and civil society. During their visit, senior officials also discussed the importance of an inclusive transitional political process that protects the rights of all Syrians and prevents further instability.

Those words are important, of course, but they must be supported by actions, too. The humanitarian situation on the ground remains dire, with over 16 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance—and that is purely within the borders of Syria itself. That is why, on Saturday, the Government announced a new package of international aid to help the most vulnerable Syrians,

including in Jordan and Lebanon, on top of that announced by the Prime Minister on 9 December. The UK's £61 million in aid will help provide emergency healthcare and nutrition, and support displaced Syrian children. We call on more of our partners to join us in committing greater humanitarian support. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.57 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

The House has many serious questions about the decision, announced by the Foreign Secretary to the media rather than to this House, to establish a diplomatic channel with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. HTS is a proscribed terrorist organisation, but the Foreign Secretary says that the UK is none the less able to have diplomatic contact. Can the Minister clarify the specific legal basis on which she has established contact? Is HTS the only such organisation operating in Syria that now has a diplomatic channel?

We are now aware that Ann Snow, the UK special representative for Syria, and another senior FCDO diplomat, have met the leader of HTS. Can the Minister tell us who else has made contact? Has contact with HTS leaders only been made via official channels, rather than at ministerial level? I know the Minister will be aware that there is a big difference between the two.

The Foreign Secretary also said that the FCDO is engaging with HTS because it wants a representative and inclusive Government, and an end to violence in Syria. Has the UK conveyed to HTS a clear expectation of what should happen to bring that about? If so, will the Minister now take this opportunity to share that road map with the House? Does she believe, based on those conversations, that HTS will lead a peaceful transfer of power to a genuine civilian Government which protects minority groups?

The Government need to be extremely careful, because by dealing with HTS and publicly doing so, there is a risk of legitimisation of the organisation and its position in Syria. At this stage, does the Minister not agree that that would be premature? These are very early days in the new post-Assad reality, and we need to judge HTS by its actions, not its words.

Now that the Government have embarked on this path, can we expect an unequivocal statement that there is no read-across to other proscribed groups? The integrity of the proscription system is absolutely paramount, and the Government must exercise extreme care not to undermine it in any way. Is it still the case that those who left Britain to support the murderous Daesh regime have no place in the UK, and will the Minister commit herself to ruling out any return of Shamima Begum and others to the UK? We note her comments about chemical weapons; can she provide any further detail on how the UK will push for their destruction?

Let me now turn to the humanitarian aspect of this conflict. We are aware of the Government's latest aid package to Syria. Two weeks ago, when pressed on aid delivery in Syria, the Minister for the Middle East said he was concerned that practical access for aid agencies would be difficult to maintain, and work was needed to

maintain access through established humanitarian corridors. It would be helpful to hear the Government's latest assessment of the situation. The UK has funded more than £4 billion of aid over the past decade and more, but with a terrorist group in control of significant territory, can the Minister assure the House that the only beneficiaries of British aid, including food, water and sanitation, are innocent civilians? British aid must not end up in the wrong hands, so what assurances can she give that the way in which aid is being delivered has taken account of the new operating environment?

There is real concern about what Iran's next step in Syria might be. There are reports that the regime in Tehran has been in contact with rebel groups, and we need to be very alive to the risk that it may try to re-establish a foothold for its hostile and malign operations in the region. We should be very clear about the fact that would be an awful outcome. We and our allies need to be pulling every diplomatic lever to blunt Iran's ability to launch a resurgence in Syria, and the House would welcome an update from the Minister on her work on that front.

We all want a stable, peaceful Government in Syria who will protect all groups and minorities, free from the influence of Iran and Russia. That is easy to say, but bringing it about is far more difficult—as will be avoiding an incredibly dangerous power vacuum that could fuel extremism, cause a further breakdown of law and order and bring about a proliferation of criminal activities, including the weapons smuggling and drug production. We need to see a clear plan from the Government that protects British interests at home and abroad, and supports those who sincerely want to protect the innocent Syrian civilians who have suffered so much.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her comments. She has raised a number of issues, with which I will deal in turn. First, she asked about the UK's engagement with HTS. I did talk about that in my statement, but I can provide additional information. It is clear that the fact that HTS is a proscribed terrorist group does not prevent the UK from engaging with it in our efforts to help secure a political settlement, or from engaging with any future transitional Government in Syria that includes HTS. Its proscription will not inhibit the pursuit of our foreign policy objectives in Syria, and the UK will be guided by a set of core principles for any diplomatic interaction with the interim Syria authorities, with inclusion and the protection of human rights as key considerations. That has been the case until now, and it most definitely will be the case into the future. The right hon. Lady asked about engagement with other bodies at official level. There has been engagement with Türkiye and with the SDF, and that will continue. We are seeking to do all that we can, above all, to ensure that the interests of Syrians themselves are put at the forefront in this very difficult situation.

The right hon. Lady asked about the representations being made by the UK to the HTS. I covered that in my statement, but let me repeat that we have been crystal clear about the fact that any subsequent arrangements must be comprehensive, representative, inclusive and, above all, determined by Syrians. She asked whether this would have any impact on the integrity of the proscription regime; no, and it must not, because that is an incredibly important regime and there will be no

[Anneliese Dodds]

linkage. She asked what would happen with those who chose to leave our country to promote and support terrorism by seeking to fight for Daesh; of course those people will not be able to come to the UK. She talked about the use of chemical weapons; I covered that in my statement as well, but, again, the UK will seek to play as much of a part as it possibly can in ensuring that those stockpiles are destroyed after they were used so appallingly against the Syrian people.

The right hon. Lady asked about the use of aid. I have discussed this matter myself, as have many of my officials, with a number of multilateral bodies and with a number of our bilateral partners as well. We are determined to work together to ensure that aid does not fall into the wrong hands and is not diverted. Of course that must not happen, because it is desperately needed by many Syrians. A great many people have already been displaced from Syria to neighbouring countries, but large population movements now seem to be taking place, and it really is important that the aid goes where it is needed. We are, of course, monitoring that in detail.

The right hon. Lady asked about the situation with Iran. The UK has condemned Iran's reckless and destabilising activity, including its support for militant groups. We have been very clear about that, as the new Government. Finally, the right hon. Lady talked about the need to ensure that we do not see an increase in the developments that have been so concerning, involving the smuggling of weapons and drugs. The UK will focus on that later with the new Government, because we see the damage that has already been caused in that regard.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. Earlier this week I met Alevi, Kurdish and other communities who are deeply concerned about what will happen to minorities in Syria now that HTS has seized power there. The UK has rightly proscribed HTS as a result of its links with al-Qaeda. Can the Minister reassure the House that the Government will use all their powers to prevent HTS and other hostile actors from attacking minorities in Syria?

Anneliese Dodds: Of course we will seek to use every lever in that respect, because it is the position of this Government that all civilians must be protected, and that includes civilians who form part of religious and ethnic minorities. We have also made it very clear that, as I mentioned a few moments ago, the political process must be inclusive, and that covers all religious and ethnic minorities. When it comes to the situation for Kurds, I think it relevant to underline the fact that the UK has been in touch with both Türkiye and the SDF since the start of this escalation. We are urging all sides to refrain from activity that could lead to a further loss of civilian life, and of course we want to see the ceasefire being held to.

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

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The fall of Assad marks a turning point in Syria's history, one that brings renewed hope for millions who have suffered under his brutal rule. It also represents a serious setback for the

global ambitions of the regimes in Moscow and Tehran. As we reflect on this momentous day, however, we must remain vigilant. It is not enough to see the end of a cruel despot who unleashed chemical weapons on his own people; true justice requires that he be held to account for his crimes, ensuring that such atrocities never reoccur.

In these early days of transition, every effort must be channelled into securing an orderly and peaceful transfer of power. We welcome the signs of engagement with groups on the ground, including those who have had contact with HTS, and we urge all parties to commit themselves to a stable path forward; but this cannot be a mere change of flags or faces. The new leadership must work tirelessly to safeguard the dignity and rights of every community, ensuring that religious and ethnic minorities are not just tolerated but actively protected. Equally vital is the reconstruction of Syria's infrastructure: investment in roads, schools, hospitals and electricity grids is essential. Restoring those lifelines of society will help to rebuild trust and lay the groundwork for a thriving, inclusive economy that reaches every corner of the country. The international community stands ready to support these initiatives, but we must see clear evidence of genuine commitment to positive, meaningful change.

The Minister mentioned the £61 million of UK aid, which is very welcome. Can she give us the details of how it will specifically support Syrians who are returning to their home country? May I also ask what the Government are doing to work alongside key regional players to ensure that whatever comes next upholds the values of democracy and freedom?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his remarks, and I agree with the way in which he described the current situation. There is no question but that many Syrians felt an enormous sense of relief at the end of such a murderous and brutal regime, but there is deep concern about what will come now. The UK is determined to play our part in ensuring that the future is determined by the Syrians themselves.

The hon. Gentleman asks about accountability. That is an incredibly important point to reflect on, because in recent years we have seen the appalling targeting of so many Syrians by the Assad regime. The UK has played its part, as have many experts from the UK, in seeking to gather information about that. I praise the previous Government for their work in that regard, particularly their work with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, which has been seeking to make sure that there is coherent collation and use of evidence so that we can address the widespread impunity, and the suffering of the Syrian people, under the Assad regime. Given the change that has taken place, it is really important that we do not lose that information, and that, ultimately, there is the accountability that the Syrian people deserve.

The hon. Gentleman asks for details of the aid that the UK has provided, and about how that will be relevant for those seeking to return to Syria. Of course, many areas of Syria have been appallingly degraded through the actions of Assad, and basic services—water, electricity and other services that are essential for anything approaching normal life—have been destroyed. It will be a long-term process, but the UK is now focused on providing emergency healthcare, support for nutrition and food provision more generally, as well as support for the many displaced children, who have had to deal

with such a traumatic period. We will continue to focus on those important issues with our partners into the future.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I commend the Minister for her statement, and for the additional £50 million in aid. I am particularly grateful for the extra £120,000 that has been given to the OPCW to help rid Syria of chemical weapons, which, despite the denials and downplaying by some people, including Members of this House, were being used by Assad.

My question follows up on the one I asked last week about political prisoners. I am grateful that Sednaya prison looks like it has been cleared, but I hear from my Syrian friends that there are other prisons and secret detention centres across the country. What steps can the UK Government take to help support the Syrians to find any missing people and ensure that they are freed as soon as possible?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those points. He mentions the terrible use of chemical weapons within Syria. The new Government are deeply concerned about their previous use, but we also want to ensure that they can never be used again on a civilian population. We note HTS's statement that it will protect chemical weapons sites and will not use such weapons under any circumstances. We urge all parties to comply with international law, including the chemical weapons convention, and to engage with the OPCW so that we can finally make sure that all banned weapons are destroyed.

My hon. Friend raises the issue of those who have been appallingly detained—in some cases, for an extremely long period of time—in horrific circumstances. Accountability around those issues relates to the matters that I talked about a few moments ago. The IIIM is so crucial to making sure that data about Assad's murderous regime is not just collected, but held and then used to drive accountability.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Minister will be aware of reports that up to £160 million is held in assets in the UK under the Syrian sanctions regime. Will she look at ways in which that money can be used in due course for the benefit of the people of Syria?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for his question. I am sure that he will understand—indeed, he has followed these issues for many years—that the UK's sanctions regime is continuously kept under review. The UK has been determined to ensure that where we can use sanctions in order to ensure that there is accountability, we will do so. Of course, we will keep these matters under review and work with partners to make sure that there is accountability.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): We welcome the Minister's statement, and what she has detailed about the efforts of the Department and our Government to create a broad coalition to bring about peace in Syria. Earlier we had a statement on Ukraine from the Minister for the Armed Forces, who said that we were challenging malign Russian activity, and there was broad consensus across the House. Given the Russians' malign activity in Syria, does the Minister agree that

although we need an inclusive political process that includes the country's minority groups, it is essential that we have a broad international process?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the critical need for an international process, and the need for continuation of the engagement that we have seen in recent days—first, with Arab countries coming together, and then engagement by the EU, US, UK and others. I want to underline my hon. Friend's point about Russia. It is clear that with Russia's military support, the Assad regime was able to continue its brutal campaign against the Syrian people for over 13 years. The sudden fall of that regime has exposed Russia's weakened state, and the unreliable and self-serving nature of its so-called alliances.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister's statement and the removal of the Assad Government. What assessment have the UK Government made of the Syrian justice system's capacity to prosecute war crimes, and all the horrendous crimes that were perpetrated against the poor people of Syria during Assad's regime?

Anneliese Dodds: Sadly, it is very clear that under Assad, we did not see a justice system that was focused on criminal justice and on providing proper accountability. Instead, there was a vast number of political prisoners, and extensive and extremely deep persecution focused on the needs of the regime. Of course, there must be change. As I described in my statement, the UK has engaged with Syria, particularly on the need to prevent further conflict, to ensure the protection of human rights, and to ensure an inclusive and representative political process. That will require the kind of institutions that can uphold an inclusive, representative and comprehensive governance structure. Surely that is the least that the Syrians deserve.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Does the Minister share my concern that the situation in both Syria and Gaza threatens stability in the wider region, and can she reassure me that the Government are acting urgently to support humanitarian needs in both Syria and Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes, I can reassure my hon. Friend on that. It is important for us to understand the situation in many countries in the region. Jordan has a very large proportion of Palestinian refugees, and also has many Syrian refugees. I had the absolute privilege of meeting some of them when I visited the Zaatari camp in Jordan. The UK has been working with Jordan on the Jahez programme, which we announced recently, but we have also been working with the country to ensure that, where possible, we can push forward access for aid into Gaza. I pay tribute to the Jordanian Government for that.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I have several short questions. The Minister has already touched on sanctions; the new Syrian leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has said that sanctions must be lifted, and that that is not up for negotiation. I look forward to hearing the Minister's thoughts on how we can move forward.

On behalf of the SNP, I welcome the £61 million of support, particularly for healthcare and nutrition, but who will deliver it, and how can we ensure that it is delivered to the people who need it most?

[Chris Law]

Over the last week or two, we have all seen the unfolding news about the horror of what happened, and not just in the prisons. This week, Channel 4 News has reported that hundreds of thousands of civilians have been buried in mass graves. What are the UK Government's thoughts on the technical and forensic assistance provided following previous genocides, not least in Rwanda and the Balkans? What support could we provide? The University of Dundee is a world leader in forensics, and I would like it to have the opportunity to hear the Minister's response.

Anneliese Dodds: I will try to answer the hon. Member's four questions as quickly as possible, so that others can speak. First, there were already tough sanctions in place against the Assad regime—against 310 individuals and 74 linked entities. As I mentioned, this Government will keep all evidence and potential designations under close review, and we will not hesitate to take further action as needed.

We are working with partners, particularly the UN agencies, on delivering aid. Yesterday or the day before, I discussed in detail with the UN emergency co-ordinator how we will ensure that access is provided, working together in concert. We also need to make sure that there is no duplication, given that there is such need. That is something on which the UK is very much focused.

The UK has been engaged in ensuring that forensic evidence is collected. As I said, much of that work is conducted through the IIIM. It is important that UK experts are engaged, and I pay tribute to the Dundonians who have been engaged in this important work. Clearly, we are hearing very disturbing reports, and it is critical that we have clear, substantiated evidence that can be used to drive accountability. I hope that many UK experts will be involved in that effort.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): The end of a vicious dictatorship and the limited progress that has been made under the interim authorities are leading to ever more Syrian refugees, perhaps even millions, returning home. Of course, in principle, this is good, but Syria's education system, its infrastructure and its healthcare system are devastated. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this presents a significant opportunity for the UK to play a huge role in helping Syrians to rebuild their country? British aid agencies, companies and experts in international law can all help to embed stability, and to ensure a democratic transition and an inclusive and more prosperous country for the Syrians.

Anneliese Dodds: I agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, millions of Syrian refugees remain in Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan, and the House has to recognise that a further surge of refugees out of Syria would increase the strain on many other countries and potentially increase the number of people seeking to use dangerous routes into continental Europe and the UK. We need to work on this with multilateral organisations, and with countries in the region, while making sure that we focus on future reconstruction.

We have talked about the destruction of many basic services, and it really will be important to make sure that Syria, as a whole nation and a whole territory, is made inhabitable again; that is the right of all Syrians.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am sure colleagues on both sides of the House welcome the fall of the brutal Assad regime, and perhaps very cautiously welcome the early inclusive statements—in part, at least—of Ahmed al-Sharaa, the HTS's leader, but I have to confess that I am somewhat nervous. Are these statements too good to be true? Does not the international community, particularly the UK Government, need to be careful that it is not being played? In particular, the transitional Government should be judged on their deeds, not just their words and BBC TV interviews.

Briefly, when will the UK embassy in Syria reopen? What will the Government do to ensure the protection of minorities, particularly, at Christmas, Christian minorities, and to make sure that they are represented in the transitional Government and, indeed, the future Government of Syria?

Although some of the biological and chemical stockpiles held in Syria have been bombed by Israel—that is welcome, in my view—we have to ensure that they do not fall into the hands of any rebel group or transitional Government, but are completely destroyed or given over to another authority that can destroy them.

Anneliese Dodds: I covered the nature of the UK's engagement with HTS both in my statement and in my answers. Of course, it is critical that the UK is clear about the need for a future political settlement to be comprehensive and inclusive, and it must include both ethnic and religious minorities.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the Christian minorities in Syria, many of which were appallingly persecuted over many years. As with other minorities, we need to ensure that they are protected into the future. The UK has been resolute on that point.

The right hon. Gentleman mentions chemical stockpiles, and the UK Government have been absolutely clear that those stockpiles must not be used. HTS has made a statement on this subject, and we are determined to ensure that it is held to that, and that all parties ensure that the stockpiles are destroyed, so that they can never be used.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for her diligent work on the very challenging situation in Syria. I am sure that she has seen the reports from places like Idlib, Aleppo, Homs and Damascus of women being forced to wear the hijab, young women being escorted, and other restrictions on women's rights. That is in stark contrast to the position under the autonomous administration in north and east Syria, Rojava; gender equality is baked into its constitutional arrangements. What assessment has she made of HTS's attitude towards gender equality and women's rights? Does she think that there should be a ministry for women and gender equality in the constitutional arrangements of a future Syrian republic?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend raises an issue that could not be more important. When we talk about arrangements being inclusive, comprehensive and representative, that must include arrangements for the 51% of the population who are women. We must also see that girls, as well as women, are protected. When we looked at the previous humanitarian situation in Syria, we saw that there were huge issues for many women in

accessing family planning and basic health services—those kinds of issues hit women particularly hard. The UK has been supporting the work of the United Nations on family planning, and we will continue to make sure that the UK is a strong advocate, both on a political level and on services for women and girls in Syria.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Minister might like to welcome the fact that the Israeli air force is systematically destroying chemical weapons, rather than relying on the word of terrorists. Will she comment on the largest occupation anywhere in the middle east, namely that of Turkey in Syria, and on the pro-western Kurdish fighters who are being singly dealt with by the Turks? It appears that the Turkish Parliament now sees an opportunity to annex more and more of Syria, creating a greater Turkish empire. Has the Minister or the Government had any discussions with Turkey about its intentions?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising these issues. I briefly mentioned that the UK has been in contact with Türkiye and the Syrian Democratic Forces since the start of this escalation. As he will be aware, there is a US-brokered ceasefire, and it has to be held to. We have been very clear with all sides that they must refrain from activity that could lead to further loss of life or damage to civilian infrastructure in order to avoid further destabilisation and civilian suffering in the region, which has already been intense and which must not be worsened.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I welcome the Minister's involvement and preparedness to work with the new Syrian Government, and we hope that that will deliver a future free from war and free from human rights abuse. However, the new Government are faced with a country awash with weapons and armed forces from Russia, Turkey, the USA, Israel and ISIS active in the country. What actions has she taken to ensure Israel withdraws from Syria and Turkish forces withdraw from the north of Syria, allowing the Kurdish people to live in peace and with rights of self-determination?

Anneliese Dodds: We are aware that the situation is incredibly complex, and a large number of armed groups, with a variety of different affiliations, are involved. In that context, the most critical issue for the UK Government

is that civilians are protected. My goodness, they suffered enough under Assad, and now, with the fall of Assad, we must ensure they are protected. On other nations engaged within Syria, we are clear that it is critical that civilians, including those from minorities, are protected, and that all must work quickly towards an inclusive political transition. As the UN Secretary-General has said, the future of Syria is a matter for Syrians to determine, and that is the position of the UK Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jim Shannon to ask the final question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When I speak in the Chamber, I always see myself as a rear gunner. I thank the Minister for her statement and her clear commitment to human rights, prevention of religious persecution and righting wrongs. While I welcome the fall of Assad, I fear for what will replace that regime. As we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, if we do not—I say “we” collectively—secure democracy, a dictatorship under a different guise will arise. How will the UK and our UN allies ensure that those women and children who have lived through horrific oppression will not simply taste freedom for a short time before entering a new despotic regime? What specific support can our Government give to women and children at this time?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for all his work over many years on these and associated issues. He talked about the complex situation that faces us now. As many have reflected, there is relief at seeing the fall of such a dreadful dictator but concern about what may come next. As I have mentioned, the UK Government will do all we can to seek to ensure that the subsequent governance regime is comprehensive, inclusive and representative, and will ensure the safety of civilians, including children. The hon. Gentleman asked about the UK's approach on support towards children. Within the support we announced a couple of days ago, there is provision for education for displaced Syrian children and also for psychosocial support, which will be important to those young people.

In ending, as we approach Christmas, and particularly off the back of this discussion, now really is a time when we must wish for peace on earth and goodwill to all. I wish everyone in the Chamber, all the staff and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a very merry Christmas.

Service Accommodation

DEFENCE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Defence Committee. Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches.

I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, and not the relevant Government Minister, but Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I plan to finish the Select Committee statement after 20 minutes.

2.33 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is an honour to present the Defence Committee's first report of this Parliament, which is on service accommodation.

As we approach Christmas, we would all hope that the brave servicepeople who put their lives on the line for our country would all have decent housing, where they could celebrate in the warmth, without fear that their living conditions would put their health or their families' health at risk. However, that is not always true, as our report and other reports have found. What is more, there is not yet a robust funded plan to put the situation right.

Before I say more about the Committee's findings, I want to put on record my immense gratitude to my fellow Committee members in reaching strong recommendations on a cross-party basis. I thank members of the Defence Committee in the previous Parliament, including the now shadow Defence Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who took the evidence that informed this hard-hitting report. In particular, I thank Robert Courts, the former Member for Witney, who originally proposed and led the inquiry. I put on record my gratitude to the House of Commons staff whose hard work made the inquiry possible, especially Sarah Williams, who managed the inquiry with curiosity and care, from conception to report.

Our armed forces personnel dedicate their lives to protecting this nation, often at great personal sacrifice. Ensuring they have access to safe, comfortable and well-maintained accommodation is not just a matter of duty—it is a moral obligation. The Committee's investigation has revealed a deeply concerning situation that has developed over many years. The condition of both service family accommodation and single living accommodation falls far below the standard our servicemen and women deserve.

We have found instances of dilapidated housing, inadequate maintenance and unacceptable living conditions, including some truly appalling persistent problems with damp and mould; cases of total loss of heating, hot water and cooking facilities for months in winter; flooding; and rodent infestations. Such substandard living conditions directly affect the morale and operational readiness of our armed forces. They are also a significant challenge to recruitment and retention.

Our report highlights systemic failures in the management and maintenance of service accommodation. The current system is plagued by lack of clear accountability and has reached a point of crisis, following insufficient funding over decades. Satisfaction with service accommodation is very low. That is hardly surprising given that a third of single living accommodation and two thirds of service family accommodation are in such poor condition that they are essentially no longer fit for purpose.

The Committee has put forward several key recommendations to start to address this situation. We call for detailed funded investment plans for service accommodation, which are crucial to address the backlog of repairs and to bring the housing stock up to acceptable modern standards. Such plans are also crucial to enable effective planning for how best to manage the interim situation in which so much defence housing remains substandard.

For all accommodation maintained under contract, we call for the Ministry of Defence to review the assurance processes and performance measures for those contracts as part of a plan to improve the management of accommodation. There needs to be much more focus on the satisfaction of servicepeople and their families. That must include making sure that complaints processes are accessible and fit for purpose. Better communication with servicepeople and their families is absolutely key, alongside better delivery of real improvements that people value.

The Committee also examined recent developments relating to the allocation of family accommodation—namely, the botched mismanaged nature of it. Both the proposed changes and the subsequent pause in their implementation have caused significant uncertainty for service personnel and their families. The situation underscores the need for clear, consistent communication and highlights the importance of thorough consultation with those affected by such changes.

I want to emphasise that this is not about apportioning blame but about recognising a shared responsibility across Governments, over many years, to do better for those who serve our country. However, it is now for the current Government to put things right. The challenges are considerable and require a meaningful plan of investment and effective delivery and communication.

I warmly welcome the announcement on Tuesday that the Government are buying back the service family accommodation portfolio. The decision back in 1996 to sell the portfolio was a major mistake and was compounded by the terms of the deal, which has been described by the Public Accounts Committee as “disastrous”. It left the public purse billions of pounds worse off and the Government responsible for maintaining and upgrading an estate that was, in effect, owned by somebody else. That is why the situation was a nettle that needed to be grasped.

Buying back the portfolio is the right decision and has the potential to be a real game changer. However, essential though that is, the buy-back will not, in itself, directly improve things for servicepeople and their families right now. Along with my colleagues on the Defence Committee, I will be looking closely at the plan that follows and how it is funded and delivered. I commend the report to the House.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I put on record this Government's support for the report that my hon. Friend has just published. The state of

military housing is not good enough. Too many of our military families are living in poor-quality accommodation, and that is precisely why the Government seek to renew the contract between the nation and those who serve. That is why we are bringing Annington homes back into public ownership. That will save the taxpayer £600,000 a day, which is money that can be used to better support our service families. I am grateful to hon. Members from both sides of the House, including the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for his work in support of the deal.

Does my hon. Friend agree that this decisive break from a failed past is just our first chance to renew the contract between the nation and those who serve? I hope he will keep the Government honest on our commitments to improve service life and accommodation. Through the work we are legislating for with the Armed Forces Commissioner, I hope his Committee will be able to support and provide ongoing scrutiny of service family accommodation, because decent housing is the least that all our armed forces and their families deserve. This Government are intent on delivering on that.

Mr Dhesi: I welcome the Minister's comments and, indeed, we will be supporting and scrutinising the work of Government. We look forward to working with the Armed Forces Commissioner as and when they are appointed. As I intimated earlier, Tuesday's announcement is very welcome, but there is a great deal of work for the Minister and his colleagues to do. The proof will be in the planning and the delivery.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The Liberal Democrats fully support the findings of the report and we hope it will mark the beginning of a much better and fairer deal for armed forces personnel. For too long, they have been failed by successive Governments. Does the Chair agree that this is a long-overdue change, welcomed by our party and across the House? Our service personnel, who at times put their lives on the line for this country, should at the very least expect to have a warm, safe and secure place to call home. Does he also agree that the backlog and repairs to the basic services he has highlighted are unacceptable and should not be allowed to recur in future?

Mr Dhesi: I could not agree more with the Liberal Democrat spokesman. It is completely unacceptable that we expect our brave servicemen and women, and their families, to be housed in such substandard conditions. We have instances of damp, mould, rat infestation—I could rattle off so many other things that are completely unacceptable. I completely concur with the hon. Gentleman and look forward to the Government taking immediate and urgent action to remediate things.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I warmly welcome the report and I am proud to be part of my hon. Friend the Chair's team, who have so well encapsulated the witness testimonies and the work that was done by the previous Committee. I join him in warmly welcoming the announcement from earlier in the week and the forthcoming work to bring about a service commissioner to oversee the process and ensure such injustices do not

befall our service personnel in future. Does he agree that service housing is the foundation upon which our service personnel serve and commit to our country, and that this is the start of a journey of repairing a very damaged contract that this country has with its service personnel?

Mr Dhesi: I concur fully with my fellow member of the Defence Committee. Given his vast experience of having served in our armed forces, his contribution as a member of the Committee will be substantial, and I know he will bring that experience to bear as we look forward to remediating things. He is correct that service accommodation is the foundation on which we must ensure that our servicepeople have the very best facilities that we as a nation can offer.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): For the record, I declare an interest: I participated in the inquiry while serving on the Committee in the previous Parliament. I thank the Committee Chairman for kindly pointing that out. Also for the record, we welcome the Annington decision, partly because we had done a lot of work on that prior to the election. I thank the Minister for playing fair on that.

Now that we have hopefully resolved the issue of the ownership of the estate, there is still the question of its management. Changing the ownership does not fix the boiler. Will the Chairman of the Committee be pleased to hear that, in the same bipartisan spirit, we are happy to work with the Department and Ministers to see if we can provide proposals for improving the management of the estate now that, hopefully, we have resolved the ownership question?

Mr Dhesi: The right hon. Gentleman is indeed right, not only in his considerable contribution to the deliberations relating to the service accommodation report, but in preceding years, when he served in such a distinguished manner on the Defence Committee, which, by the way, works on a cross-party basis and the report was agreed unanimously. He is also right to highlight that the management of the contracts will be essential. The Committee's report has identified the serious problems and now the ball is in the Government's court as to how they manage that. However, it is great to see the cross-party working and I hope that will help to address the issues in a more timely manner.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I welcome the Committee's "Service Accommodation" report and recommendations, but I am not surprised by its findings. I also welcome the Government's move to purchase back housing stock that should never have been sold off and the hundreds of houses that will bring back to Portsmouth. However, the issue of Ministry of Defence housing is huge, because of the years of managed decline under the previous Government. There has been no real investment, just sticking plasters.

Portsmouth in particular has been underfunded, and those in naval properties miss out more than most, because they can be in their homes for longer than those in other services as they are based at the port. There is a cap on void works, which means that, if a family moves out, the house needs renovating and it will be withdrawn. This causes undue stress to families who have already

[Amanda Martin]

selected schools, sorted out their removals and left jobs. There is not always a guarantee of a house in the same area.

There is so much to say on behalf of Portsmouth service personnel, but, lifting words from the pages of the report, I invite the Committee and the Ministers to meet me, the contractors and service personnel in Portsmouth to see the reality of the situation.

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend is 100% right. She is also speaking with considerable experience, because of the importance of Portsmouth to our nation's defence, and the sheer scale of its service accommodation. Indeed, I look forward to visiting Portsmouth. The Defence Committee, along with its staff, will be visiting the city very soon. And, yes, every instance of substandard accommodation is unacceptable, and we must collectively work to rectify matters.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Some 40 years ago, I was growing up in army accommodation, because my dad was serving in the Royal Signals. Even then, I remember my parents talking about the problems that they were having with their accommodation. It is extraordinary that all this time later, things have probably got worse, rather than better. I want to put on record that this is about not only service personnel but their spouses and children who live in the accommodation. When service personnel are serving away from home, often for months at a time, the family's health and mental health is impacted by the quality of their accommodation. Does the Chair of the Committee agree that the impact on mental health is important?

Mr Dhesi: I could not agree more with the hon. Member. She has got to the nub of it. If our brave servicemen and women are anxious about what is going on with their families when they are serving around the world, that affects their mental health. It also affects the mental health of the families themselves—the partners and the children. It is extremely important that we rectify matters, otherwise armed services personnel will vote with their feet and walk away.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I wholeheartedly support this excellent report of my hon. Friend and his Select Committee. May I also ask them to look at the issue of housing for veterans, which is a very important

matter? Many veterans in Reading live in poor-quality, rented accommodation, despite the fact that Reading borough council has prioritised their needs in the council house waiting lists. There are simply not enough council houses to go around. We have particular problems with our British Gurkha community who are struggling in poor accommodation. Will the Select Committee look into that matter?

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend has been a champion of veterans, particularly Gurkha veterans. I know that he recently visited Aldershot and many other places, including Westminster Hall, to champion their cause. He is right that veterans' issues need to be resolved. I think that he, along with his constituents, will have been happy with the Government's recent announcement of homes for veterans, but we must keep pushing to ensure the best possible outcome for our veterans.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I wish you a merry Yorkshire Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for the Committee's report. As we are admitting things, let me say that, in the 1980s, I, too, lived in armed services accommodation for a brief period. It is important for us to remember how many children live in armed services accommodation. I have been raising this issue since 2018, at the time of the CarillionAmey contract. Catterick garrison in Yorkshire has one of the largest stocks of armed forces housing, and I know that my hon. Friend knows how poor much of the maintenance work has been. He has already mentioned mould, rats, and conditions that are unfit for children, or anybody, to live in. Does he think that service families who suffered the most egregious examples of poor maintenance should be able to receive compensation from those private companies?

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend, along with other hon. Members, speaks with a great deal of experience having lived in service accommodation. When I had the honour recently to visit Catterick, I was able to see for myself some of the service accommodation. We do need to ensure that people are held to account. I have no doubt that the Government will put pressure on those management companies to ensure that compensation commensurate with what people have suffered should be forthcoming.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): That concludes the Select Committee statement.

Point of Order

2.53 pm

Alison Bennett: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In today's urgent question, the Minister for Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), said that the Government would be introducing a "£100 million boost for adult and children's hospices", but neglected to say that this money would be available only for capital spending, as confirmed in the written statement published this afternoon. She repeatedly referred to the £100 million sum when asked about what steps the Government were taking to address the cost of national insurance increases for hospices, even though this money will not be available for staff costs. Has Mr Speaker received any indication from the Minister that she intends to correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of that point of order. While the Chair is not responsible for the content of contributions made by Ministers, I am sure that her concern has been heard by those on the Government Benches. If an error has been made in this instance, I am sure that the Minister will seek to correct it as soon as possible.

Backbench Business

Christmas Adjournment

2.54 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

It seems like only a few days ago that we were having the pre-conference recess debate, yet here we are in the final days of 2024. What a busy year it has been for all of us. We have had general elections, mayoral elections, leadership contests, gnarly Taylor Swift's Eras tour, the Paris Olympics, and President Trump re-elected to the White House, but still no trophy for Spurs. Perhaps we can put that right in 2025.

I thank everyone who has played a part in making 2024 so special: the catering staff; the House staff; the Clerks; the workmen; the staff in the post offices, hairdressers, bars and shops on site; the security teams; the Doorkeepers; Mr Speaker and his Deputies, and their staff; and my colleagues and all their staff. I hope that everyone has a wonderful Christmas, relaxing with loved ones, friends and family, and I wish everyone the happiest of new years, with peace, health and prosperity. At this time of the year, we should also think of those who are far less fortunate than ourselves.

I have been pleased to take up the role of Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee this year, following in the footsteps of the former Member for Gateshead, after he stood down, having served nine years as Chairman. I pay tribute to his hard work over that time, ensuring that Back Benchers were able to bring their issues to the Floor of the House. I intend to do so in that capacity as well. As it is Christmas, I must say that my display of accismus to the position saw off all the competition. The rest of my Committee and the Clerks have been invaluable in the transition, and I look forward to continuing our work in the new year.

Another addition to my CV this year has been assuming the role of Chairman of the prestigious—well, I would call it prestigious—1922 committee. I am pleased that we have welcomed our new leader, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), who has made a really good start in the five weeks since she was elected. I hope that Labour Members do not get too comfy on the Government Benches, as we will be back in short order. I also thank my fellow officers, my hon. Friends the Members for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), for their help and counsel over the past few months. It has certainly been a busy introduction to the job.

Transport for London has continued to be run into the ground, with spending priorities that are short term, political and simply vain. The refurbishment of the Central line needs to be expedited. This is badly needed, because it is my understanding that there are literally no more spare direct current motors for the 1992 stock available, necessitating their conversion to alternating current motors as a matter of priority. That may sound not so important, but the project has been going on for the last five years. TfL now has a completion date of 2029 for the project. That is outrageous. The Piccadilly line is four years behind schedule. The new trains will

[Bob Blackman]

not come into force until the end of next year; they were supposed to come in in 2011. Now TfL is saying that it does not have funding to upgrade the signalling either.

The Bakerloo line has the oldest working trains in regular service in the UK. Those who have travelled on them know how bad they are, yet TfL ducked the issue of replacing them again, citing funding as the reason. There are no plans to replace the 1972 stock, which many of my constituents have to use from stations in my constituency, but there was money for Mayor Khan to pay off his union paymasters. There was also money to pay for a costly election year fare freeze gimmick, and £7 million to spend on a vanity project regarding the London Overground, to say nothing of the choice of the line names themselves, which are at best virtue signalling and at worst extremely confusing. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be delighted to hear that I will not bore the House with the history of the names of the London Underground lines, but they are either historically derived or named after royalty. The Overground lines are certainly not.

I am therefore disappointed that the Government see fit to reward this wanton destruction of TfL with a promotion for the former deputy Mayor for transport—she is the new Transport Secretary—and a possible knighthood for the man in charge of it all. Nearly 200,000 people have already signed a petition calling on the Government to reconsider, and I wholeheartedly agree. Indeed, I would be more than happy to recommend colleagues from the Government Benches who would be far more deserving of a knighthood than Mayor Khan.

We should remember the violence being implemented on Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh, and the attacks in—can you believe it?—Canada on Jews and Hindus in their synagogues and temples. That is outrageous. We in this House are all conscious of the escalating situation in the middle east, but there is a clear and present danger that if terrorists remain in Gaza, the conflict cannot have a long-term solution. Indeed, it could drag Hezbollah, Iran and extremist forces in the middle east into a full-scale war with Israel, which none of us want to see. We should understand that the regime in Tehran is pure skibidi. On 25 June, Labour promised that if it was elected, it would proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety, as many of us had been calling on previous Conservative Governments to do for a number of years. On 8 July, *The Guardian* reported that the Government would not proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist group in its entirety, completely U-turning on their promise. I call on the Government to correct that error of judgment sooner rather than later.

I was honoured recently to meet the inspiringly brave Mandy Damari—a woman with rizz. Her daughter Emily Damari is still being held hostage in Gaza. Emily is the last British hostage in Gaza. She is an avid Tottenham fan and an innocent young girl taken from her apartment on 7 October 2023. She has not been returned, and she has been shot, wounded and not given medical treatment. It is totally unimaginable what she is going through. We must not let Emily be forgotten, and I urge the Government to work with the Israeli Government to ensure a safe return as soon as possible. The longer Emily is held captive, the slimmer her chances

become and the longer she has to endure such dark days. My thoughts and prayers remain with the Damari family and those who have lost loved ones due to terrorism.

Another issue that the Government need to reconsider given the situation globally is their defence spending commitments or lack thereof. They committed to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence as soon as they could. Now that has changed to having a road map to achieve it. In this uncertain world, we need this to be accelerated, not delayed. We have already heard that the Ministry of Defence faces a large funding gap in the current financial year and in 2025-26. In December, the National Audit Office identified a deficit in the equipment plan of £3 billion for this year and a further deficit of £3.9 billion for the following year. The MOD will have to find an extra £1 billion each year to fund the above-budget costs of the 2023 and 2024 pay settlements for the armed forces. It is such an important point that the national interest should not be subject to party politics or spending reviews—the money should be ringfenced.

On 27 January, we mark Holocaust Memorial Day. I am pleased that through January there will be a range of activities to mark it, including the annual book of commitment, which I urge all colleagues, especially those new to the House, to sign. They can place in it their commitment to combating antisemitism and hatred of people because of their religion, race or background. It is saddening that the tensions in the middle east are so frequently spilling over onto our streets, with antisemitic behaviour rising by over 500% compared with pre-7 October levels. We must stand up to that abominable behaviour, not allowing any hate crimes to take place, regardless of race or religion.

During the festive period, it is particularly important to share a thought for those without a permanent home and those sleeping rough. The winter months can be ruthless, with increased hours of darkness and plummeting temperatures. It can be an incredibly lonely period for those without any friends or a home to live in, watching everyone ignore them on the sidewalk while others enjoy quality time with their families. I send my good wishes to my local charity FirmFoundation, which will be providing hostel accommodation once again, and to Crisis and all the other homeless charities, which do such good work. When passing someone who is sleeping rough, do not just ignore them; wish them a merry Christmas. That acknowledgment, with just a few words, could mean a lot to them. However, please do not give them money. Give them food; give them time and attention. Let me mention at this point that, despite my prompting, the Government still have not implemented the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023, which was my private Member's Bill. I look forward to that happening in 2025.

I thank everyone in my constituency for their hard work over the past year. The support from councillors and activists every weekend, as we continue to knock on residents' doors, is invaluable and greatly appreciated. The general election was, it is fair to say, very tough for my party, and I am sorry to have seen so many great colleagues depart this place—I look forward to many of them returning. I am eternally grateful that we in Harrow East bucked the trend and increased my majority, and grateful to everyone who helped during that time, come rain or shine. I thank the residents of Harrow East for showing up to vote for me, and the thousands of them who completed my surveys on a range of issues. I have

taken up those issues and am organising meetings with the appropriate people to ensure that we get results for local residents. I never take this wonderful job for granted. Come 2025, I will be working tirelessly to stand up for the people of Harrow East, as all Members should do for their constituencies.

I am delighted that the Government have got the Tobacco and Vapes Bill through to Committee stage in this House. I welcome their ambition to inherit the previous Government's goal of eradicating smoking from society and tackling youth vaping. I look forward to the continued work to scrutinise the Bill and ensure that all appropriate amendments are adopted so that we have a smokefree society in our lifetimes. I pay tribute to my friends at Action on Smoking and Health—in particular to Deborah Arnott, who retired this year after so many years leading the organisation—who have been tireless in providing briefings and meetings, and in hosting events for colleagues and me.

I recently visited the Royal National orthopaedic hospital in Stanmore for a productive meeting. I spoke at great length with Paul Fish, the hospital's CEO, about future plans and improvements to the hospital. Many of the outbuildings are in dire need of investment to maximise patient care. Back in 2015, I led the campaign to get the hospital rebuilt—at the time, the Care Quality Commission had deemed it not fit for purpose. I am delighted that the previous Government allocated £42.5 million to rebuild the main site into the state-of-the-art centre that it is now, supporting literally thousands of people every year with their problems. As a fan of technology, I was particularly interested as I walked around the new X-ray wing, which has three new scanners specialised in different intricate requirements—we often downplay what the health service does in such specialist areas.

I am reaching the end of my remarks, as you will be delighted to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I pay tribute to our great friend, the late, great Sir David Amess, who so loved these debates. May he rest in peace and remain in our thoughts. I wish everyone a very merry Christmas, and a happy Hannukah, which starts on Christmas day. I hope that everyone enjoys the rest and a well-deserved break with good food and good company—we will have the debate on obesity and food strategy when we return after Christmas. I also wish everyone a very happy new year. May 2025 be filled with positivity, peace, health and happiness.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I ask Members to invoke the spirit of Christmas and help each other out by keeping their contributions to around four minutes so that we can get everybody in.

3.8 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall and Bloxwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). Again, in the best traditions of Sir David Amess, I will be going around my constituency. He is sorely missed here, and our thoughts and prayers are with his family at this difficult time—a time of family.

I will raise four local issues, one international, one national, and a partridge in a pear tree—sorry, that sounded better in my head. The first local issue is the accessibility of Bescot railway station, which does not have access for disabled people or for parents and

carers. I first made contact with the Minister of State for Transport in September 2022, and despite a meeting in November 2023 with Walsall football club supporters, including disabled supporters, as well as Network Rail and West Midlands combined authority, nothing has happened. I asked Network Rail to look into the matter, and it said that it thought there was a solution and would provide an answer in six months, but we are still waiting. We have legislation enshrined in statute—the Railways Act 1993, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010—but I understand that Bescot Stadium station has been put on the list for 2027. That means that my poor constituents who are disabled or are parents with pushchairs will have to wait until then, which is unacceptable. My constituents are not interested in a feasibility study of a feasibility study, so will the Minister—who it is very welcome to see in her place—raise this issue with the Secretary of State for Transport?

The second issue is bowel cancer. In Walsall and Bloxwich, emergency admissions for cases of bowel cancer are the highest across the Black Country, double those of the next highest. Walsall Manor is the only hospital in the Black Country that does not use robotics for bowel cancer. Why should my constituents have to travel to New Cross hospital to access a quick, easy and cost-effective way to treat this cancer, which is the second most common cause of cancer death? Again, if the Minister would raise this issue with the public health Minister, that would be very welcome.

The next issue is the use of schools and saving the taxpayer money. Sneyd community school was closed in 2011. It was re-established as a university technical college by the University of Wolverhampton and Walsall college. That was closed in 2015, but it is a perfectly viable school. Headteachers in the area have suggested that it could be used as a special school, but instead, public money is being used to destroy the vegetation in Reedswood Park to build a special free school. Joseph Leckie school has offered to work with the council to expand places where they are needed—in fact, it has a waiting list of 30 places for each year. That school needs a new canteen, kitchen and dining hall, and I have been working with it since 2010 so that it gets its full allocation of Building Schools for the Future money, which it has not received. The headmaster has said that he hopes to fund

“an inspirational learning campus that is really fit for purpose”. I hope the Minister will take that back to the Secretary of State so that we can all work together to ensure public money is used to expand the current schools, rather than build a new school.

Our heritage in Walsall is under threat because the local council wants to close the leather museum and move it to another area. It is the top attraction on Tripadvisor, and I suggest that hon. Members come and visit. It is unique and interactive, with engaging demonstrations of leathercraft. I have been told by the Worshipful Company of Saddlers that most UK businesses in the leather industry are based in Walsall, and leather goods from my constituency are sold worldwide, including by Launer, one of the companies that made the late Queen's handbags. I am delighted that Baroness Hodge in the other place will be reviewing the Arts Council, but as the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has said, culture, museums, arts and libraries are so important to our wellbeing. As such, will the Minister raise this issue with the Secretary of State?

[Valerie Vaz]

The international issue I want to raise is that of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, a British citizen who is in prison in Egypt. He has a 13-year-old son, and he is an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience. He needs consular access and he needs to come home, so can I ask the Minister to ask the Prime Minister to raise this case?

My final issue is the year of reading. We had a year of reading in 1998 to promote a culture of reading, and again in 2008 to build a nation of readers. Reading for pleasure has diminished, so will the Minister ask the Secretary of State for Education whether she will consider having a year of reading in 2026?

Finally, I wish everybody a very merry and happy Christmas, and thank all the staff in this place for their help and support throughout the year—including the Official Reporters, who are looking down—and everybody else who has helped us, including my hard-working staff. I hope everyone has a very peaceful time, given the really hard work we have had this year.

3.14 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Ahead of the Christmas break, I am delighted to have this opportunity to recognise and celebrate some of the amazing organisations that serve the Scottish Borders all the year round. These groups, and the volunteers who help keep them running, often do not get the praise they deserve, so I want to mark the excellent work of those who provide unbelievable support to so many people all the year round. The generosity and compassion of volunteers and workers across the Borders are incredible.

I want to start by recognising the organisations that provide extra help to our NHS, and to patients and their families. I recently had the privilege of meeting some of the Margaret Kerr fundraising team, who help support the purpose-built, specialist palliative care unit at Borders general hospital. I would encourage everyone to give anything they can to help this wonderful group and to keep the unit operating as effectively as possible for those who need treatment and care. I also thank the volunteers at the Borders Parkinson's support group. It was a pleasure recently to join the volunteers and service users, and to spend some time with those who attend. The meetings are well attended, good natured and very sociable, so well done to the volunteers for bringing people together in this way.

Beyond healthcare and the NHS, I want to take this opportunity to recognise the passionate community campaigners who want the best for the Borders and who put in the work to make local projects happen. The first of these fine groups is the Campaign for Borders Rail—I have worked with it for many years—which is seeking to extend the Borders railway on to Hawick, Newcastleton and Carlisle. I have been doing everything I can during my time as its MP, and previously as its MSP, to get this extension built. It is disappointing that the new Government have not yet committed to the funding to which the previous Government had committed for the feasibility study, but I will continue to push for that to be delivered. Similarly, I pay tribute to the Rail Action Group East of Scotland for its campaigns to get better train services along the east coast of Scotland and to get the station reopened at Reston a couple of years ago. I particularly want to mention two stalwarts

of this campaign, Barrie Forrest and Tom Thorburn, who have done so much to improve rail services over many years.

Beyond the transport network, lots of community groups in the Borders are helping to bring people together. First, I want to mention the Men's Shed network, which has multiple locations across the Borders to promote the wellbeing and quality of life of local people. We are particularly lucky in the Borders to have the highest number of men's sheds located there than in any constituency in the UK. Secondly, I want to mention Escape Youth Services in Hawick, which provides incredible support to young people. I was delighted to be able to join one of its sessions recently, and the young people clearly love and enjoy the activities that the dedicated team of volunteers provide for them.

I have a few other groups to mention, including Sustainable Selkirk and the Berwickshire Marine Reserve, which help preserve our environment. I also want to mention the local people who help promote our high streets, because without thriving high streets with local businesses and shops, our communities would be greatly diminished. The team behind the Galashiels business improvement district recently had a huge success in persuading local businesses to back its plans, and I would also mention the General Store in Selkirk and Café ReCharge in Galashiels.

To conclude, I wish every Member of the House a very merry Christmas and a happy new year when it comes. Christmas is a time to be thankful, and I particularly want to thank the UK armed forces personnel who will sacrifice their own festive break to serve our country. Their selfless sacrifice and dedication should be an inspiration to us all. The same goes for those in the NHS and the emergency service workers who work through the festive period to keep us healthy and safe. We owe them all our gratitude for continuing to do their duty while most people take time off. Although their efforts are not as critical as those of our armed forces and emergency services, we should not forget hospitality workers and small business owners who also work through the festive season.

Finally, I hope we will all take the chance over Christmas to think of those less fortunate than ourselves, and to look out for our neighbours, who may be lonely or struggling more at this time of year. Even the smallest gesture of generosity can mean a lot to someone who may not have others to look out for them. Happy Christmas to everybody.

3.19 pm

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I want to highlight a few key issues in my constituency that I have been proud to work on since I was elected in July and flag up some issues that we intend to push in the future.

I want to start with the Hitachi train factory in my constituency. I campaigned on it for two and a half years, and it is a source of huge pride. Many of us in this House spend a lot of our lives on trains and any of us who have travelled with London North Eastern Railway, Great Western Railway, Avanti, East Midlands Railway or ScotRail will probably have been on a train built in my home town of Newton Aycliffe. That is a source of huge pride to the 750 workers who operate the plant, but also to the 1,500 people who work in highly skilled engineering jobs in the local supply chain.

I am incredibly grateful to the work of the Prime Minister, FirstGroup, Angel Trains and others who came together to arrange a £0.5 billion deal to help secure the future of the factory. It is important because that factory sits on the line of the original Darlington to Stockton railway, the world's first passenger railway, which celebrates its 200th anniversary next year. That is incredibly exciting, and I am sure we can agree across the House that if 200 years ago we were leading the world in passenger rail, we as a country can do that again now. It has been fantastic to secure that factory, and I look forward to working with ministerial colleagues and others as we continue to ensure it goes from strength to strength.

We also need to work on making sure that the rail manufacturing industry, not just in my constituency but in Derby and other proud railway towns, has a sustainable future. I would like to work with ministerial colleagues and others to ensure that.

The second key issue we have worked on to push high-tech jobs has been to find a future for the Oetric semiconductor factory in Newton Aycliffe. It was opened by the late Queen in 1991 and had some fantastic commercial orders from Apple and others but, crucially, was making semiconductors for the future fighter jets programmes that the United Kingdom was developing with our allies. After commercial contracts were moved abroad, there was a real threat to the semiconductor supply that is critical for our defence capabilities. I would like to put on record my thanks to the Defence Secretary for stepping in to secure this plant and this sovereign supply of these crucial components which are central to our defence. I was grateful to meet my right hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry last week to talk about how going forward we can expand the skilled jobs and opportunities and apprenticeships in that factory, and the contribution it can make to our national defence.

There are real opportunities in the defence sector and in defence-adjacent companies to make sure we can provide more support, more opportunities, and more chance for innovation. At NETPark—North East Technology Park—in my constituency, just outside the village of Sedgfield, we have incredible businesses. Durham University spin-outs are creating satellite technology and producing radiation detection equipment used in Ukraine, making a huge contribution to the defence of the UK and our allies, but some of those businesses, because they are small and medium-sized enterprises, have said they sometimes find it easier to contract with NASA than with the Ministry of Defence. I am very grateful for the work of Defence Ministers in looking into this but we must open up more opportunities for SMEs to contribute to our defence and innovation in that sector.

On the topic of defence, I have thoroughly enjoyed taking part in the RAF strand of the armed forces parliamentary scheme and pay tribute to all the service personnel I have had the honour to meet around our country. When elected, I did not expect to go to Anglesey by Chinook, and I did not expect to jump off a five-storey platform to sample basic parachute training, but what a privilege it has been to see at first hand not just some of the activities of our forces but some of the fantastic capabilities we have around the country.

I associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) in asking everyone in this House to remember

that while we, hopefully, have some downtime over Christmas, our armed forces here and around the world remain on 24-hour alert to defend us and defend our allies. Our thanks go to them for all the work they do.

Moving to some Christmas cheer, Members will be relieved to hear that I have decided after much thought not to release a Christmas single—a decision made in the public interest—but I pay tribute to Spennymoor town band and Spennymoor youth band, who put on a fantastic brass band concert on Saturday. I want to pay tribute to them not just for the quality of the music, but for the fantastic work that brass bands like Spennymoor town band do to train up the next generation of young musicians, and to provide free music lessons in communities where many parents would struggle to give access to such high-quality tuition. The musical culture of our communities in County Durham is vital, and I put on the record my thanks to Spennymoor town band and youth band for all their work, particularly Hugh Stephenson, the president, and Fiona Casewell, the musical director. I conclude by wishing you, Madam Deputy Speaker, your fellow Deputy Speakers, Mr Speaker and all the House staff a merry Christmas and all Members a happy new year.

3.25 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this year, I initiated a Westminster Hall debate on headlight glare and the increasing road safety risks resulting from modern vehicle headlights. I did so having read an article in my local newspaper, the *Grimshy Telegraph*, reporting on a study carried out by the Royal Automobile Club, and it emerged from the debate that the Department for Transport is undertaking research. Last week, in business questions, I raised the matter with the Leader of the House, and I appreciated her reply saying that she would get the Minister to follow up. I was planning on raising the matter in this debate anyway. I look forward to receiving that update, but I hope that mentioning it yet again today will keep it on the Department's agenda.

We all know that lighting technology has changed considerably in the past decade or so. Clearly it is to everyone's advantage that vehicles are well lit, particularly for pedestrians, but there can be no doubt that the amount of glare has increased, and the Minister who responded to my May debate acknowledged that he was receiving far more correspondence on this matter. Dr John Lincoln of LightAware, a charity that explores these issues, explains that although the human eye can adapt to a wide range of light levels, from bright sunlight to almost total darkness, it cannot do so in a short space of time. He went on to detail the various scientific issues involved. I appreciate that the issue is complex and that the Department will have to do much research before introducing any regulations, but it is important. It is not just that the lights are much brighter, but that some vehicles seem to have far more than required. There is also the issue of street furniture, such as where vehicles passing over road humps can glare oncoming drivers.

Last January, the RAC published the results of its research, showing that 89% of drivers think that some or most headlights on the roads are too bright. Some 74% said that they were regularly dazzled. That might result in part from the fact that we have many more larger vehicles on the roads, and they sit higher off the

[*Martin Vickers*]

road. LightAware has carried out extensive research on that, and I hope the Department will soon conclude its own research. The College of Optometrists has suggested that as many as half of motorists over the age of 60 may have early-stage cataracts in both eyes. That makes them even more vulnerable to glare from oncoming vehicles. I hope that we can fairly rapidly conclude that research and bring forward new regulations to improve road safety.

I will touch on one or two constituency issues. I am sorry to bore Members about this issue, but I can tell new Members that the only way to get success in this place often is to bore Front Benchers so that they eventually take action. In 2011, I first raised the issue of direct train services from my constituency—then called Cleethorpes—to King's Cross, which were withdrawn by British Rail in 1992. I am still campaigning. Along with my friend the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), we now await a meeting with yet another Minister from the Department for Transport to hopefully restore that service. As I have mentioned to many Transport Secretaries over the years, my constituency has 10 railway stations, an international airport and the largest port in the country, yet we still cannot have a direct train service to London. That is crucial to the development of industry in the area and is fully supported by big business. The Hull and Humber chamber of commerce has done much research on it. I very much hope that it will be brought forward in the not-too-distant future.

I see that my time is running out, so I will restrict myself to just one other railway issue. It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) talk about the 200th anniversary of the Stockton and Darlington railway. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on rail, I hope that we can all join in marking that occasion. It will not be marked in Brigg, though. The rail service between Gainsborough, Brigg, Grimsby and Cleethorpes has one train a day and allows people only 90 minutes to enjoy the sunny sands of Cleethorpes or the excellent shopping in Grimsby. It is pointless to run one service a day and give people only 90 minutes at their destination. The service is run for the convenience of Northern Trains, rather than for passengers. I see the Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), nodding; I hope that the message will get through to the Department for Transport.

I could go on for much longer, but I conclude by saying happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all Members and staff, and a prosperous and safe new year.

3.11 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I have fully enjoyed and embraced my first five months as Member of Parliament for Southend West and Leigh, despite, like many Members, experiencing the whirlwind effect of settling into this place, setting up my new offices, and recruiting my team. I have met many people and hundreds of organisations over the last five months. If you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to bring to the House's attention four amazing projects in my constituency.

The Music Man Project is a UK charity founded in Southend-on-Sea in 2000. It provides a music education and performance service for people with learning disabilities, and teaches children and adults to sing, sign and play original music and new arrangements. David Stanley, who founded the project, has taken it from strength to strength. There are now 14 regional Music Man Projects around the country, but the central hub remains in Southend. When I visit the project during rehearsals or see one of its performances, my mood is immediately lifted and brightened. I attended its Christmas concert just last weekend, and it was simply amazing to see the participants all living their best lives. I am delighted that His Majesty the King has awarded the project the King's award for voluntary services. I am sure that you will join me, Madam Deputy Speaker, in congratulating it. The late Sir David Amess, former MP for Southend West, was a trustee and big supporter of the project. He had the vision that one day its participants would perform on Broadway, and that is exactly what they are now aiming to do in memory of Sir David. Through fundraising efforts, I hope that they will manage to make that dream a reality, because they really deserve it. If any Members would like to contribute to getting them there, that would be greatly appreciated.

I am equally proud of the work of Southend food bank, under the umbrella of the Trussell Trust. It has eight outlets in Southend in total, five being in my constituency. More than 20,491 emergency food parcels were provided by Southend food bank in the past 12 months, with more than 8,000 going to children. Southend food bank has sadly seen a 36% increase in the number of parcels it is distributing. I thank the entire team of volunteers for their outstanding work in delivering that vital service week in, week out. I am delighted that the Government have hit the ground running to tackle child poverty with the child poverty taskforce. I look forward to seeing their work progress.

St Vincent's was established in 2000 in Southend, inspired by the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the area. It provided 20,500 hot meals in the last year to homeless people through its kindness kitchen, as well as a range of other services. I want to talk briefly about Matt Fright, whom I met at a St Vincent's fundraising dinner. Matt previously suffered from drug and alcohol addiction, and was even caught up in drug dealing and ended up homeless. Through St Vincent's, he has totally turned his life around, and now works as the lead facilitator of its smart addiction programme and its hungry cupboards programme, which is part of its 3D printing work. It is a truly wonderful story of transformation. I was delighted to hear the Government announce a near-£1 billion investment for councils to break the cycle of homelessness.

Finally, I want to briefly recognise Andy's Man Club, which opened at Southend United football club in May 2021. Andy's Man Club, which has groups all around the country, is a space where men can go and speak openly about their mental health in a non-judgmental, non-clinical environment. Men in particular can find it difficult to discuss their mental health, and to open up about how they are feeling. Just this past month, I have personally seen the devastating effect of poor mental health going wrong. It has a heartbreaking effect on those who are left behind. We need to do much more to get men talking and opening up about how they feel, so

I am pleased that the Mental Health Bill is making its way through the other place, and will reach this place next year.

As we enter the festive season, I thank all our blue-light workers, hospital staff and others who will keep us safe and well this Christmas season—and all year round.

Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, the other Deputy Speakers, Mr Speaker, the House staff, all Members, their teams and my wonderful team, as well as the constituents of Southend West and Leigh, a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

3.36 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Happy Christmas, everyone. Patricia is a young, intelligent woman with a severe eating disorder. Despite the tireless work of professionals involved in her care, her mental health treatment needs are not being met, and her progress has stalled. The east of England provider collaborative, which is responsible for referrals to specialist eating disorder units—SEDUs—is intended to ensure co-ordinated care close to home, but in Patricia's case, it has failed profoundly. Since becoming involved in July, I have observed a pattern of miscommunication, delays and systemic neglect. My attempts to engage with professionals at the Cambridge and Peterborough foundation trust, which provides local eating disorder services, were initially referred to lawyers, and the communications relationship between Patricia, her family, and care providers is all but broken. Meanwhile, there appeared to be no overall co-ordination of or plan for Patricia's care.

This summer, Patricia stabilised medically during a long admission at Norfolk and Norwich hospital. She was promised an assessment for referral to a SEDU, but faced prolonged delays, only to be rejected for admission. She was devastated, yet resolved to continue to seek help. At the time, I accepted that it might simply be the case that Patricia was not medically stable, despite that being at odds with what her clinicians at the hospital were saying.

National NHS guidance requires

“coordinated care and efforts to reduce and prevent gaps during service transitions”,

yet Patricia's transitions between services have been anything but co-ordinated. Crucially, she has been denied care based on her disability and mobility needs. In meeting with those involved in her care, I sought closer collaboration between acute and mental health trusts, a patient-centred care plan, a dedicated caseworker and the appointment of an external specialist. Instead, the response was a shared email inbox—hardly the co-ordinated expert oversight required.

Patricia's eating disorder is not “treatment-resistant” or “untreatable”, as some have claimed; these terms lack empirical basis and perpetuate stigma. Yet Patricia has been judged for behaviours symptomatic of her condition—at one point, her care team removed her from a SEDU waiting list after she “confessed” to such behaviours. This stigmatising approach is unacceptable.

Patricia's complex needs, including autism and pathological demand avoidance, require an integrated approach. Some of the things that I and others have advocated for her to receive have been denied; others are taking a very long time to materialise. I understand that external psychiatrists are no longer invited to the weekly meetings about her care. Instead, the same

individuals who seem to have given up on her also advise the integrated care board, creating a troubling conflict of interest. The collaborative care model appears to have failed her, and concerns raised by other professionals have been ignored. That led me to request NHS England's intervention. Disturbingly, I learned that Patricia's court ruling, which prevents forced treatment, is being used to justify withholding all care unless she complies with rigid, unattainable demands. That ultimatum—our way or the highway—is unethical and counterproductive, particularly for someone with autism and PDA.

Further, Patricia's care documentation reveals a fatalistic approach that misrepresents her condition, effectively ensuring rejection from SEDUs. I believe this is a systemic issue, reflecting the toxic ideology in certain parts of the eating disorder treatment system that some patients are untreatable and should not be treated. This ideology, detailed in a controversial article in the Royal College of Psychiatrists newsletter, has no basis in evidence, yet it appears to influence Patricia's care. She is sadly not alone in facing that. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, yet Patricia has been systematically excluded from lifesaving treatment. NHS guidance has been repeatedly breached. CPFT rejects external opinions, and even offers of eating disorder specialist therapy support within the hospital setting. Patricia needs a stable, specialist placement, with integrated medical and mental health treatment, yet she remains trapped in a cycle designed, I believe, to have her fail.

Clinicians who find themselves believing that there is nothing that can or should be done in a case should step aside from any role in it, not preside over it. Differences of opinion are essential to developing areas of healthcare, but they should be supported by supervision and challenge, not be encampments of ideology. Characteristically, Patricia refuses to die. I urge the House to support direct NHS England commissioning of a SEDU placement for her, bypassing CPFT and its affiliates. Her case needs a proper second opinion, and we need support for settings that are being asked to consider admitting her. The case will then need very careful handling to ensure her consent and participation, but I believe that can be achieved.

Patricia's experience is a stark reminder of the injustices faced by vulnerable individuals in a system that should protect them. Her story echoes other national scandals where institutional neglect has caused immense harm. I am speaking today because Patricia, her family and I are at our wits' end. She has a huge amount of value to offer the world. She is at a desperate stage of her illness, yet she refuses to give up. Treatment is her only chance and we must not abandon her. She will continue her fight. Her family will continue to fight, and I will be by their side every step of the way, but the NHS must act urgently to hold its services accountable, ensure adherence to guidelines, and provide the care that Patricia and countless others deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call the next speaker, I will have to impose a four-minute time limit.

3.42 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate in today's debate. As we approach the festive

[*Jenny Riddell-Carpenter*]

season, I extend my warmest wishes to everyone in the House—to you Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the dedicated staff who help make this place so special and kind.

Christmas offers a timely opportunity to reflect on the achievements, community spirit and remarkable individuals who make up the heart of our constituencies. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the individuals, charities, businesses and organisations that make Suffolk Coastal such a special place. One such group is Pitstop in Felixstowe, where Liss and her team of volunteers do exceptional work supporting young families in need. Their work goes beyond providing material things such as food and clothes. They work to ensure that no family feels isolated or alone. That is especially important during the holidays, but important at any time of year.

The Woodbridge branch of the Salvation Army is a shining example of our community giving back. During my recent visit, I had the pleasure of meeting Alan, Tanya and their team of volunteers, who work tirelessly to provide food and essential supplies to those facing hardship or loneliness. A few weeks ago, I held a pop-up surgery at the Salvation Army's food bank. Citizens Advice was there to provide financial support to those in need. I was able to provide financial advice and give support to people who face real and pressing poverty, and to those who had unexpectedly found themselves on hard times. That was a pretty normal surgery experience for me.

Then I met Edward. Edward is 42 and street homeless. He was a fisherman previously, in Aldeburgh. He had a stable job, a home and a relationship. When things started to go wrong for him, as they do for us all at some time in our lives, it affected his mental health, which meant that he turned to drugs. The drugs took over his life, and it spiralled from there. When I met Edward the other week, he was clean. He had managed to get clean on his own, and had been sofa surfing, but then, naturally, the good will of his friends ran out. When that luck ran out, he had moved into a disused caravan on private land that he had found near Woodbridge. His only coat had been stolen some days earlier. My team were able to get him some emergency help, and it was the Salvation Army that so kindly stepped in and bought him a brand-new coat from Mountain Warehouse on the same day. He was later placed in emergency temporary accommodation, and he is now being supported by the council; but it was that friendship and support from the Salvation Army that gave him the first glimmer of hope that he had felt in months, with a warm meal, a new coat, and a safe place to begin the journey to find temporary accommodation. I want to place on record my sincere thanks to the Salvation Army, and, indeed, to all those groups that do so much to support our constituents.

Woodbridge is one of the many beautiful market towns in my constituency that tourists flock to, and just the other week it was voted the happiest place in the country in which to live. As someone who lives in Woodbridge, I wholeheartedly and unapologetically agree. However, whenever I talk about the beauty of Suffolk Coastal I feel a desperate need to talk about the other side of the constituency as well, and Edward's story is a

real reminder of that. I fear that many people do not see the poverty or the struggles facing so many people in my constituency. In Suffolk Coastal we have 23% of children on free school meals, but in Southwold, the place that the tourists coo over, we have 39%, and in just one primary school in Southwold one in two children receive it.

We have food banks in every single town in my constituency, and they are growing in each of our villages and parishes. We have a housing waiting list that only increases each year, with 150 households in east Suffolk living in temporary accommodation—which means that this Christmas, 188 children will be living in hotels or B&Bs. That is no way for any child to live at any time of year. The work of our community to fix some of the most pressing issues must be commended; I have already talked about the work of some of our amazing food banks, and it does not stop there.

As you can imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. The hon. Lady's time is up.

3.46 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I believe that the Government should be holding a debate on the UK-wide impact of the closure of the port of Holyhead. Although ports in Wales are a matter for the Welsh Government, international trade is a matter reserved to the UK Government, and Holyhead's strategic location is key to the UK economy. Westminster cannot ignore this issue.

The port sustained serious damage in the aftermath of Storm Darragh, and all sailings have been cancelled until 15 January at the very earliest. The storm brought gusts of up to 94 mph and caused enormous disruption to the port, which provides the main sea route between north Wales and Ireland and is the UK's second busiest roll-on roll-off port. Its closure just before Christmas has had a direct impact on livelihoods and businesses on the island: the sudden ending of freight traffic means that businesses have seen their work vanish overnight.

This is pushing local businesses to breaking point. The owners of Royalty Recruitment, a family-run business, told me that they had had to let 10 brand-new staff members go, three of whom had only recently joined them. Holyhead Truck Service is another local business that has been affected; it has seen its work dry up completely, as 40% of its annual income is from mechanical work for Irish companies. This time of the year would usually be the busiest period for these businesses, but now they are facing huge job cuts and reduced demand owing to the closure of the port. The sudden loss of income is unsustainable for many businesses, and job losses will push families into financial hardship, leaving them struggling to pay their bills.

In a statement earlier this week, the Secretary of State for Wales did not announce any direct support from the UK Government to address the crisis. I am certain that if we were talking about the Port of Dover or an airport in London being closed for at least a whole month, there would be a huge effort to get the site open again and to support the thousands of supply-chain jobs affected, but so far Holyhead has been treated as an afterthought. The UK Government must recognise the huge impact that the closure of the port will have not only on trade—given that total UK exports to

Ireland amount to £54 billion and that Ireland is the UK's third largest export partner—but on the livelihoods of the people of Ynys Môn and north Wales. They should set up a hardship fund to support businesses and families directly affected by the closure, as well as those involved in the supply chain. The funding should be directed towards the council and third sector organisations that are best placed to offer financial and other support to those struggling.

The port operator says that the earliest the port may open is 15 January. However, that is with weather permitting, and I fear that more cold and stormy weather at this time of year will push the date back. Once the port reopens, the damage done to the local economy will take time to heal. Decisive action by both the UK and Welsh Governments is needed to minimise the damage and the suffering that people will be feeling. As climate change fuels more violent storms, the Port of Holyhead will be vulnerable to closure again.

The Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), has joined my calls for support for businesses. She wrote to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade yesterday to seek an update on the support that the UK Government are providing to get the port back up and running, and to all businesses and employees impacted by the closure. The Government must step up and provide the emergency funding needed to get us through this difficult period of time.

3.50 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Given the festive season, I thought it appropriate to use this time to celebrate my constituency and to say a few thank yous. Most importantly, I thank the people of Luton South and South Bedfordshire for re-electing me as their Member of Parliament in July. Following boundary changes, I am proud to represent the good people of south Bedfordshire; a number of villages and swathes of beautiful countryside have been added to the urban landscape of the constituency. I am grateful to people in the new part—including Kensworth, Studham and Eaton Bray, to name but a few places—for electing me, because some of them had never voted Labour before. The new constituency boundary also means that I now represent more animals than ever before—if that is a thing—given that Whipsnade zoo and Appledown rescue and re-homing kennels are both within Luton South and South Bedfordshire. I thank all who work or volunteer with those great charities. My rescue dog, Maisie, would of course want me to remind everybody that a dog is for life, not just for Christmas.

It is an honour and a privilege to represent my home town of Luton—the place where I grew up and went to school, where I live, and where I previously represented residents as a local Labour councillor. This place can be a bit intimidating at times, but I always remember where I came from when faced with challenges. I am Luton born and bred, which keeps me grounded every day.

Luton sometimes has an unjustified bad reputation, but we have plenty to be proud of, and I want to focus on the positives that our town has to offer. This year, Radio 1 brought the Big Weekend to Luton. It was a wonderful opportunity to showcase our town, with brilliant musical performances from stars including Sabrina

Carpenter, Teddy Swims, Raye and, much to the delight of many Lutonians, Coldplay. They made up a song entitled “Orange” to celebrate the colours of our brilliant Luton Town football club—but I do not need Chris Martin to say, “I was born in love with Luton and I’m always gonna be.”

Speaking of our football club, it is a brilliant and exciting time for Luton FC. This week, the planning committee at Luton council formally approved plans for the new Power Court stadium development. It marks a huge moment of regeneration in our town, with plans for restaurants, a hotel and a music venue alongside the stadium, making Luton a destination not only for football, but for entertainment.

A place is only as good as the people in it, and our beautifully diverse and vibrant community across Luton South and South Bedfordshire is what truly makes the constituency so special. There are some wonderful community organisations and charities that do so much to support those in most need. I thank Luton food bank, as well as NOAH and Signposts, for supporting many people in need. I thank Luton Irish Forum, which provides invaluable support, including debt and welfare advice and so much more. I thank Luton citizens advice bureau for all it does, and for the guidance and support that it offers people across the town in times of need.

We have excellent organisations dedicated to supporting women and girls, and I thank Women’s Aid, Luton All Women’s Centre and Stepping Stones. A healthy society can only be achieved by ensuring that we have support for those who need it, particularly with regard to mental health. I thank Healthwatch Luton, Mind BLMK, Headway, our community mental health hubs and local Samaritans for all that they do. Alongside our civic society, we must remember our faith communities, who, during 14 years of Tory austerity, stepped up to fill the welfare gap that the previous Government created in towns like ours.

Finally, I want to mention all our public service workers who sacrifice so much to keep us healthy and safe, many of whom will not get to rest over Christmas, including Bedfordshire police, Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and all our doctors, nurses, paramedics and NHS staff at Luton and Dunstable hospital.

Merry Christmas and happy new year to one and all.

3.54 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I often think of our role as place-makers, problem solvers and great representatives of our constituencies, and on that basis, I say a huge thank you to all of my constituents for re-electing me. There is loads of fuel in the tank to keep me going in representing the mighty constituency of Keighley and Ilkley with great enthusiasm and energy. I reaffirm my commitment to doing my very best as their local champion.

Of course, place-making is all about driving local growth within our communities. That is why I want to go through some of the key projects across my constituency that I am honoured to be working on. A lot of this work comes on the back of money from the last Conservative Administration, who allocated and ringfenced £33.6 million specifically to Keighley through the Keighley towns fund. This funding is aimed at driving growth by using public sector money to try to drive private investment into the centre of Keighley.

[Robbie Moore]

One of those great projects is Providence Park, which is due to open early next year. Next door to that, we have Keighley train station, which has just benefited from a £9 million funding allocation. Further along the same road, Keighley fire station is undergoing development. We also have a new skills hub, a new manufacturing, engineering and tech hub, and a new health and wellbeing hub coming down the line shortly. That is not to mention our mighty Keighley Cougars, to which the last Conservative Administration allocated £2 million to regenerate the stands for the benefit of fans. Haworth village hall is benefiting from money to make sure that our community groups can continue their range of activities. Keighley central hall is also benefiting from money. The building of a new sixth-form college has also been announced. I urge the Government to stick to this plan, as I know it is currently under review. We need this new sixth-form college, announced by the last Conservative Administration, to be completed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, your constituents will also benefit from our new Airedale hospital, which is a huge achievement. From the moment I was elected in 2019, I campaigned tirelessly for ringfenced money to get our new hospital built, and I am very pleased that work is under way.

We also have the city of culture—or, as I like to call it, the district of culture—coming to the Bradford district. It is incredibly important that Keighley, Ilkley, Silsden and the Worth valley all benefit from the money that is coming to the Bradford district.

I also say a huge thank you to our small businesses. I hold small business awards every year, and I am incredibly grateful to everyone in my constituency who nominated our mighty small businesses. I am very pleased to say that this year's winners were: Within the Wood, from the Worth valley; Clara's Closet, from Keighley; Raymond Town Menswear, from Ilkley; and Isherwood's butchers, from Silsden, which won our overall small business award. Thank you to those small businesses that keep our local economy going, and to all those who shop local.

Before closing, I would like to say that I was very saddened to learn of the death of an individual who worked tirelessly as chair of the Keighley towns fund. Unfortunately, Ian Hayfield passed away just a couple of days ago, and I want to put on record my incredible thanks for his tireless energy in driving positive growth in Keighley. I am sure everyone in Keighley will want to do the same.

I thank everyone in my constituency for their efforts in the run-up to Christmas, and I wish all Members a very happy Christmas.

3.59 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore). Like him, I would like to continue the wonderful tradition of our late colleague from Southend and do a brief tour around my constituency of Reading Central, starting with a quick word about Reading football club, talking about Reading gaol and local art, and moving on to thank small businesses and charities.

The wonderful Reading FC is one of the longest established clubs in the English league, but sadly, because of poor ownership, it is currently languishing in league 1. The club has a glorious history, has had many great cup runs and holds the record for scoring the highest ever points total in the championship: 106 points—99 goals—in the 2005-06 season. If I had one request for Santa, I would ask that Reading FC has a new owner for Christmas. I would like to see Dai Yongge pack his bags and head home, and a new owner, who can take the club forward, come in, invest in its future and get us back into the championship. Who knows, maybe we can get back into the premiership, in which we played for three seasons, over two stints? If we could achieve that, it would be truly wonderful and every child in Reading would be delighted; it would be the best possible Christmas present they could ever wish for.

Dai Yongge has had the club up for sale for a year and has turned down two bids. Sadly, he was associated with two overseas clubs that closed, so there is a great deal of concern from fans and other local residents about the future of the club. We have also lost the manager recently, who has moved to Hull City. I wish the new manager, Noel Hunt, well, but there are real concerns about the future of the club. I hope that Dai Yongge can listen, sell the club and move on.

On Reading gaol, we have better news. I wish the new owner, Reading borough council and Historic England well in their efforts to try to turn the wonderful former gaol into something special, by redeveloping it in a constructive way and providing a significant amount of arts provision in our town centre. Oscar Wilde was incarcerated in Reading gaol. It is an incredible building and a wonderful example of early Victorian architecture. If it were open to the public, it would prove to be an incredible visitor attraction. It was briefly open in the mid-2010s when Artangel held installation art and poetry readings in the gaol, which attracted thousands of people from across the country. Having the gaol as an arts hub would be worthy of our town; it has a very successful music festival and many other arts activities, but it does not have an arts venue of this type. I am campaigning for that and I look forward to success in the new year.

Finally, I cannot mention all the winners of my small business competition individually, but I thank them for their efforts in driving growth in our local economy, providing employment and making our town centre, and other local centres, vibrant places to visit, which shoppers and other residents much enjoy. I pay tribute to the many charities in the Reading area that do wonderful things at Christmas, and all year round, in particular Toys and Teens, which is a fantastic appeal that has made many children very happy at Christmas, and the many other wonderful local charities. I also thank all those working at Christmas, particularly those in our NHS, other emergency service workers and many others who provide vital services while we are all enjoying Christmas with our families.

Before I finish, I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and your colleagues, all our colleagues across the parliamentary estate, including the Doorkeepers and the other staff who make this place such a wonderful place to work. I wish the public, especially residents in Reading, a very happy Christmas and a wonderful new year.

4.3 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): People up and down the country are big fans of Formula 1, so I am honoured to congratulate McLaren, based in my constituency of Woking, on the extraordinary achievement of winning the constructors' championship, the first time it has done so since 1998. That monumental success is an indication of the hard work and innovation of the team at McLaren. I have submitted an early-day motion congratulating McLaren on championing the UK's leading role in Formula 1.

McLaren's victory represents far more than a sporting win. It shows British high-quality manufacturing at its best—that is what we, as a country, do so well—and although I am focusing on McLaren and Formula 1, our high-quality manufacturing is excellent in other areas too. In Woking, we are immensely proud to be the home of a team that has not just won Formula 1, but stands at the cutting edge of technology, engineering and high-quality manufacturing. McLaren is a major employer in Woking, offering high-quality jobs and training opportunities. It embodies the kind of forward-thinking enterprise that we need more of in Woking, in Surrey and across the UK. British manufacturing is world-leading and McLaren's success shines a light on that and shows what British firms can achieve on a global stage.

High-quality manufacturing creates the high-quality jobs that we as a country need if we are going to get people out of the cost of living crisis and help them increase their and their children's life chances. If we attract more businesses like McLaren and give them the opportunities to establish and then thrive, we could ensure that high-quality manufacturing in Britain is here to stay. I want to see Woking continue as a hub for cutting-edge technology and world-class manufacturing. We can create that right environment by encouraging investment and attracting businesses that share McLaren's ambition. That means supporting apprenticeships and the skills training that is needed, investing in infrastructure and funding more in research and development.

McLaren won the championship in 1998. As a small child growing up in Woking, I remember when they drove their cars around the town, led by Mika Häkkinen. They hit potholes then, and I hope they celebrate on the streets of Woking again—I have called for them to do so—though I fear they will once more hit a pothole. That is why we are proud of them in Woking. I again congratulate Lando Norris, Oscar Piastri and the entire McLaren team on their remarkable achievement, and I hope to do the same next year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and everyone on the parliamentary estate a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

4.6 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to speak in my first Christmas adjournment debate. I want to use the time to make two Christmas wishes and say some thank yous before we all begin driving home for Christmas.

In that song, Chris Rea says,

“It's gonna take some time

But I'll get there”

and nowhere is that more apt than in Dartford, where residents face gridlock, spilling from the river crossing at one end of the constituency and a long-term blockage

to a major route out to the east of the constituency, where my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) represents the community.

As another song goes,

“I don't want a lot for Christmas

There is just one thing I need...

All I want for Christmas is”

spades in the ground on the proposed new lower Thames crossing. Perhaps taking my advice from the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), it would be remiss of me not to mention it, and I hope that after almost 15 years of waiting 2025 will finally see the project started and I will not have to mention it again.

I also look forward to working in 2025 with Members from across the House, the other place and Ministers to promote fair economic growth across the Thames estuary. If I were allowed a second wish—I promise it is a very simple one—I would like to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) to persuade the Government of the need to get on and get the Elizabeth line out to Ebbsfleet, where it should finish.

I want to use this time to thank some of the wonderful businesses, community groups and faith groups for welcoming me so warmly as their Member of Parliament since my election in July and for making my constituency such a fantastic place to live, full of civic life and activity. They are: We Are Beams and all the businesses that support them; Home-Start North West Kent; Dartford churches food bank, which keeps people from destitution; Rev. Mandy Young at St Alban and St Edmund King and Martyr churches; the Winners chapel in Dartford and its great community work; our great community pharmacies, which keep people well; Helping Hands in Swanscombe; the Ellenor and Demelza hospices, which received good news today from the Government about their funding; the Dartford gurdwara; the organisers of the festival of Ganesh from our Hindu community and the Nepalese teej; Dartford FC, which is currently a brilliant fourth in the Isthmian league and looking for promotion; Fairfield leisure centre and its great public health work with our local community; the team at All Directions; Millie Gooch and the Sober Girl Society, with her great work on alcohol harm; Sue Stockham and her formidable work combating ovarian cancer; Cohesion Plus, which organises the Dartford light festival, Black History Month and so much else; the Ebbsfleet events committee behind the Christmas fair and other great activity; Vijay and the great *Dartford Living* magazine and networking evenings; Dartford Central Park Athletics and Dartford Central Park parkrun, which has just celebrated its 10-year anniversary; and the amazing team at Dartford fire station.

I cannot let this speech end without congratulating my excellent colleagues on Dartford Labour group and, of course, my amazing team here in Westminster and out in my constituency. I hope the House will permit me one last indulgence: on behalf of everyone who lives in Dartford, I thank the emergency services staff who will work right through the Christmas break to keep us safe and well, including the staff at the wonderful Darent Valley hospital.

I will end by wishing hon. Members across the House, and all the House staff, a wonderful Christmas, particularly the Minister, who will be responding to this debate; she

[*Jim Dickson*]

is one of the best things to come out of Dartford. I wish everyone here a merry Christmas and look forward to seeing them in the new year.

4.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, let me thank all my staff in the office back home for all the work that they do. Their efforts are the reason that my constituency office works so well.

In the short time that I have, I want to give a message of hope. I was thinking about what I wanted to say a long time ago. It seems like it was only yesterday that we were bringing in the new year, and now that has passed. I think of the loss of friends and my heart aches at the thought of those empty chairs around the Christmas table, which many of us will have. For those whose loved ones are in hospital and not with them, and those whose families work in essential care, Christmas can be a lonely time. I am reminded of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

“To everything there is a season, and a time”.

Times can be tough. I think of those who are struggling financially and who cannot find a way to solid ground. They cannot see a way forward, and they have nowhere to turn.

I think of those who have lost relationships with partners or children and who find themselves in a position where they are all alone. I think of those who are awaiting news from hospitals or from tests, or who are watching their ill loved ones, not knowing what the year holds. I can understand the hopelessness that flows from that, yet I have a faith that sustains me. I am reminded of the Christmas message—the ultimate message of faith, hope and love. I often cling to the scripture in Hebrews 10:23

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

I know that, while times may be difficult, God is faithful and will never leave us alone in our struggles. He never leaves me alone.

The Christmas message is from a God who loved us so much that he sent his only son to die so that we could have life. The message that comes from his perfect and sinless life, his shameful death and his glorious resurrection is one that gives us hope over 2,000 years later. This is not a nice story wrapped in a bow. This is a story of desolation and despair, yet the plan of God, which is not always easy to see or to understand, was at work in turning it all for the good for all of us. The baby in the manger—the Christ on the cross—is the King of Glory. I am thankful that this reminds me of the hope that I have when I hold fast to him.

As we consider the Christmas story, we must remember that it did not end with the gift of the three kings, with a miracle at a wedding, or with a cross on a hill. It is an unfolding story in which right hon. and hon. Members have a part to play. We can all choose to bring light and hope. In a world of despair, I find that there is still goodness all around us. I think the goodness of God is seen through the goodness of people around us.

When I think about all the good work carried out by the volunteers, the Church and the charitable sector and when I see the goodness of community groups and neighbours, I am reminded that people are still good. When I read of those acts of kindness to strangers,

I think of what it says in the good book—if we entertain a stranger, we could be entertaining an angel. Who knows who we will meet in this world when we do something good for a stranger.

In his introduction to the debate, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) referred to helping those homeless people on the street. Again, that reminds me that people are still good. There is still a desire to help others, and God still moves in situations. A world without hope is a world in darkness. Although it may feel like the skies are darkening, I have faith because I have seen goodness and light throughout this year, dispelling the darkness.

To conclude, from my home to each and every home in this wonderful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—I love telling people that we are all better together in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—I wish you all a very happy Christmas and blessed new year. It is with hope in my heart that I trust that we will all see the goodness of God through the goodness of the people we meet in 2025.

4.14 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I will use my time in this debate to raise an issue that we have heard so much about over the last six months: the crisis in special educational needs. Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting a coffee morning held by Family Voice in my constituency of Guildford. I was honoured to hear some stories from a group of mums who shared their experiences relating to their children's journeys, and trying to get support for those young people. Every single one of them stressed to me how challenging those journeys have been, with emails going unanswered; caseworkers who go on holiday and never come back; months—sometimes years—of their children not being able to attend education; thousands of pounds spent on private assessments to get the support that their children need, or appealing decisions made by the local authority; and fighting every day to be heard, and the exhaustion that that brings.

The thing that distressed me most was the moment when one mum shared that, as a result of the whole process, she had considered suicide. Then another mum said the same thing. How are we in a position that the process that is designed to support and provide for young people is creating so much distress that families are at breaking point and even considering ending their own lives? I am deeply grateful to Education Ministers for making it very clear that the Government are committed to addressing the SEND crisis, and I hope to be able to work with the Government to address it in 2025.

I will tell the House two very quick stories to emphasise how desperately the situation needs to change. The first is that of a 17-year-old woman in my constituency who has been out of school for five and a half years. She was not able to do her GCSEs. She was given a placement in October at a place where she has thrived. She has said herself that she has felt seen and has found her community, but that placement has not yet been renewed by the local authority. She has been failed, and the hope that was there has potentially been ripped away.

The second story is that of a nine-year-old boy with autism and pathological demand avoidance. The local authority, Surrey, sent him to an independent school in 2022 to provide for his needs. That school has now said

that it cannot provide for those needs. It has removed his placement and said that it will not hold the place while his family try to find a school. I find that deeply unacceptable. They are apparently not the only family who has experienced that off-rolling, but Surrey says that the families have elected to home-school. Will the Minister ask a colleague to meet me to discuss the practice of off-rolling, which I am sure is happening not just in my own constituency?

I reiterate that so many of us will have received deeply distressing emails seeking support from our residents. These are the people who are able to advocate for themselves. How many families are unable, for various reasons, to advocate for themselves? As we try to fix the SEND crisis, we must remember that we do so not just for the families we hear from every day in our inboxes. At the moment, I have nearly 50 separate cases, but we are also seeking to fix the crisis for those families we do not know about. I hope that we will be able to work across the House in 2025 to fix this crisis, because we cannot and must not continue to allow our children to be failed.

4.18 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I wish a very happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all the staff of the House of Commons for the work they do to support all of us. I also thank all the people who work so hard in my constituency in a series of community centres, schools and other places, and all those who help, support and work in the food banks in my constituency. I feel sad that food banks have now become institutionalised within our society. Fifteen years ago, there were almost no food banks; now they are all over the country. We need to look at the problems of inequality and poverty in our society.

I feel sad that over the past five months in this Parliament, since the general election, we have missed opportunities to end the two-child benefit cap and to reduce levels of poverty among many older people. In fact, we have made it worse by ending the winter fuel allowance. We have allowed Royal Mail to be run by yet another private sector operator, which will take profits out of it, rather than bringing it into public ownership to ensure that the people of this country benefit from our oldest public service.

When the House returns in January, the issue of the water industry will have to be addressed. Water companies across the country are paying their chief executive officers the most massive salaries imaginable and taking out huge profits, which are often paid to overseas investors in our industry, and we have catastrophic levels of pollution in our rivers and seas. The water company for my area, Thames Water—the most indebted such company around—expects to put up bills even higher to pay for infrastructure, which it could have paid for itself had it not been paying so much money to private investors all over the world. The case for public ownership of water is absolutely overwhelming.

I want quickly to mention some other issues in the last couple of minutes I have. Our society is precious and valuable, but in the past year we have seen the rise of racism in our society, and a culture of blaming migrants and refugees for the problems people face in housing, education and health. It is nothing to do with them; those problems are the result of a lack of investment in those services. Can we resolve over Christmas to have

respect for those people who are trying to make a safe place to live and contribute to our society, rather than this culture of blaming migrants and people who have come from Calais merely because they are trying to survive in a difficult world beset by war and conflict? That would help a great deal.

My constituents are wonderful people, but many have the most appalling housing problems to deal with. There are the street homeless, who are helped by various organisations, including the local authority, and I do not blame them for the problems at all. There are those living in the grotesquely overpriced private rented sector, those living in increasingly undemocratically run housing associations, and those living in leased property where they pay exorbitant charges for ground rent and services and have little control over their own lives. I appreciate what the Government have brought forward in the Renters' Rights Bill. I welcome it, as far as it goes, but we need to have a further, deeper think about housing as a right and as something that people need, and not the exorbitant costs at present. With that, I wish you a very happy Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.22 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This week marks the end of Disability History Month, which has given us all a chance to highlight the experiences of disabled people and to support disability rights. In Bath, 30% of all households include at least one person with a disability.

I recently visited Carrswood day service to learn more about the incredible work it does to support adults with learning disabilities in the city. The service also provides respite for unpaid family carers, who are often the primary caregivers—where would we be without our unpaid carers? The visit also highlighted the Rake Up and Grow initiative—a vocational project that helps adults with learning disabilities gain practical skills through community gardening projects. The project not only helps build skills, but promotes social inclusion and community engagement. By working with local organisations, such as the Royal United hospital, Bath Rugby Community Foundation and others, Rake Up and Grow provides fantastic opportunities for disabled people and people with learning disabilities.

Bath and North East Somerset Third Sector Group—3SG—is a voluntary, community and social enterprise infrastructure network for around 250 charities, providing one-to-one support, training, events and wider advocacy work in the sector. Charities are the ever-constant, extra support going above and beyond every single day. Now more than ever, charities are needed to pick up those waiting for statutory services, or just those who are falling through the cracks. They employ highly skilled workers and strategic thinkers, many of whom are delivering daily lifesaving interventions and deserve to be equal partners in any conversation with the Government and the NHS.

The work of the third sector cannot be overstated, but charities are now at breaking point. For too long they have been asked to do more for less. The third sector applauds better wages for all but urges the Government to reconsider its non-exemption from national insurance increases. I know that 3SG BaNES has surveyed its member charities in Bath and north-east Somerset, and those affected by the Budget will need to find between £4,000 and £400,000 in extra costs every year.

[Wera Hobhouse]

Those are big amounts of money for organisations that already have to survive on dwindling resources. So 3SG urges the Government to consider the pressure that they will put on the third sector, including hospices, if they do not lift the NIC increases. I and the Liberal Democrats urge the Government to consider that again. As someone has said, the Government always say no before they say yes, so I am hopeful.

When I think of all our local charities and the good they do, I wonder where we in Bath would be without them and all the wonderful services they provide. I thank all those who work in the charitable sector and in voluntary organisations, all family carers and all those who look after people who are sick and need our support this Christmas. I wish them all a very merry Christmas.

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everybody across the House, a merry Christmas.

4.26 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for opening the debate. He is a fellow Bob and a fellow Spurs fan. I am not sure how much we will agree on in 2025, but something we certainly do agree on is Spurs winning something.

Bob Blackman: This is the one!

Bobby Dean: Yes. The hon. Gentleman covered lots of local and international issues, which I think demonstrates the breadth of debate in this place. Before I respond to some of the Back-Bench contributions, I will focus a little on my work in Carshalton and Wallington.

I made three big promises to my constituents: on the NHS, on the cost of living and on the environment. I feel that I have made some progress in my first few months in office. First, I have negotiated with the NHS trust and the Health Secretary on the future of our local St Helier hospital. We hope that will mean that we will retain our A&E services and get a new building in our community in the next year. Secondly, on the cost of living, I am privileged to sit on the Treasury Committee, so I get to examine very closely the country's finances and, I hope, to make an impact on the economy more broadly. Thirdly, on the environment, I have been focused on my local river, the Wandle. I made a documentary film about it last year, and we are doing a short follow-up in the new year—just in time for the Oscars.

We have heard lots of brilliant tributes to local organisations, volunteers and charities, and a range of issues have been raised, but I will focus my highlights on the Christmas-themed contributions. The right hon. Member for Walsall and Bloxwich (Valerie Vaz) almost went into “The Twelve Days of Christmas” with her mention of a partridge in a pear tree. She also mentioned many constituency and international issues of concern to her.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) talked about driving home for Christmas. I am a subscriber to autopay for the Dartford tunnel because my parents live in Essex, so I will go through his constituency in a week or so as I drive home for Christmas. The hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) talked about a local band that will not be contesting the

Christmas No. 1—thankfully, because my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) would not be too happy about that. I was shocked that my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) did not mention the choir behind our right hon. Friend's “Love is Enough” single—so I will get that plug in, and keep my job.

There was a mention of what I will dub “Christmas lights”—although not quite—by the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), who talked about the serious issue of headlight glare. On a more serious point about Christmas food and drink, many Members reflected on how many people will go without food this Christmas, and how important it is that we acknowledge the vital role of food banks at this special time. Our work in this place will never be done until every food bank is abolished.

My Christmas drink reference is a little more tangential. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) mentioned her port, and I classify Christmas port as a drink for this festive period.

Finally, we talked about Christmas sport. We might be moving into Boxing day a bit here, but the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about our being better together, and sport is a special way of bringing people together at this time. The hon. Members for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins), and for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), talked about their respective football clubs; I will be going to watch my local football club on Boxing day, and I hope the hon. Members do the same. My hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) talked about Formula 1, not football, but that gives me a really good link back to Tottenham Hotspur football club, who are the hosts of the only F1 go-karting track in the country. Again, my new year's hope is that we win a trophy.

In closing, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you a merry Christmas, as well as all the staff who have been so supportive of me as a new Member of this House. I thank all our colleagues for the respectful debates that we have had today and throughout the year.

4.30 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is an honour to wind up this end-of-term Christmas Adjournment debate for the official Opposition. We have had a wide and varied range of issues raised during this debate, as well as a fantastic array of facts from constituencies across the United Kingdom. Members in all parts of this House have spoken about the issues that really need tackling, and about the pride they feel in their constituency and their constituents.

Might I give newer Members on the Government Benches a top tip—a genuine, non-partisan top tip? When they speak in these debates in future, they should know that this is the only time when they can speak on the Floor of the House to a Government Whip. They are able to tease that Whip, claim what they want for their constituency from them, and sometimes tease out where they think the Government might be going wrong. I encourage Members to tread gently, however, because if they do so—and I encourage them to; I used to do it to my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew)—the meetings without coffee will start again in January. They should enjoy themselves in this afternoon's debate, though, and I know that they have.

The Whip responding, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), will be making a list. She will be checking it twice. She will be looking to see which of her Members have been naughty or nice, and they never know, Santa Claus might be coming to a town near them. I note that the hon. Lady was chair of the all-party parliamentary group for bingo at one stage of her career. I wonder whether in her winding-up remarks, we will see a game of Labour bingo—“14 years”, “fixing the foundations”, “dire inheritance”. She should not be surprised if I shout “Full house” at her while she is winding up, because I am afraid that we will not be taking any of that broken record from the hon. Lady. However, it is a lot less broken than the record that I encourage Members on all sides of this House to buy as we approach the Christmas No. 1 competition: “Freezing This Christmas”, which is raising money for Age UK. I apologise to the Liberal Democrats for not endorsing the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey).

I will run through contributions made by Members from all sides of the Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned that he has been elected Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, and opened this debate in his typically charismatic and factual way. He wears two hats, also being chairman of the 1922 committee. I can guarantee that he will not be receiving any communications from me over the next five years. He also said that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is a winning candidate, and I look forward to her taking over as Prime Minister in five years’ time. We should respect the fact that she is the fourth female leader of the Conservative party—something that the governing party needs to take note of.

My hon. Friend also spoke about his campaign on London transport. That is what you get with Sir Sadiq Khan. Labour wants to bring in more directly elected Mayors by central diktat across the whole country. We on the Conservative Benches will absolutely hold Sadiq Khan to account for the dire services that he offers his constituents in London. Finally, my hon. Friend outlined his absolute commitment to the proscription of the IRGC—an issue that he has championed on both sides of this House. I know that he will keep pushing for that, and he is absolutely right to do so as he stands up for the great nation of Israel.

The right hon. Member for Walsall and Bloxwich (Valerie Vaz) mentioned the really important issue of accessibility for all funding for railway stations. All Members from across this House have over the last five years brought up cases of constituents. I have many times brought up my constituents and the funding for Hedge End and Swanwick; feasibility study money was allocated by the last Government. I ask the Minister on duty to request that the Department for Transport comes back to all Members who were promised that money in the last Parliament—it was allocated by the last Government—and outline where we are going with accessibility for all. The ministerial letters that I received did not say when the next steps would happen. I ask the Minister very politely, on behalf of my constituents, where we are on that project.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) mentioned, in a heartfelt speech, all the volunteers across his constituency. He is absolutely right to pay tribute to the volunteers we all

have in our constituencies, particularly in the NHS and the armed forces. They are a credit to our nation. They will be working across the United Kingdom this Christmas, and we all owe them a huge thank you.

My hon. Friend mentioned the men’s shed charities, which I know from personal experience have helped many men with mental health issues. I do not think we talk enough about that topic. I pay tribute to the men’s sheds across the country for the things that they build on behalf of community centres. We have some lovely flower beds in Hedge End village in my constituency that were built by such volunteers, and I pay tribute to them, too.

The hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland)—this is testing my pronunciation of place names across the UK—is a dedicated champion of his constituency. Before we entered this place, we worked together in another sector, namely the social housing and housing association sector in the UK. He is a first-rate brain on housing policy in this country, and I hope that he is used by the Government to unlock the social housing that is much needed.

The hon. Member mentioned the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I declare an interest, in that I am a trustee of the scheme, and I encourage Members from across the House to take part in it. It is fantastic. We obviously honour the work that our armed forces do, and the scheme allows us to get closer to them, and to really listen to what they have to say about what they go through on our behalf, day in and day out.

As he does every time we have one of these end-of-term Adjournment debates, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) raised really important issues in his constituency—particularly the direct train service to King’s Cross, which he has been bringing up consistently in this House since 2011. I say to him: keep going. I did not find him boring, and I look forward to his bringing up the issue in the next such debate, probably in the summer. I look forward to responding on that occasion, too.

The hon. Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) mentioned animals in her constituency, and a dog is for life, not just for Christmas. I hope that she buys her dog Maisie a big bone this Christmas. I see that she has Maisie on her phone.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) is a dedicated and doughty champion of his constituents. He and I were elected to this House in the same intake, and I do not mind saying to him that his was a stand-out result for me on election night. He is a doughty and committed constituency MP, but his result surprised me—not because of any lack of ambition or lack of ability on his part, but just because winning his seat and getting through this election, which was very difficult for Conservatives, shows the dedication and the work that he puts in.

My hon. Friend mentioned a number of Conservative initiatives to fund programmes in his constituency that were ringfenced, and he wants to drive growth. I fear that growth will be damaged by some of the policies of this Government, but he is a tireless campaigner. I would like to know what was in Clara’s Closet, a shop that he mentioned. He was also right to pay tribute to Ian Hayfield, the chair of the town’s bid, who passed away a couple of days ago, and Members across this House send our condolences to his family.

[Paul Holmes]

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) championed McClaren, and outlined the local investment that such businesses, particularly F1 businesses, bring to his constituency, and he is absolutely right to do that. The hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) made a couple of puns about Christmas lyrics. I recommend that he stick to the day job of standing up for his constituents and focusing on solving issues. However, he brought some fun to this debate; that is entirely what such debates are meant for, and I hope that he is successful in lobbying Ministers for investment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) always comes to this House—well, he is here most of the time. He said that we all need to think of others at this time, and had a message of hope at Christmas. Whenever he stands up in this House, he offers us hope and shows us how we should be doing our jobs. I wish him and his family a happy Christmas.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) mentioned volunteers and special educational needs and disabilities children. When I am sitting here heckling the Labour party, she has often brought up that issue for her constituents, in her short time here. I know that she will continue to do so in her way, and I will work with her to make sure we improve on those issues.

May I take this opportunity to thank all of House staff for their unfailing help to all Members, particularly new Members? A record number of new Members came into the House. I would particularly like to mention—other members of staff should not take it personally—Godfrey, Daphne and Dawn in the Tea Room, who make my lunch and serve me tea very well. I have a lovely cup of tea after being in here, and I will have one after this debate. I particularly thank the Doorkeepers for putting me right when I have got lost, and putting up with my humour. I thank all staff, and I wish them a very merry Christmas. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the other Madam Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker a particularly good Christmas, and a rest. I also thank my team, who help me and keep me on the straight and narrow: Steph, Emma, Dan and Charlie.

This debate shows that this really is a place of worthy ideals. It is a place for decency, and a place where we share a common bond: the privilege of representing our constituencies, places we care about, and our constituents, the fantastic people who make up this country. I wish my constituents in Hamble Valley a great Christmas. To all Members right across this House, I say: I look forward to seeing all of them back in the House in 2025, and I hope everybody has a very good rest.

4.41 pm

The Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury (Anna Turley): Let me begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and thanking him and all the members of the Backbench Business Committee for all the work they do in bringing so many important issues to the notice of this House. I thank him again for his contribution today, although I slightly disagree with him and others on the Transport for London issues. Many of us outside London dearly wish for a transport system that is so well-funded and efficient. I think he was channelling Ebenezer Scrooge a little bit in complaining about capped fares, but I take

his comments in the spirit in which they were intended. I also thank him for raising the issue of the hostages taken on 7 October. Our hearts break for them and their families, and we desperately hope for them to be returned. We hope for peace and a ceasefire, and we thank him for bringing this issue to the House. I also thank him for his important tribute to Holocaust Memorial Day; we all agree on its importance.

I wish a very happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker, as well as your fantastic team, the Clerks, the Doorkeepers, the Library staff, the security, the catering teams, the police, the guides, the visitor support, the cleaners, *Hansard* and the many thousands of people who make this place and the other place run. We should never forget what a privilege it is to be here, and how well we are served by the entire parliamentary team.

We also should never forget how precious our democracy is as we stand here in the mother of Parliaments. From the market squares of Damascus to the trenches of the Donbas, people are fighting and dying for democracy—for the right to self-determination, for the right to speak out, for freedom. We must never take this responsibility or this privilege for granted.

While this may be the last speech in this Chamber for the year, it is my first speech in the Chamber for more than five years. I am very grateful to find that this old place has not changed too much. I see one or two new faces on the Benches, and I am delighted at how many of them are on the Labour Benches, and how many Labour Members represent places that have never before had a Labour MP. The lovely Jennie the guide dog, who is normally here, is following in the pawprints of Lucy and Sadie. And of course today we think particularly of the late, great Sir David Amess—we see the commemorative plaque—a phenomenal man who I really enjoyed working with in setting up the all-party group on endometriosis. He is much missed, and I know how much he loved this debate every year.

Of course, I think also of my dear friend Jo Cox, who we still miss very dearly, and who should have been here with us, playing her part in a Labour Government.

I have never been prouder in my life than to have been returned as the Member for Redcar in July. As a so-called retread, I have been denied a maiden speech, and as a Government Whip, I am unable to join in debates. I have swapped voice in this place for influence, I hope, on behalf of my constituents within this Government. As it is Christmas, I hope the House will indulge me if I take a moment to thank my wonderful constituents across the Redcar and Cleveland constituency for putting their faith in me once again. I thank my agent Sarah, my organiser Jack and my brilliant team for their hard work in those long months leading up to 4 July. I thank them and all constituency and parliamentary staff for the fantastic support they provide for us on our constituents' behalf.

Since the election, I have been thrilled to visit schools across the constituency, including Huntcliff, Riverdale, Nunthorpe, Ormesby primary, Rye Hills, Lakes primary, Whale Hill and Redcar and Cleveland college. I talked to hundreds of pupils to celebrate Parliament Week recently. It has also been my privilege to continue to support local charities, including Footprints in the Community, South Tees Research, Innovation and Education, the Imaginarium, Teesside hospice, the Royal

British Legion, Grangetown Generations, the Junction and many more. It has also been a privilege to have watched netball at Grangetown, football at Redcar Athletic, Redcar Town, Marske United and Normanby, swimming with Eston swimming club and boxing at Redcar boxing club. I am thinking today of the home helps caring for our elderly, the steelworkers at Lackenby, the small businesses on our high streets and the nurses in James Cook, Foxrush House and Redcar hospital. I am reminded every day what makes our community great and what a great community I am lucky to live in.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My hon. Friend has been incredibly active on steel, in her constituency and in this place. She and I both know that the Government are engaged in sensitive and difficult negotiations at this present time about the steel industry, but can she touch on her views and the Government's views about ensuring that steel is not a sunset industry?

Anna Turley: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the hard work he is undertaking. What a doughty champion he is for the people of East Cleveland, the community in which he was born, and the steel industry. As he says, it is a vital industry to this country, not a sunset industry. It is vital to our defence, our sovereignty, jobs, our plans for building homes, our infrastructure and to our being at the forefront of the global transition on steel. We are all working hard together on the Government Benches for electric arc furnaces in Teesside, for the future of Scunthorpe and for Port Talbot, and this Christmas we think of steelworkers around the country, who are doing their utmost to maintain this phenomenal industry that is so vital to our national interest. We thank them.

This has been a debate worthy of this place, and I believe this is the best democratic assembly in the world, capable of rising to greatness when the occasion demands. In particular our recent debate on assisted dying was testament to our democracy and the quality and thoughtfulness of hon. and right hon. Members from all parts of the House. Today's debate has been no less impressive, if a little more local and festive. I pay tribute to a few of the fantastic speeches we have heard today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall and Bloxwich (Valerie Vaz) raised important issues, and I take to heart the pledge I made to her to bring these issues to Ministers. No one should be denied the chance, for better or worse, to watch their local football team because they cannot access transport. We will certainly be taking that matter up.

I am proud of everything that this Government are doing on cancer, with £1.5 billion being put into scanners and diagnosis. As someone who lost my grandad to bowel cancer, that is close to my heart. I will also take up my hon. Friend's issues on free schools and arts and museums. I very much look forward to the year of reading, too, as a champion of literature.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) paid fantastic tribute to charities and volunteers, and we all know how crucial they are to our society and our community, particularly at this time of year. We could not function without them. I am reminded that my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) mentioned the Salvation

Army. We know what a phenomenal job it does at this time of year, when so many are falling through the gaps. Its people are there to catch them, and thank goodness they are. I pay tribute to them and to all our voluntary and community groups. I send all best wishes to Edward and for his future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) has done fantastic work championing Hitachi. He is certainly not boring in his relentlessness in that work. We are delighted to secure that half a billion pounds to support the workers, the supply chains, the jobs and the apprenticeships. We look forward next year to celebrating 200 years of the railways, and as someone who is going back via Darlington tonight, I look forward to celebrating the Stockton and Darlington railway next year.

The hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) raised really important issues on road safety that I had not really thought of, but I valued the opportunity to reflect on them—sorry for the pun. Lights and glare is fascinating, not boring. Persistence is key. I look forward to him continuing to work with Ministers on that. I am certainly happy to take that up with the Department for Transport.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson) talked about fantastic local projects. I congratulate the Music Man Project on its King's award and wish it all the very best for the future.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) raised a really important constituency case. We listened very carefully to that. He is absolutely right about the numbers of people who, like Patricia, have to wrestle and navigate the system for whole-person care. The Government are committed to dealing with that. I look forward to working with him, not just on that particular case but perhaps in seeking a debate and working on addressing that.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) raised a really important issue. Our thoughts are with all those affected by the storm and the closure of the port. We will continue to press the Secretary of State and the Government for Wales on that. It is a port of massive national significance, and I can imagine that the impact is really hard for small businesses, particularly at this time of year. We will take that up. I look forward to engaging with her on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) is, again, a doughty champion for her patch. I spent many happy times in my childhood in Whipsnade Zoo, so I wish it all the very best, as I do Maisie, my hon. Friend's rescue dog, and Luton Town FC.

The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) was, again, a real powerhouse for his constituency. He paid tribute to some great sports and community groups. I congratulate him on the new hospital, and we all look forward to celebrating the city of culture in Bradford next year.

I come to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda). We wish the Royals all the very best in their promotion. Likewise, in terms of the fine sport we have in this country, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster), we congratulate McLaren on the brilliant work it does. As he said, Britain is at the forefront of high-tech manufacturing and engineering.

[Anna Turley]

We wish my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson)—my home town—all the best in continuing to campaign for spades in the ground on the lower Thames crossing and on the Elizabeth line, which are both crucial projects. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is sadly not in his place, for his classic decency and kindness, not just in his tribute today, but in everything he has done, particularly for new Members to welcome and support us all.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) raised SEND, which has been raised a huge amount in the House—it has been raised with me in every surgery since I have been re-elected—so we know that it is a critical issue. As she said, families are battling the system, and we want to have a country where every child matters and gets the support that they need. The issue of off-rolling is crucial. I thank her for raising those issues and look forward to working with her.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) knows that I greatly respect his lifelong work and commitment to tackling poverty and inequality. I am sure that he would agree that a Labour Government are infinitely more able to tackle poverty and reduce inequality than a Labour Opposition, and I know that he will support some of our work to tackle inequality and poverty in this country. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for paying tribute to all those working with adults and children with disabilities this Christmas.

I will be brief, because I am conscious of time, but I want to say thank you to the British people who in July chose change. They looked around and saw the NHS on its knees, our dentistry in crisis, our trains stalled and chaotic, raw sewage in our rivers, lakes and seas, rough sleeping visibly scarring our towns and lives, taxes at a 30-year high and child poverty at Dickensian levels. After 14 years, they had had enough. They turned in their droves to a Labour Government once again to clear up the mess and rebuild the social and economic fabric of a fractured nation. Now the hard yards of change have begun.

We on the Government side of the House are so ambitious for change. We have the biggest legislative programme in a quarter of a century, with 38 bills in the King's Speech. The programme includes: rail back in public hands to put passengers before profit; a raise in the minimum wage and increases for teachers, nurses and public sector workers; maternity leave from day one in a job; more powers for police to tackle antisocial behaviour; a house building revolution; the miners pension scheme; £1 billion for buses, with local people back in charge of them; homes for veterans; a child poverty taskforce; a national wealth fund for a transition to the industries of the future; breakfast clubs for schoolchildren; action on spiking and stalking; bringing back neighbourhood policing; action on sewage; and, in my own patch, the biggest single investment on Teesside in history, with carbon capture and storage bringing jobs and ushering in a new industrial renaissance on Teesside.

This is an exhaustive Christmas list for Britain—only missing, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall and Bloxwich (Valerie Vaz) said, a partridge in a pear tree. Change is coming, Madam Deputy Speaker. The people have cast out the old and ushered in the new.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Lady has plenty of time, but can I just say to her: one line, two lines, full house.

Anna Turley: Eyes down. [Laughter.]

To quote Lord Tennyson,

“The old order changeth, yielding place to new”.

In July, the people cast out the old and ushered in the new, and we will not fail them.

At this time, I know we all want to take a moment to reflect on our families, our communities and, perhaps, our faith. We should never forget that Christmas is not always a time for celebration and joy; for some, it is a time of great regret, sadness, grief and loneliness. For many, it is a time of mental stress and financial worry. We pray for peace and for an end to conflict and separation around the world. We think of our courageous armed forces around the world, those saving lives in conflict zones, the NHS and so many other key workers, for whom Christmas day is just another day at work. To everyone alone, or serving abroad, or in pain this Christmas, please know you are not alone, and that you are loved. That, surely, is the true meaning of Christmas.

I am reminded, as I finish, that one of England's greatest Christmas literary figures, Charles Dickens, began his career here as a parliamentary reporter and sketch writer. So, like Tiny Tim, let me close by saying,

“God bless Us, Every One!”

4.56 pm

Bob Blackman: I congratulate the Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), on finally getting her voice heard in this Chamber. In addition to the three Front-Bench speakers, we have had 18 Back-Bench speakers, which demonstrates the importance of this type of debate, where Members can raise whatever subjects they choose. They have chosen to talk about their constituencies, their particular causes, their charities and their families. This is a very important aspect of our parliamentary work; it demonstrates to the people out there that we represent how important they are to us.

I would like to correct the record. In my earlier speech, I referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) when I should have referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers). I want to put that on the record straightaway.

Finally, I would like to wish everyone a very merry Christmas and a happy new year. Although this is a time when Parliament goes into recess, Members of Parliament will not just be having a holiday; they will be working hard on behalf of their constituents, and our constituents will value the work that we do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I get the opportunity to have the last word. Many Members have mentioned family, and I want to take this opportunity to say merry Christmas to our parliamentary family, making sure we remember our Doorkeepers, the Sergeant at Arms, the Clerks, who keep me in order, and the catering and security people. Godfrey and Margaret got a mention, but I would also like to say—although I may not have been there today—a thank you to Kelly and Jackie in the hairdressers downstairs.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

MV Ruby: Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeff Smith.)

4.58 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): The MV Ruby is a sorry tale of bad decision making by Government and a selection of unaccountable, unelected quangos operating in silos without any application of common sense. It exemplifies the loss of sovereignty of Parliament, which should be absolute under the 1689 Bill of Rights, which asserted the rights of Parliament and individual rights based on John Locke's philosophy.

The outcome was a shocking and avoidable double act of environmental terrorism, when around 300 tonnes of ammonium nitrate—better known as agricultural fertiliser—was dumped in the sea about 12 miles off the coast of my constituency. When I fill my drill or fertiliser spinner with fertiliser, I discharge the contents of the double-skinned weatherproof plastic bag into the hopper and recycle the bag. In this case, the bags were dumped into the sea with the ammonium nitrate still in them. They will not biodegrade, and will float to the surface after a storm, potentially becoming wrapped around a ship's propeller and shaft, causing extensive damage—not forgetting the vast ecological damage to young fish, the seabed, and the inevitable algal blooms that will follow. To make matters worse, as the elected representative of the good people of Great Yarmouth, I was excluded from all communication and decision making leading up to the catastrophic dumping operation on 16 November 2024.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeff Smith.)

Rupert Lowe: Apart from the terrible outcome, the Government's account of events conflicts entirely with the local account of events. The locals claim that the Department for Transport-Secretary of State's representative drove the process and gave instructions for the sitting MP to be excluded from all communications, convinced that it was a Cobra situation. When finally briefed on 28 November by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) at the Department's offices, he stated that the locals had made a mountain out of a molehill, the operation was never Cobra and the decision to exclude the MP from briefings was a local one. Somebody is clearly lying and the official briefing pack from the DFT suggests that this is the Government. The hon. Gentleman told me in an email that he was too busy to see me to answer follow-up questions and suggested that I pursue usual parliamentary processes, so here we are. I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate, which seeks to inform the House where the truth lies. The crux of the issue is the part played by the Health and Safety Executive and its employee, Dr Nathan Flood.

MV Ruby docked in the outer harbour of Great Yarmouth, following input from the Secretary of State's representative on 28 October 2024, as a ship in distress carrying 20,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate. Peel Ports is used to handling this material, which is commonly landed at ports, distributed by road, stored on farms and used to grow our food. Peel Ports notified the

requisite authorities, including the HSE, which declined to inspect the ship's cargo. Peel Ports began offloading the bags of ammonium nitrate on to the sister ship, Zimrida. On 11 November, Peel Ports identified seawater in hold one and some staining on the lower bags. Peel Ports notified the HSE, Dr Flood, and again requested its attendance to inspect the bags and the material. HSE refused to attend and inspect. Peel Ports sent them photographs and videos of the cargo in hold one. Peel Ports employed its own explosives experts, Dr Jim Warren and Dr Charles Owen, to attend and inspect the cargo. They reported that they could wipe the staining off the bags, concluding that it was unlikely the bags were contaminated. Peel Ports again requested HSE attendance, which was refused. Peel Ports' view was that it could safely unload the stained bags—the ship had previously carried a cargo of coal—on to the dock for analysis and disposal. HSE threatened sanctions and enforcement action against Peel Ports if one bag was unloaded on to the dock. I understand that legal responsibility for the material passes from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to HSE once unloaded. It is also interesting that Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service attended MV Ruby at this time, on either 12 or 13 November, and downgraded the situation.

Dr Flood's attitude was reported by many of the stakeholders to be aggressive, inappropriate and unprofessional, with the use of foul language and even banging his fist on the table and telling people, "This is going to flatten Great Yarmouth." Analogies to the Beirut explosion were wholly inappropriate and misleading, causing panic among both local and national Government, who have no experience of handling ammonium nitrate. It is incredible that he did that without either a site visit or proper physical analysis of the material before the dumping. Was he too lazy to do what common sense suggested was the correct cause of action? Dr Flood only attended the site and inspected a small number of remaining split bags of material on Monday 18 November, after being instructed to attend by a Minister. I understand that he put on a new pair of rubber gloves which he thrust into the ammonium nitrate and then threw the gloves on to the table, claiming they smelt of diesel. Other people report that they understandably smelt of new rubber. This was also after the gross act of environmental terrorism. To carry out no inspection before dumping is quite extraordinary.

This kind of behaviour is not uncommon from the HSE, which is a law unto itself, clearly employing a policy of "Do as I say, not as I do". The question is, who regulates the regulator? When we understand that the HSE is part of the Department for Work and Pensions, no further explanation is necessary or indeed possible. We now find that the Marine Management Organisation, the MCA, the Environment Agency, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the HSE all blame the dumping on the ship's captain. All other possible sensible options were blocked, but does this silence make them complicit in this catastrophe? I conclude that it does.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing a debate on this topic, which has caused great concern to residents of our neighbouring constituencies. In this case there appears to have been a total information vacuum for local people and representatives, which has fuelled fear and

[Steff Aquarone]

speculation. A number of my constituents have contacted me asking simply, “What is going on?” Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in the event of such a situation in the future, it will be important for all relevant agencies to provide far more clarity and transparency for residents and their elected representatives?

Rupert Lowe: I could not agree more. Good government must be transparent government.

I hope that the Minister has his pencil ready, because I have 18 urgent questions for which I believe the House needs answers.

No. 1: Why did the Minister tell me on Thursday 28th November that this was a local issue?

No. 2: Why did the local officials think that this was a Cobra situation when the Minister said categorically that it was not?

No. 3: Why did the Minister suggest that local officials had made a “mountain out of a molehill”? The locals said it was all driven by the Department for Transport and the Secretary of State’s Representative for Maritime Salvage and Intervention. Who is lying?

No. 4: Who gave the instruction that the local MP was not to be briefed except by the Department for Transport? Was that because I am a Reform MP, or because I have experience of ammonium nitrate from farming? What were the roles and reports of Andy Gregory, Stephen Benzies and Stephan Hennig?

No. 5: Was the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) involved in the decision making?

No. 6: Was the resignation of the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley on Friday 29 November in any way linked to the unjustifiable outcome involving the dumping of approximately 300 tonnes of potentially contaminated ammonium nitrate with bags? Was it a coincidence that it happened less than 24 hours after my briefing by the Department for Transport?

No. 7: Why was the load described as “potentially contaminated”? Was it physically tested before the dumping? Is there a certificate to prove that?

No. 8: Why were the polypropylene double-skinned waterproof bags dumped with the ammonium nitrate? When used in farming, such bags are emptied and recycled.

No. 9: Did anyone consider that polypropylene bags float to the surface and damage or destroy a ship’s propeller and propeller shaft, apart from this being an act of environmental vandalism?

No. 10: Why was the view of those at Peel Ports—experts at handling ammonium nitrate—not acted upon? They claimed that the double-skinned waterproof bags at the bottom were stained but dry. They suggested unloading the “dumped” material on to the dock for analysis and disposal. Is it true that it becomes the responsibility of the HSE once on land? Pictures that were obtained back up Peel Ports’ opinion.

No. 11: Why did the HSE throw its weight around and threaten Peel Ports with prosecution/enforcement if one bag was unloaded on the dock?

No. 12: Why were local fishermen, local fish markets and Dutch fishing vessels not informed of the decision to dump offshore in my constituency?

No. 13: How close did Great Yarmouth come to evacuation? Why was that information withheld from the elected representative of Great Yarmouth? Who knew what, and when?

No. 14: was the balance of the cargo safely unloaded by Peel Ports?

No. 15: is it fair to say that the owners and operators of MV Ruby were forced into the decision to dump ammonium nitrate in bags at sea?

No. 16: who signed off on this gross act of environmental terrorism without a test certificate? How can this have happened?

No. 17: why do both the harbourmaster and Peel Ports agree that this matter was not handled well, and that there was the wrong outcome?

No. 18: does this House agree that the Government were right to exclude an elected Member of Parliament by diktat, thereby undermining Parliament and showing disrespect for the good people of Great Yarmouth?

As G. K. Chesterton observed,

“A society is in decay, final or transitional, when common sense really becomes uncommon”.

This sorry episode lacked any common sense and resulted in bad decisions by unelected, unaccountable quangos acting in silos. We now need an official parliamentary inquiry, which I strongly request, having researched the matter in great depth. It must not happen again, and the appropriate heads must roll.

On that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, all the parliamentary staff and all my fellows MPs a very happy Christmas?

5.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): Well, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is the season of good will.

First and foremost, I want to say that I am proud of this nation. I think I am prouder of this nation than the hon. Gentleman is. The United Kingdom has a proud seafaring heritage, and we are the home of the International Maritime Organisation. We uphold the rule of law in this country, and we treat seafarers with respect and dignity. We fulfil our legal obligations, and we proud to be pioneers in the maritime industry. These principles informed how we handled this situation.

The MV Ruby left Great Yarmouth on 1 December with no cargo onboard and is now at the Port of Tyne, where she is undergoing repairs. The ship left Great Yarmouth with uncontaminated cargo on 16 December for onward voyage to the Ruby’s original intended destinations. Throughout this situation, my Department and other authorities exercised their duties for the safety of the UK and its population, and for that of the ship and her crew. I stand by all the decisions and actions that we took, and I note that everything has been resolved successfully. We were always confident that that would be the case.

I will briefly set out the background. The MV Ruby is a Maltese-flagged vessel that was damaged during a storm on 23 August 2024, not long after leaving port in northern Russia. The vessel entered UK waters on 24 September 2024 under international legal provisions that allow for the right of innocent passage through territorial waters. She went to anchor in order to refuel,

but at anchor she posed a number of potential risks to UK interests—namely, the safety of navigation for other vessels. We were also worried about the safety of the crew, their welfare and the safety of the ship.

There were no sanctions issues in relation to the ship, her crew or her cargo, and she was insured by Lloyd's of London, which is internationally regarded as having the highest standards for its clients and strong requirements for the insurance companies that conduct business there. The vessel is class certified by Det Norske Veritas, which is one of the 12 world-renowned classification societies within the International Association of Classification Societies. That demonstrated to us that the vessel was operating well within the recommended industry guidelines.

Before entering the Port of Great Yarmouth, the Ruby had been at anchor for a month. The ship was damaged, and the crew were struggling to get basic supplies. At this point, media reporting focused on the perceived Russian connections of the Ruby, as her origin port was in Russia. This made potential suppliers fear Russian exposure and reputational damage, which further impacted the quality of life on board. Beyond this humanitarian aspect, the extent of the damage to the hull was unknown, and the practical and environmental consequences of the vessel sinking in UK waters, with all her cargo and fuel on board, would have been unthinkable.

Given all this, and where safety requirements were met, there was no reason to deny access to port. The Secretary of State's representative for maritime salvage and intervention, SOSREP, supported the ship's management company in convening conversations with UK ports to identify an appropriate port for the offloading of this cargo type and a yard where she could then be repaired.

The ship's management company made a commercial decision to enter a UK port for repairs. This was because the conditions in the bay of Biscay, which the vessel would have had to traverse, can be extremely rough at this time of year. The crew of 19 on board had already suffered through the original storm and subsequent weeks on board a damaged ship. Offering her refuge in port helped to manage all these risks, and at that point, there was no indication of concern about her cargo.

Ammonium nitrate, for a bit of background, is a compound typically used in fertiliser that the UK regularly imports. In 2023, over 200,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate were handled at UK ports, and the port of Great Yarmouth is one of the many ports experienced in handling this type of cargo. Once at port, the cargo was safely offloaded for several days before any potential contamination was identified.

The Health and Safety Executive was alerted to the potential contamination on Monday 11 November, as the port identified evidence of seawater and hydrocarbons—fuel oil—on the outside of the bags. When it was identified that seawater and hydrocarbons were present on the outside of some of the remaining bags, all movement of cargo in the affected hold was stopped, and the relevant authorities were notified.

HSE undertook a risk assessment, and its findings were actioned by the port and the ship operator. The port's harbourmaster made the decision to issue a direction under the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847, following the guidance provided by the HSE at a cross-agency meeting, and classified the vessel as a dangerous

ship. SOSREP was engaged and worked with the ship, the port, the MCA and the HSE to ensure that the ship and the crew were safely removed from port.

The ship was removed from port on Saturday 16 November, and the affected cargo was discharged at a pre-identified location at sea. The master of the ship took the view that, in the light of deteriorating conditions at sea and the unacceptable risk to the crew of the potentially contaminated material remaining on board as the sea became rougher due to the incoming weather front, disposal should commence that evening. The cargo believed to be contaminated represented under 2% of the total volume being transported.

Discharging the potentially contaminated cargo at sea, about 300 metric tonnes, was not an exercise undertaken lightly. As would be expected, there was careful and thorough examination of all the alternative options. A full assessment of the environmental implications and safety risks was also undertaken. The work was overseen by environmental experts and the relevant regulators. The East of England environment group was convened for the purposes of this incident and was comprised of experts from: the Food Standards Agency; the Joint Nature Conservation Committee; the local authority; the Marine Management Organisation; the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science; Natural England; the Environment Agency; and the inshore fisheries and conservation authority.

The location chosen for disposal was identified as the least sensitive in terms of habitat, flora, fauna and fisheries. The site is an existing aggregate extraction area, involving mechanical activity on the seabed. We have been assured by scientific experts from both the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the East of England environment group that ammonium nitrate is not a persistent chemical and, with sufficient dilution, will dissipate without leaving a trace.

As would be expected, DEFRA is now going through the standard procedure of notifying the relevant international authorities of the discharging event, as the British Government treat our duties to the natural environment with the highest seriousness.

Where safety requirements are met, there is no basis for the UK Government to refuse entry into port in those circumstances. After the potentially contaminated cargo had been discharged, the port and ship operator followed the usual processes to enable the MV Ruby to return to Great Yarmouth with advice from the MCA, HSE and environmental regulators. Allowing the ship to return ensured crew welfare and enabled the normal transfer of its remaining cargo. I must emphasise that there was no evidence that any of the remaining cargo was potentially contaminated, and this was borne out by events. No further contamination was found.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): If there was no potential contamination and if all the processes were fully followed, as the Minister is indicating, then presumably the Government will have no problem ensuring that all that documentation is made available and public, in a transparent and open way, so that we can have no doubts about that, and any lessons that need to be learned, will be learned.

Mike Kane: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and wish him a happy Christmas as well; we share the same dry cleaner, Mr George, who regularly

[Mike Kane]

asks after the hon. Gentleman. I say to Reform Members that the way this matter is being raised is a playbook: assertions, which are often outlandish or simply wrong, are made that are designed to appeal to malcontents; victimisation comes in that playbook, because they habitually cast themselves as the victim of dark forces, conspiracies and cover-ups, always wanting to know where and when, and to have transparency; they expect others to accept the premise of their questions, but then belittle the officials and workers who have worked extraordinarily hard, often in difficult circumstances in our seas. By belittling those officials and workers, Reform Members are trying to make people believe those officials are wrong and they are right. I think there should be little bit more dignity in the approach taken by Reform Members in this matter.

I have had correspondence with officials at Norfolk county council and Great Yarmouth borough council, as well as the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), who is no longer in his place. I would like to

offer my personal gratitude and thanks to the officials at the Health and Safety Executive, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and Peel Ports in Great Yarmouth for their co-operation and diligent work throughout the period. I also thank the captain and the crew of the ship for their co-operation during this episode.

I am pleased that, by following the expert advice, this episode has concluded safely and successfully. Our ports, and the men and women who work in them, are invaluable assets to our nation, but we can all be guilty of failing to fully recognise the vital role they play in the life of our island nation. I would like this debate to record the respect and gratitude this House has for them and their work. Our Christmases will be a lot merrier thanks to them all.

Merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the staff and the House, and a blessed new year as well.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 19 December 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Future of Harland & Wolff

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): National security is the foundation of our plan for change—without it we cannot deliver on our milestones to raise living standards across the UK, with good, skilled, productive jobs.

I am pleased to announce that a commercial deal has been reached, subject to approvals, that will see Navantia UK—a specialist in shipbuilding—purchase Harland & Wolff’s shipyards in Belfast, Arnish and Methil in Scotland, and Appledore in Devon. This industry-led deal will secure the future of all four of Harland & Wolff’s shipyards and protect around 1,000 jobs across the UK.

The deal will ensure the delivery of the Ministry of Defence’s fleet solid support (FSS) contract. The Government have worked closely with Navantia UK on the future of the FSS programme. We have agreed with Navantia UK on the absolute minimum of changes to the contract, ensuring its continued delivery.

Defence is at the heart of the industrial strategy, where we have identified it as one of eight growth-driving sectors for the UK economy. Our industrial strategy is unreservedly pro-business, engaging on complex issues that are barriers to growth and investment.

Navantia UK has committed to invest significantly on commercial terms into Harland & Wolff’s shipyards, a major investment into the UK’s industrial base. This is a good deal for Harland & Wolff, its employees, and the British shipbuilding sector more broadly, as it provides the best opportunity to sustain essential sovereign shipbuilding capacity and capability for future naval work, safeguarding both current and future jobs in the UK.

We are committed to supporting vibrant and successful shipbuilding and offshore fabrication industries, and our skilled workforces who deliver them, in all parts of the UK, in which Harland & Wolff has an important role to play.

[HCWS344]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Bills: Price Review 2024 Final Determinations

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): Our water system needs fixing. Our rivers, lakes and seas are choked by pollution.

Under the Conservatives, our sewerage system crumbled. They irresponsibly let water companies divert customers’ money to line the pockets of their bosses and shareholders.

The public are right to be angry after they have been left to pay the price of Conservative failure.

This Labour Government will ringfence money earmarked for investment so it can never be diverted for bonuses and shareholder payouts. We will clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good.

Ofwat, the independent economic regulator, has today published its final determinations for price review 2024. This independent process sets the prices water companies can charge customers in the form of water bills over five years. This includes a confirmed £104 billion of water company expenditure over the next five years—2025 to 2030. This is the highest level of investment in the water sector since privatisation. This investment will be crucial to deliver the improvements in the sector that the public expect to see.

In the next five years, the increase in bills is expected to pay for:

- £12 billion investment to reduce harm from storm overflows which will reduce storm overflow pollution by 27%, including upgrading more than 2,800 storm overflows.

- An £8 billion investment to boost water supply, including progressing nine new reservoirs.

- Leakage reduction of 17%—taking it to the lowest since privatisation.

- 30,000 new jobs across the country.

While this much-needed investment in the sector is welcomed, no one wants to see these bill rises, but customers have been left to pay the price of Conservative failure.

This Labour Government will ensure that this can never happen again by ringfencing money earmarked for investment, so it is spent on cutting sewage spills and improving services for customers—not on bonuses and shareholder payouts. If the money is not spent how it was intended, it will be refunded to customers.

We expect water companies to put robust support in place for customers that are struggling to pay their bills, and ensure customers know how to access it. This includes:

- Bill discount schemes such as WaterSure and social tariffs.

- Actively offering payment breaks or payment holidays.

- Adjusting payment plans urgently to help with sudden changes in household finances.

- Simplifying the processes for customers to get extra assistance.

- Helping customers get advice on benefits and managing debts.

Going forward, we have a plan to fundamentally reset the water sector—so we are not just fixing past failure, but also unlocking opportunities for the future.

We are putting accountability back at the heart of our water system. The Water (Special Measures) Bill will put a stop to the behaviour that has so enraged the public. It will strengthen regulations, including new powers to ban the payment of bonuses for water bosses if environmental standards are not met and bring criminal charges against lawbreakers, with new, tougher penalties including imprisonment when companies obstruct investigations.

We have launched an independent commission into the water sector and its regulation to put customers first, transform how our water system works and clean up rivers, lakes and seas for good. This is expected to form the largest review of the industry since privatisation.

This is a once in a generation chance to reset our water sector and deliver the change we all want to see. After years of pollution and decline, it is time to invest in new opportunities and restore our clean rivers, lakes and seas.

[HCWS345]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Hospices

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): This Government want a society where every person receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to the end of life.

Palliative care services are included in the list of services an integrated care board must commission. This promotes a more consistent national approach and supports commissioners in prioritising palliative and end of life care.

Whilst the majority of palliative and end of life care is provided by NHS staff and services, we recognise the vital part that voluntary sector organisations, including hospices, also play in providing support to people at the end of life and their loved ones.

This Government are determined to shift more healthcare out of hospitals and into the community, to ensure patients and their families receive personalised care in the most appropriate setting and palliative and end of life care services, including hospices, will have a big role to play in that shift.

This Government recognise the range of cost pressures the hospice sector has been facing over a number of years. In recognition of this, I am delighted to update the House that £100 million in additional capital funding is being provided to support the hospice sector. We believe that this capital investment will help with physical and operational pressures that hospices are facing. This package will allow hospices to create an improved physical environment and allow them to focus on providing the best quality care to patients.

The £100 million in additional capital funding will be spent across the remainder of this financial year (2024-25) and next (2025-26).

The principal requirements for the £100 million capital funding would be for hospices to deliver improvements that directly benefit patients, have a tangible impact on the physical environment and provide value for money.

I am also delighted to announce that children and young people's hospices will receive a further £26 million revenue funding for 2025-26. This is a continuation of the funding which until recently was known as the children and young people's hospice grant.

These two funding streams will help both adult and children's hospices in England to continue delivering the best end of life care possible for patients, their families, and loved ones.

The allocation and distribution method for both strands of this additional funding will be set out in early 2025.

[HCWS348]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Compulsory Purchase Reforms

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I am today publishing a consultation on reforms to the compulsory purchase process and compensation provisions in England and Wales.

The Government are determined to achieve our hugely ambitious plan for change milestones of building 1.5 million safe and decent homes and fast-tracking 150 planning decisions on major infrastructure by the end of this Parliament.

To support the delivery of a range of development, regeneration and infrastructure projects in the public interest, we need to make better use of underutilised land across the country. We know that many local authorities share this objective, but their plans are all too often frustrated by onerous barriers to land assembly, complex purchasing processes, and unrealistic compensation expectations on the part of landowners. The result is significant amounts of developable land that remains unused and overpriced.

In our 2024 general election manifesto, the Government committed to further reforming compulsory purchase compensation rules to improve land assembly, speed up site delivery, and deliver housing, infrastructure, amenity, and transport benefits in the public interest. We promised to take steps to ensure that for specific types of development schemes, landowners are awarded fair compensation rather than inflated prices based on the prospect of planning permission being granted on the land in the future—known as “hope value”.

The eight-week consultation that we are launching today is the next step in fulfilling this commitment. Building on the Government's 9 September commencement of regulations that enact the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 power to remove “hope value” from the assessment of compensation in compulsory purchase cases by directions where justified in the public interest, the consultation proposes new reforms to the process for compulsorily acquiring land without hope value compensation through general directions on certain types of sites that deliver clear benefits in the public interest.

The objective is twofold. First, to make the compulsory purchase process faster and more efficient so that acquiring authorities are incentivised to make use of it where appropriate. Secondly, to enable more land value to be captured where justified in the public interest and then invested in schemes for public benefit.

The consultation also seeks views on broader reforms to ensure the balance of the assessment of compensation awarded to landowners is fair, both to speed up decisions on compulsory purchase orders and to reduce the administrative costs of undertaking compulsory purchase.

Through this consultation, we want to understand better how the proposed reforms would operate in practice and how successfully they would deliver on our objectives of streamlining the compulsory purchase process and bringing forward much needed development including for housing, regeneration and infrastructure.

Subject to feedback to this consultation, we intend to bring forward measures in the planning and infrastructure Bill to implement the changes.

I look forward to continuing to work with all those with an interest in improving the compulsory purchase process and compensation regimes to make sure our reforms are robust and deliverable.

[HCWS346]

WORK AND PENSIONS

British Sign Language Report 2023-24

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): This Government are committed to removing barriers and increasing opportunities for deaf and disabled people. The British Sign Language Act 2022 provides us with the ability to do this by creating a greater recognition and understanding of BSL, and also by requiring the Government to report on what each Department listed in the Act has done to promote or facilitate the use of British Sign Language in its communications with the public.

The publication of the first BSL report in 2023 provided a snapshot of the activity that had already been delivered by Government Departments in the first year since the Act gained Royal Assent, while also highlighting the areas of Government communication that needed further improvement.

The second BSL report, covering the period from 1 May 2023 to 30 April 2024, has been published. A copy of the second report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

This second report summarises the progress Government Departments have made, and highlights where we have further to go. It shows that there has been an increase in the use of BSL compared to the first report—the overall number of BSL communications produced by Government Departments has more than doubled, from 76 in the first reporting period to 176 during the second reporting period. This represents encouraging progress but also shows that there are still improvements to be made.

This Government want to ensure disabled people's views and voices are at the heart of all we do and ensuring that Government communications are made accessible to deaf and disabled people is essential in supporting us to achieve this goal.

This Government are committed to going further. We will be working with the BSL advisory board, deaf people and their representative organisations, and with Ministers across Government to continue to make tangible improvements for the deaf community.

We will publish a report every year for the next five years, going further than the frequency required by the Act. The next report will be published in July 2025.

[HCWS347]

Written Corrections

Thursday 19 December 2024

Ministerial Corrections

EDUCATION

Qualifications Reform Review

The following extract is from the statement on Qualifications Reform Review on 12 December 2024.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am minded of that old adage—I suppose I am old enough to remember all these things—that when you ask a fish to climb a tree, it does not make the fish stupid; it just cannot do it. My concern with the qualification review is that we will not have the breadth of scale that allows for student choice and accessibility, and it will try to pinpoint people into roles that they cannot be successful in. How can the Minister ensure that those gifted in academia will have that clear path, and those gifted with job skills will find their place as well, alongside those still searching for their calling who are looking for wide subjects to keep many doors open for their future?

Janet Daby: We are keeping 157 of the courses that were outlined to be defunded. That will be reviewed on an ongoing basis depending on uptake. Our focus is very much on economic growth, and our mission is for growth and ensuring that young people have opportunities in T-levels and other qualifications to ensure that they are able to get the jobs that are desperately needed in our country. We are not removing the rules of combination. More variation should support 16 to 19-year-olds to have access to the jobs they wish to do in the future.

[*Official Report*, 12 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 1088.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby):

Janet Daby: We are keeping 157 of the courses that were outlined to be defunded. That will be reviewed on an ongoing basis depending on uptake. Our focus is very much on economic growth, and our mission is for growth and ensuring that young people have opportunities in T-levels and other qualifications to ensure that they are able to get the jobs that are desperately needed in our country. **We are removing** the rules of combination. More variation should support 16 to 19-year-olds to have access to the jobs they wish to do in the future.

JUSTICE

Victims of Sexual Violence: Court Delays

The following extract is from the Adjournment debate on Victims of Sexual Violence: Court Delays on 16 December 2024.

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend will be aware of the consultations run by the previous Government on the criminal injuries compensation scheme. I have been reviewing those consultations and we are looking to publish the Government's response in the new year, but we are aware of the concerns from the sector, and from victims and survivors, about the scheme. We are looking at how much more we can do to support victims and survivors as a whole on these issues.

[*Official Report*, 16 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 144.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones):

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend will be aware of the consultations run by the previous Government on the criminal injuries compensation scheme. I have been reviewing those consultations and **a response will be provided in due course. I am** aware of the concerns from the sector, and from victims and survivors, about the scheme. We are looking at how much more we can do to support victims and survivors as a whole on these issues.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 19 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	429	SOLICITOR GENERAL	442
Budget: Family Farms	431	Crown Prosecution Service: Support for Victims... ..	446
Electronic Waste	436	Freight Crime	449
Flood Protection Funding	429	Knife Offences	442
High-grade Agricultural Land	437	Misdemeanours	445
Hunting Trophy Import Ban	434	People Smuggling	449
Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances.....	433	Rural Crime	445
Pollution of Waterways	435	Violence against Women and Girls.....	447
River Dredging	437		
Rural England Prosperity Fund.....	430		
Topical Questions	438		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 19 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	53WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	55WS
Future of Harland & Wolff	53WS	Compulsory Purchase Reforms	55WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	53WS		
Water Bills: Price Review 2024 Final Determinations	53WS		
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	55WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	57WS
Hospices	55WS	British Sign Language Report 2023-24.....	57WS

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Thursday 19 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS	1WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS—continued	
Education	1WC	Justice	2WC
Qualifications Reform Review	1WC	Victims of Sexual Violence: Court Delays.....	2WC

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CONTENTS

Thursday 19 December 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 429] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Solicitor General

Hospice Funding [Col. 451]

Answer to urgent question—(Karin Smyth)

Business of the House [Col. 463]

Statement—(Lucy Powell)

Harland & Wolff [Col. 484]

Statement—(Jonathan Reynolds)

Ukraine [Col. 496]

Statement—(Luke Pollard)

Syria [Col. 512]

Statement—(Anneliese Dodds)

Service Accommodation [Col. 523]

Select Committee Statement—(Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi)

Point of Order [Col. 529]

Christmas Adjournment [Col. 530]

General debate

MV Ruby: Safety [Col. 565]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 53WS]

Written Corrections [Col. 1WC]

Ministerial corrections
