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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**  
(HANSARD)

Thursday 27 April 2023

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 27 April 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### BBC Local Radio: Proposed Cuts

1. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the BBC on its proposed cuts to local radio services. [904659]

**The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** The Department for Culture, Media and Sport regularly meets the BBC to discuss a range of issues. Ministers have met the BBC on several occasions since the announcement, where we have expressed the House's shared concerns about the BBC's plans to reduce parts of its local radio output. Ministers made clear that the BBC must continue to provide distinctive and genuinely local radio services, with content that represents and serves communities from all corners of the UK.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Well, the BBC is not doing that, and I am furious that BBC Radio Humberside is essentially being trashed. Local radio content will end at 2 pm each day. There is no coverage at weekends. Local presenters, including Burnsy, have had to apply for their jobs, and only one was successful. The rest are facing gagging clauses and fear losing their redundancy pay if they speak out. This is basically the end of local public service radio, which is irreplaceable, and the BBC management will not listen. It is easier to get a meeting with the Prime Minister than the director-general. Can I ask Ministers to do what Burnsy would suggest, and get BBC managers to give their heads a wobble and sort this out?

**Julia Lopez:** I shall do my best to get some heads wobbling. I know that the right hon. Lady is a big supporter of Radio Humberside and her local BBC television service, "Look North". I know this situation is difficult for the journalists affected. The BBC has told us that these are cost-neutral changes and that it is moving resource into digital and providing some additional resource in relation to original journalism, but this House has said many times and has effectively expressed its collective opinion that these cuts are regrettable, and it is something we will continue to discuss with the BBC.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the acting Chair of the Select Committee.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): The Minister is correct that this is in the end a decision for the BBC, but the House will be considering a media Bill in the coming months. Will the Bill do anything to protect the essential BBC local radio services that many people beyond this House—not just in this House—find to be an important part of the broadcasting landscape?

**Julia Lopez:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution. We are not going to protect specific parts of the BBC by primary legislation, but we have a number of important measures on radio services that we feel strongly about including in that legislation, and that includes measures on smart speakers. We want to reduce the regulatory burden on and costs for radio stations, but we also want to strengthen the protections for local news and content. Hopefully that legislation will help with some of these issues.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): At a time when accountability and scrutiny in public life are more important than ever, the role of the BBC and other media outlets is so important. My local newspaper, for example, will not run any political stories, and has not really done so for many weeks now. Will the Minister consider the role of local media and why local newspapers will not run political stories?

**Julia Lopez:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the importance of local news reporting to the health of our democracy, and I met news publishers recently to discuss how we might support a more thriving local newspaper ecosystem. There is a range of challenges in making those publications commercially successful, but as he says, if they do not have that local content, they are fundamentally undermining their own importance in the communities they serve.

**Mr Speaker:** On his birthday, I call Andrew Selous.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I agree with the sentiments expressed so far. We are very well served by BBC Three Counties Radio. If I could pick out one example, Roberto Perrone's drivetime programme is in danger of being axed, as are many other good programmes. Will the Minister use the Department's power to have another word with the BBC? Much as I am a big fan of the BBC, I do not think it has got this one right.

**Julia Lopez:** I wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday, as I am sure does the whole House. He asks us to speak again to the BBC about this matter. This issue has been running since the autumn, and the appetite of the House to raise it in the Chamber has not waned. The BBC should take that as a mark of the strength of feeling in this House and a mark of how important we, as representatives of communities across the country, think BBC radio services are.

**Mr Speaker:** Do tell the BBC how wonderful Radio Lancashire is. I call the shadow Minister.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): The BBC's cuts to local radio services will be a great loss to communities. I know the immense benefit that Radio

Sheffield brings to my area. The BBC's plans to redirect this resource into online local news may place the BBC in direct competition with existing local news sites. Can I press the Minister again on what she is doing to discuss the impact of these cuts with the BBC? What steps are being taken to support local journalism outlets and their employees?

**Julia Lopez:** The hon. Lady raises an important point about the impact of the BBC, and the care that it needs to take in relation to the impact that it can have on commercial services. We do not want the support that the BBC gets from the licence fee to be seen as something that crowds out market competition. We will consider that in the mid-term review. I thank her for her comments

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The local radio situation must cause stress for hard-working BBC staff across England, and they have my sympathy. The Minister will know about the deep disquiet among BBC staff across the countries of the UK about the fact that they have a chair in Richard Sharp whose tenure is hanging by a thread, and who is resisting calls to resign despite the clear improprieties around being given a job by a Prime Minister for whom he facilitated an £800,000 loan. What reassurances can she give to BBC staff and the general public that her party will not in the future give plum positions to people who have been involved in lavish donations, given the propriety issues that inevitably occur?

**Julia Lopez:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the appointment of Richard Sharp is the subject of an Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments report. We do not control the timetable for that, but it will hopefully shed some light on the appointment. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman raising concerns about the propriety of the appointment. We in DCMS believe that we ran that appointment to the letter and, as he will know as a member of the Select Committee, it was also endorsed by the Committee.

### Coronation: Community Participation

2. **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage community participation in the celebration of the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III. [904660]

10. **Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage community participation in the celebration of the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III. [904675]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):** Many people across the UK will take part in what will be a very special coronation weekend. My Department has worked with local authorities, charities and community groups to ensure that there is something for everyone. There will be street parties and big lunches, and hopefully people can watch it on a big screen, if there is one near them. An interactive map on coronation.gov.uk highlights what is happening in people's local communities across the weekend.

**Mr French:** I welcome the Government's efforts to support this historic event across the UK, and I am deeply honoured to represent Old Bexley and Sidcup, which was recently voted the most patriotic constituency in the country. Will my right hon. and learned Friend join me in encouraging local children to enter my free "A Card for the King" competition, and in thanking all the residents, businesses and volunteers in Bexley who have arranged more than 95 street parties and a range of community events to celebrate the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III?

**Lucy Frazer:** I encourage as many people as possible to take part in my hon. Friend's competition, and I congratulate his constituency. I thank the residents, businesses and volunteers who are truly embodying the spirit of the coronation. I am delighted to hear that so many events will take place, with communities coming together for street parties for the coronation. I hope that all the residents of Old Bexley and Sidcup have a great celebration.

**Nickie Aiken:** In 10 days' time, the world will tune in to watch the coronation of King Charles III and Queen Camilla at Westminster Abbey in my constituency of the Cities of London and Westminster. The people of the two cities are very proud that we have been involved in the coronation of our monarch since 1066, but it is not just about the ceremony; it is about the work that goes on behind it to make it what it will be, and the procession that we will see across Westminster. Will my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State join me in thanking all those involved in making the coronation what it will be? The street cleaners, the unsung heroes who will tidy up—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think we have got the message. Come on, Secretary of State!

**Lucy Frazer:** I join my hon. Friend in thanking everybody who will make the coronation so special. It will be a world-class event that will be seen across the globe, and that is down to the hard work of many people, including her constituents and the emergency services in the Cities of London and Westminster, which will ensure that the weekend's celebrations are a safe historic moment. I was also pleased to note that various community projects will take place in her constituency over the weekend, including a range of street parties and a wonderful opportunity to help London zoo care for its animals.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her energy, interest and enthusiasm for this matter. After reports that nationalist-led councils across Northern Ireland have blocked proposals for funding for the King's coronation, and the welcome recent news that Michelle O'Neill, the leader of nationalism, has now decided to attend the coronation, will the Secretary of State ensure that all councils across Northern Ireland, whether nationalist or Unionist, have the funding required to enable all to celebrate the coronation of our great King Charles?

**Lucy Frazer:** It is important for the celebrations to take place across the UK. We have funded devolved Administrations, 11 mayoral combined authorities and 10 local authorities to have screens as part of the

celebrations. I know that Northern Ireland will be screening the service across nine different locations, so I hope as many people as possible can take part.

### Grassroots Sport

4. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support grassroots sport. [904663]

6. **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support grassroots sport. [904668]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** Supporting grassroots sport is a key priority for the Government. Last year, Sport England received almost £350 million to fund grassroots sports projects. We are also supporting community participation, with more than £300 million between 2021 and 2025 to deliver up to 8,000 multi-sport facilities in communities across the UK.

**Nicola Richards:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the support he has provided to the campaign to confront the ownership of West Bromwich Albion, working with Andy Street and supporters groups. We have seen the huge step of the release of the football governance White Paper. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will continue to monitor the situation at clubs such as West Bromwich Albion and Birmingham City, and ensure that the new regulator will have the ability to take action to protect the clubs that support grassroots sport in the west midlands?

**Stuart Andrew:** May I praise my hon. Friend and her colleagues for the tremendous amount of work she has done in standing up for the fans of the clubs she has worked with so closely? Frankly, too many clubs face financial troubles, and we continue to monitor situations across the football pyramid. We have set out the reforms that will protect football clubs so that they can meet their day-to-day liabilities and preserve the clubs for the future. That will include sanctions, where necessary. We will introduce new owners' and directors' tests, including a fitness and propriety test and enhanced due diligence of owners' sources of wealth, and we will require owners to demonstrate robust financial plans to provide people like her constituents with the assurances they need.

**Esther McVey:** In Wilmslow in my Tatton constituency, we have a football academy run by Erik Garner, which will be putting on a girls' world cup for primary age children this summer. That is possible only because town councillors stood in to give funding to ensure the maximum number of girls can participate. Given that women's football is still growing, will the Minister explain how organisations that do not have parish and town councils that can step in can access financial support from the Football Association for similar events, to help to inspire the next generation of Lionesses?

**Stuart Andrew:** I congratulate my right hon. Friend's constituent for the work he is doing. We are all proud of the Lionesses' success and the inspiration it has given. The majority of funding for grassroots sport is delivered through Sport England. We invested £21 million in

2021-22 and £46 million in 2022-23 in grassroots sports facilities in England. We suggest that organisations hoping to run similar events contact Sport England or the FA, and many community groups that do not have parish councils do so. We are also carrying out an in-depth review of women's football, chaired by former Lioness Karen Carney, which will report this summer.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Clive Efford.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] I will pop round with a cup of tea later, Mr Speaker.

Over the years, many hundreds of thousands of children up and down the country have learned to swim in their local swimming pool, and the clubs that provide those facilities are quite often very grassroots and local. However, our local swimming baths are under threat. The energy they consume is enormous and they are extremely expensive to run. The £63 million announced in the Budget is welcome, but we have yet to see the detail of how that money will be rolled out. Can the Minister tell us when it will be rolled out and when we will know the criteria?

**Stuart Andrew:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. I have spent a lot of time listening to local organisations making the exact same points. That is why, as a Department, we lobbied the Treasury heavily to get that £63 million. That will not only help with the current issue of the costs swimming pools are facing, but address some of the long-term issues to make them more sustainable. We are working through the detail and will make an announcement in due course.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): A key element in ensuring the success of grassroots sport is having a good pool of talent and enough participants. However, one problem is that a number of young people, once they leave school, do not continue participating in either team sport or individual sport. What is the Government's strategy to ensure that as many young people as possible continue to do some sort of sporting activity when they leave school?

**Stuart Andrew:** Again, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue. Participation in sport and physical activity is a key piece of work that we are looking at. It is good to see that it has recovered to pre-pandemic levels, but we need to go even further. We are working on the sports strategy, which will address some of the issues he has raised, and I hope to make an announcement on that in due course.

### Musicians from Ukraine and Europe: UK Tours

5. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support musicians from Ukraine and Europe to tour in the UK. [904664]

**The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** My Department regularly engages with the Home Office on supporting international talent to come to the UK. The Government have provided direct support for Ukrainian musicians, including on priority visa applications for orchestras and performers. There are a number of ways to perform in the UK,



including the creative worker route, which enables workers to come to the UK for up to 12 months. The UK/Ukraine season of culture and the upcoming Eurovision song contest demonstrate our ongoing support for Ukraine.

**Dr Huq:** We knew things were bad for UK creatives when, last year, an Andrew Lloyd Webber company chose to take a Chinese production of “The Phantom of the Opera” on European tour rather than a home-grown one, because it was cheaper and less hassle, but last week at Calais, the German punk band Trigger Cut spent three days wrangling over the permitted entry route, only to be told that they were not professional enough musicians. Since when was that kind of judgment part of a customs officer’s duties? Will the Government urgently negotiate friction-free touring? This situation is wrecking livelihoods, our cultural offer and our reputation abroad.

**Julia Lopez:** I appreciate that a number of cases recently have caused concern; I am happy to take those up with the Home Office, including the case of Trigger Cut. I know there was also an issue in relation to the Khmelnytsky Orchestra from Ukraine, which was unblocked with help from ambassadors. There are creative routes to come here, but if there are any frictions, my Department is eager and happy to resolve them.

**Dame Caroline Dineneage** (Gosport) (Con): Touring musicians from overseas and our home-grown talent need venues in which to perform, yet many brilliant grassroots music venues up and down the country are really struggling. They are so important because they are effectively the research and development department of our music industry, which is our global superpower. The cultural recovery fund enabled many of those venues to survive, but how will we ensure that they are not destroyed by the cost of living crisis?

**Julia Lopez:** My hon. Friend has tremendous passion and expertise in this area and I know that, like me, she recently met Mark Davyd from the Music Venue Trust, a grassroots music venue organisation. I discussed with him a range of issues facing the sector, including energy costs and ticketing, and various proposals that involve both Government and the private sector. We are exploring how we can help those critical grassroots music venues to survive because, as my hon. Friend recognises, they are vital to the development of talent in our wider music industry.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Brexit has been an unmitigated disaster for touring musicians right across the UK and within the EU. The international language of song and music is being constrained by a barrage of bureaucracy and opportunities lost across continents for generations. Bands from the EU now say they will boycott the UK because of what they describe as degrading treatment at our borders, and most UK bands have given up trying to enter the EU at all. The all-party parliamentary group on music recommended appointing a touring tsar to fix the problems. Whatever has happened to that, and what is wrong with that suggestion?

**Julia Lopez:** The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight how valuable and life-enhancing UK music is, including the folk rock that he produces, and I know Europe is

eager to hear it. He paints a fairly bleak picture of touring, but we have been doing a whole range of work to unblock some of the issues that have been raised with us by touring groups. There is now a range of visa, transport and other arrangements, but it is in our interest to make sure that those music bands can reach their key audiences, and we continue to look at what other frictions there are so that we can try to unblock them.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): A few days ago, a Marks & Spencer store held a minute’s silence for the people of Ukraine and to honour a Ukrainian employee. There is clearly a huge well of feeling in this country for the people of Ukraine and the suffering that they are currently enduring. Can the Minister arrange a tour for the Ukrainian band? Can we do a lot more to promote the Eurovision team?

**Julia Lopez:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the work of the Marks & Spencer store in his constituency. We are doing a tremendous amount of cultural co-operation to support our Ukrainian friends. We are hosting Eurovision, and that includes £10 million-worth of support to provide a truly collaborative show. We are also providing 3,000 subsidised tickets for displaced Ukrainians in the UK. It will be a tremendous celebration, and it is being ably organised by my dear colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew).

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

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Despite the Minister’s comments, the truth is that the Home Office failed to issue visas on time to five Ukrainian musicians from the Khmelnytsky orchestra, which was due to perform in the UK. That was despite promoting the concerts on a UK Government website as an example of British-Ukrainian relations. The difficulties have cost that orchestra tens of thousands of pounds. It is important to the war effort in Ukraine that such classical music ensembles can perform here, and this incident has done damage to the UK’s international cultural reputation. Can the Minister tell us what action she can take, working with the Home Office, to avoid such damaging incidents happening again with Ukrainian musicians. A number of orchestras are preparing to tour, and we do not want to leave them high and dry like the Khmelnytsky orchestra.

**Julia Lopez:** I do not think that anybody in this House should be in any doubt about the Government’s wide-ranging support for Ukraine and its people, across the cultural sphere, into defence, and through other huge forms of co-operation. Obviously, what happened with that orchestra is regrettable, but once the musicians had produced all the information that was required, their visas were fast-tracked and they were able to perform in the UK. If there are ongoing issues with the Home Office that we need to resolve, we shall engage carefully with our colleagues, but I think the hon. Lady’s characterisation of the situation is grossly unfair.

**Barbara Keeley:** Besides making it hard for touring musicians to enter the UK, the funding cuts affecting classical music and opera are leading to Britain not being attractive to musicians for training or performing. Last Sunday, Sir Simon Rattle denounced the funding decisions of the BBC and Arts Council England, saying:

“When the two largest supporters of classical music in this country cut away at the flesh of our culture...it means that the direction of travel has become deeply alarming.”

All these problems, from visas to funding cuts, now pose a fundamental threat to the future role of our world-leading classical musicians. What future do Ministers see for classical music in this country?

**Julia Lopez:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising Sir Simon Rattle's comments—obviously, he is a tremendously valued performer in this country. But again, she paints an absurdly bleak picture of classical music in this country. It is tremendously valued by this Government and by the people we represent. Obviously, there is an issue with the approach to the BBC Singers and BBC English orchestras, and we are very glad that the BBC has paused its decision on that matter. This Government have put forward a tax relief for the orchestras, which has been extended. Arts Council England is run by somebody who used to run Classic FM. It has given huge amounts of money to orchestras. We are now funding 23 orchestral organisations, up from 19 last year. We are putting forward a music education plan. We have a whole range of interventions to support classical music in this country, so I fundamentally disagree with the way the hon. Lady tries to characterise the Government's tremendous support for orchestras.

#### Cost of Living: Cultural and Charitable Organisations

7. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support cultural and charitable organisations with increases in the cost of living. [904669]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** As announced at the spring Budget, we are providing £100 million for charities and community organisations in England. It will support frontline organisations experiencing increased demand and higher delivery costs, and will provide some investment in energy efficiency measures. Charities and cultural organisations are also receiving support for their energy bills until March 2024 under the energy bills discount scheme.

**Mary Kelly Foy:** While the Government continue to fail the most vulnerable in our society, the charity sector is left to fill in the gap. In my constituency, we are very fortunate to have the County Durham Community Foundation, which has raised £900,000 through its Poverty Hurts appeal, allowing many fantastic local projects to literally keep their lights on during the cost of living crisis. I welcome the Government's recent announcement of support for charitable organisations, but what steps is the Department taking to establish a wider and longer-term funding commitment to the sector?

**Stuart Andrew:** I spent 16 years of my life working in the charity sector, and I cannot praise it enough for the tremendous amount of work it is doing. That is why I spent time speaking to the sector, to listen to its concerns about the cost of living issues, hence why we have announced this £100 million, which I know the sector has warmly welcomed.

**Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): One of the cultural cornerstones in Barrow and Furness is CandoFM, a fantastic local community radio station that I was fortunate enough to bring to Downing Street to meet

the Culture Secretary last week. It walks like a charity, talks like a charity and supports the local community, but because of its licensing arrangements, it is not allowed to hold charitable status, unlike hospital radio stations. I wonder whether the Minister might look into that, because it would be a route for funding hard-pressed organisations such as CandoFM.

**Stuart Andrew:** My hon. Friend raises a very interesting point, and I would certainly like to praise CandoFM for the work it is doing. Obviously, there are conditions for achieving charitable status, but I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss what might be possible.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [904676] **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities. [R]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):** I will shortly be making an oral statement setting out details of a White Paper to bring our gambling regulations into the smartphone age. My Department has recently unveiled landmark reforms to our broadcasting regulation with a new draft Media Bill. We have given 43 youth centres a share of £90 million and backed our outstanding bid to bring Euro 2028 to the UK and Ireland.

With days to go until the historic coronation of King Charles III, I am sure Members across the House will join me in thanking everyone who is working so tirelessly to apply the finishing touches to what will be a magnificent celebration of British national life.

**Kevin Brennan:** On this business of musicians being turned away at our borders, having tried to enter the UK via the permitted paid engagement route, can the Secretary of State have stronger words with the Home Office? I know that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's job tends to be treated as a bit of a one-off gig by this Government, but she needs to show some heft and really get stuck into the Home Office on this issue. How can we credibly argue with our European neighbours that our musicians should be getting better access to go and play in Europe when we are treating European musicians trying to enter this country to do a few gigs like criminals?

**Lucy Frazer:** I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman highlights that the DCMS has some heft, because we are responsible for some world-leading departments. We are absolutely committed to supporting the creative sector to adapt to requirements for touring in the EU, and actually the vast majority of member states, including the UK's biggest touring markets, offer visa and work permit-free routes for musicians and creative performers. Of course, there is more we can do, and my Department is looking closely at this. I spoke to the Foreign Secretary about it yesterday, and I know that he raised the challenges faced by touring artists at the Partnership Council at the end of March.

T2. [904680] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): The Advertising Standards Authority, despite its misleading name, is a self-regulating body. Nevertheless, it has considerable powers within DCMS's areas of responsibility.

If those were used for social engineering rather than factual accuracy purposes, would that cause Ministers some concern?

**The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** I know how strongly my hon. Friend feels about freedom of speech and thought, and I have great admiration for the work that he does in this wider area. He is right that the ASA is a self-regulating body for the advertising industry, and he is also right that it is at its best when it focuses on its core purpose of making sure that consumers get legal, decent, honest and truthful adverts, rather than value judgments on social issues and pushing a certain world view.

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

**Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab):** This week, yet another case of music copyright dominated headlines. Our proud creative industries are facing significant challenges, as we have heard. The role that AI will play in the future is also concerning for many. Exactly what action is the Minister taking to ensure that emerging tech and our world-leading creative industries are supported rather than sidelined?

**Lucy Frazer:** I am very conscious of this issue. We have fantastic creative industries that do original work, and we need to protect them. That is why I have held roundtables with the music industry to discuss that very issue. The idea is to put together a code of conduct, working closely with industry, to ensure that we protect the original work that they produce.

T4. [904682] **Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** Last Saturday, the National Piers Society launched its national touring exhibition of seaside pier posters at the Claremont pier in Lowestoft. There is a concern that the international promotion of tourism is too London-centric, and I would be grateful if the Minister could outline the work that is being done to promote the unique offer of coastal Britain to overseas visitors, as illustrated in those posters.

**Julia Lopez:** My hon. Friend is very fortunate to represent one of our beautiful coastal communities, and he is right about the importance of promoting non-London destinations. There is a tremendous amount of fantastic things to visit out there beyond our capital. To give a couple of examples, we have a GREAT-funded campaign to see things differently, which includes the Pembrokeshire coast national park, Thorpe Bay beach and Brighton pier. Earlier this year, VisitBritain welcomed more than 120 international trade buyers in the travel industry for a series of educational visits across Britain that focused on coastal communities. I hope that they will take the wonderful things that they saw back to the buyers in their own countries.

T3. [904681] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** First, I wish to thank you, Mr Speaker, for hosting last week's reception celebrating the successful four decades of our Great North Run. Chuter Ede community centre in South Shields is facing closure, as are many other centres with sports facilities across the country. Does the Minister think it is the lack of Government help with their high energy bills, the Conservative cost of living crisis or the Conservative-led local authority cuts that are to blame?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** This Government have given significant support to organisations up and down the country to help with cost of living issues. That is on top of the programmes that we are providing, including the ones that I was talking about a moment ago, for grassroots sport. We are putting more money into grassroots sport now than has been put in for probably decades.

**Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** British motorsport, in order to stay at the cutting edge, wishes to transform itself to use synthetic and sustainable fuels, but the taxation regime disincentivises that. Will the Minister work with me and colleagues in the Treasury to ensure that the use of sustainable fuels is incentivised?

**Stuart Andrew:** I completely agree about the importance of motorsport in this country, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his commitment and hard work in this area. We already support sustainable and synthetic fuels under the renewable transport fuel obligation scheme. Tax policy, as he knows, is a matter for the Treasury, but I will of course work with him and ensure that his ideas are shared across Government.

T5. [904683] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** The reputation of the BBC has been dragged through the mud by the grubby loan deal that Richard Sharp made with a former Prime Minister, which allegedly was to curry favour to become BBC Chairman. Does the Minister therefore think that the current Prime Minister's pally-pally relationship with Sharp is why he has not sacked him yet?

**Lucy Frazer:** As the hon. Member will know, the Commissioner for Public Appointments is looking into this matter, and it would not be appropriate to comment until it has published its full report.

**Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con):** The Folkestone library at Grace Hill in the town was one of the early Carnegie libraries, an important cultural hub as well as a working building. It is currently closed because structural repairs are required. Does the Minister agree that the Arts Council strategy should recognise not only the need to support working library facilities, but that they are often important heritage assets that benefit the whole local community?

**Lucy Frazer:** Library facilities are very important, and I was pleased to visit a library facility recently. We have put more funding into libraries and into communities across the country.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** BBC Radio York keeps North Yorkshire connected to the local community, but the reforms will remove that vital link. It would be such little cost to keep afternoon programming and "Drive Time" running. Will the Minister look at the real cost of running that programme and ensure that the BBC does not cull BBC local radio?

**Lucy Frazer:** As the Minister of State has already mentioned, decisions on BBC programming are a matter for the BBC; as she also mentioned, the BBC will have



heard the points made today about how strongly Members of this House and people across the country feel about this issue.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the Rutland-to-Melton CiCLE Classic—the only international men's single-day race cycling competition in the whole UK? It was best listened to on Rutland and Stamford Sound, Rutland's only radio station, but we need three RSL licences to cover all our three towns. Will the Minister please meet me to discuss those urgent needs?

**Julia Lopez:** Any day now I will be going on maternity leave, but I will be covered by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who is an absolutely passionate supporter of the radio industry and who as a Back Bencher spoke to me about radio issues. I am sure that he will be happy to look into the licensing issue that my hon. Friend highlights.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The Rugby Football Union has announced groundbreaking policies on maternity, pregnant parent and adoption leave, which have been said to normalise motherhood in sport. Will the Minister encourage more sporting bodies to introduce similar inclusive policies?

**Stuart Andrew:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this. One of the key elements that we will be looking at in the sporting strategy is how we increase opportunities for women and girls in sport. I am pleased to say that we have made significant announcements about equal provision in our schools—but yes, we absolutely push the governing bodies to do all they can to increase opportunities in the way the hon. Lady suggests.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Holy Land: Desecration of Religious Sites

1. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What discussions the Church of England has had with international counterparts on the desecration of religious sites in the Holy Land. [904699]

4. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What discussions the Church of England has had with international counterparts on the desecration of religious sites in the Holy Land. [904702]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):** In the first three months of this year, seven cases of serious vandalism and antisocial behaviour against churches have been recorded in Israel. That is a sharp increase on the previous year. The Church of England continues to work with the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, the heads of other Churches, other faith leaders and the Jordanian Government, as custodian of the holy sites, to maintain the peace.

**Tim Loughton:** It was particularly galling to see these scenes in what is supposed to be a liberal democracy in the middle east: the desecration of Christian graves and

other Christian sites—something that, I am afraid, we have become used to in other countries. These were effectively religious terrorists and extremists, with no regard for the Christian religion. What measures are taking place to ensure that, in future, Christians can celebrate the Easter fire ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem without facing undue restrictions as a result of the fear of violent clashes?

**Andrew Selous:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is right to draw attention to the Easter fire ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. That 2,000-year-old ceremony has repeatedly taken place without serious incident. It is certainly our view that the restrictions have been overly heavy-handed. As he will know, the Archbishop of Canterbury has called out what has been happening—the attacks on Christian graves and so on—as blasphemous attacks. The UK Chief Rabbi has also spoken out, as we need to do across the House. I hope the Foreign Office will have similar things to say.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** Last Thursday, the Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), came here and announced a strategic partnership with the Government of Israel. That ought to give us some influence over the level of vandalism and antisocial behaviour to which churchgoers are being subjected, oughtn't it?

**Andrew Selous:** As always, my right hon. Friend makes an important point. He may have seen that over Easter the Latin Patriarch said:

“The frequency of these attacks, the aggressions, has become something new. These people feel they are protected...that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians.”

Attacks are simply not acceptable, whether against Christians or people of any other faith or no faith. I hope that what my right hon. Friend has said, as a distinguished former International Development Minister, will be heard loudly and clearly at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

### Christians in Nigeria

2. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What discussions the Church of England has had with the Church of Nigeria on the killing and abduction of Christians in that country. [904700]

**Andrew Selous:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is also the Prime Minister's special envoy on freedom of religion or belief, for the service she does in bringing this appalling issue back before the House. Since the matter was last raised with me on 9 March there have been further atrocities against Christians in Nigeria, and the issue does not get enough attention in our media, which is why I am extremely grateful to her for raising it. The Archbishop of Canterbury met the candidates in the presidential election, and stressed the need to prioritise ending inter-community and inter-religious violence, and we will continue to speak out.

**Fiona Bruce:** Open Doors reports that on Good Friday “32 Christians were killed...in an attack by suspected Fulani militants on an IDP camp in Benue State...while people were asleep”,

and that the camp

“houses nearly 30,000...mostly Christians, mainly women and children, who...fled their villages because of Fulani militant attacks.”

Open Doors described this as part of a number of “widespread attacks” across the state, including an attack on a church in Akenawe village on Palm Sunday, when a boy was killed and three people, including the pastor, kidnapped. Does my hon. Friend agree that stronger measures are needed to protect such vulnerable communities in Nigeria? What can the Church do to call this out?

**Andrew Selous:** Frankly, words are a rather inadequate response to what we have just heard, but we must not tire of raising our voices with Nigeria, which is, after all, a Commonwealth country with which we have very good relations. As a good friend to Nigeria, I would expect our distress to be heard loudly and clearly. The Foreign Office obviously needs to keep on passing on the message.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): May I take this opportunity to wish the Church Commissioner a very happy birthday? He, like me, does not count the years but makes the years count; we're at that age!

Further to the question of the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), there are missionaries from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Nigeria, including some from my constituency and across all of Northern Ireland. What discussions have taken place to ensure that support is available for ex-pat and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland missionaries in the regions we are discussing who are isolated and may be in a vulnerable position?

**Andrew Selous:** I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue, for his continued interest in it and for the magnificent work he does chairing the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. The Bishop of Guildford was recently in Nigeria, speaking out on behalf of all Christians, not just members of the Anglican communion, in Nigeria. The Church of England will keep on engaging in this issue—sometimes quietly, sometimes behind the scenes, but we will continue to speak truth to power.

## ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

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

### Postal Votes

3. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the security of postal votes. [904701]

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Speaker's Committee has not held recent discussions on the matter. The Electoral Commission has highlighted that voting by post is a safe and popular method of voting, with safeguards in place to protect against fraud. The voluntary code of conduct makes it clear that political parties and campaigners should not assist in completing a ballot paper or handle completed ballot papers. The commission encourages campaigners to follow this code.

**Kevin Brennan:** I think the Speaker's Committee should have discussions about this issue. Has my hon. Friend seen some recent examples of Conservative party leaflets, where people are being encouraged to return postal vote applications to Tory headquarters rather than back to the local authority, and where millions of people are being disenfranchised through lack of voter ID? Leaflets have also gone out—in Norwich, for example—saying that people do not need ID to vote. Should not the Electoral Commission take the view that although such practices may technically be legal, they are in fact harmful to our democracy?

**Cat Smith:** The code of conduct is of course voluntary, but the code of conduct for campaigners states that parties can provide applications for postal votes but the forms must include the address for the electoral registration officer as the preferred address, even if an alternative address is provided. Campaigners should send on any application forms they receive to the relevant address within two working days, and the commission recommends that any concerns that the code has been breached should be raised first with the candidate, political party or campaigner in question, and any further concerns should be drawn to the attention of the commission. The commission is aware of the Conservative party leaflet in Norwich and has had conversations with the party.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Grant Funding from Local Authorities

5. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): How the Church of England plans to spend grant funding from local authorities. [904703]

9. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): How the Church of England plans to spend grant funding from local authorities. [904708]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):** Grants that would cover kitchens, loos or disability access, basic repairs to roofs and windows and so on are in many cases unavailable to Church of England parish churches because of an inconsistency in the way in which local authorities are applying the law, and the Bishop of Bristol has tabled an amendment to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill to resolve this so that parish churches can apply for such grants, and I hope the Department will be supportive of it.

**Selaine Saxby:** I recently visited Meshaw Together near South Molton to discuss plans for its local church, St John the Baptist, reordering the church for wider community use. The project led by Jeff Souch and supported by the vicar was unsuccessful in securing platinum jubilee funding, but might I be able to meet with my hon. Friend to try to find additional funding that may be available for this community initiative that also secures the future of the church?

**Andrew Selous:** Yes, of course I will meet with my hon. Friend. I have also heard of the good work of St John the Baptist, Meshaw. The Church Commissioners

have given £11 million over the next three years to fund specialist support officers to advise on community projects of this nature and to help with fundraising. Small grants are available to help with repairs and towards buildings becoming net zero. Parishresources.org.uk may also provide helpful information. The Exeter diocese recently held a “meet the funders” day, to which more than 100 people turned up, to learn how churches such as St John the Baptist can approach funders such as the Benefact Trust. I encourage Meshaw to follow that up.

**Jerome Mayhew:** My hon. Friend has made reference to the speech of the Bishop of Bristol in the other place highlighting an apparent inconsistency between the Local Government Act 1972 and the 1894 Act, which gives cause for concern as to whether local government funding for Church buildings is legal. Does my hon. Friend recognise that as a serious concern, and if so how does he propose to clarify the issue?

**Andrew Selous:** My hon. Friend is right about the Bishop of Bristol, whose amendments in the other place have the support of heritage bodies and the National Association of Local Councils, whom I have also met on the issue. All we are asking is for Church of England parish churches to be treated the same as other faith and community buildings, which does not seem a lot to ask for, and I would hope that both my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and the Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), are listening hard to what I have said and representations will be made to Ministers about these issues.

### Parish Ministry

6. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to strengthen its parish ministry. [904704]

**Andrew Selous:** Parish ministry is at the heart of everything we do in the Church of England. Between 2023 and 2025, to support our mission to tell people the good news about Jesus Christ, we will distribute £1.2 billion—a 30% increase. The largest part of that funding will be used to revitalise parish ministry.

**Martin Vickers:** My hon. Friend will be well aware of concerns in congregations up and down the country about the diminishing number of priests. Will he assure the House that the Church will continue to do all it can to provide funds for the stipendiary ministries?

**Andrew Selous:** There has been an increase in the number of ordinands between 2016 and 2020, when we had 1,373 in total, including 591 starting training, which was the largest in a generation. There was a slight dip during the pandemic, but we are committed to continuing to train more priests; that is absolutely essential and is exactly what the Church of England wants to see.

### Trees

7. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Whether the Church of England is taking steps to plant more trees on its land. [904705]

**Andrew Selous:** Since 2014, the Church Commissioners have planted 819 acres of new woodland in the UK. Over the last two years we have bought 438 more acres

in south Wales and Angus in Scotland, to plant 350,000 more trees, subject to planning permission. Over the last five years we have planted 11.8 million trees globally.

**Mr Hollobone:** That is great news for Scotland, Wales and the rest of the world, but what about England’s green and pleasant land? England has, at 10%, the lowest tree coverage in Europe, so can we have more church trees, please, in England?

**Andrew Selous:** My hon. Friend speaks so well, not only for Kettering

but for England. He is right to draw attention to the fact that England is among the countries with the least tree cover in Europe. The Church absolutely wants to play its part in changing that. To help achieve that, it participated in the Queen’s green canopy initiative, including through work on an 8,000 mixed-tree plantation in north-west England. We also work with farming tenants across England to explore every possible planting opportunity, including planting trees in hedgerows, agri-forestry and field-scale woodland planting, and will carry on doing so.

### ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

*The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—*

#### Voter ID

8. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the implementation of voter ID in (a) Scotland, (b) Wales and (c) England ahead of local and national elections. [904707]

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Committee discussed the commission’s work supporting the implementation of the voter ID requirement at its recent public evidence session in March. A transcript of that session is available on the Committee’s website. The commission continues to support voters, campaigners and electoral administrators ahead of the implementation of the voter ID requirement at local elections in England next week. Its research shows that public awareness of the requirement increased from 22% in December to 76% at the end of March. Voter ID will also be required at police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales, UK parliamentary by-elections, and recall petitions from 3 May, and in general elections from October. The commission will run further public awareness activities and provide guidance for electoral administrators ahead of future elections, including in Scotland.

**Kirsten Oswald:** The SNP has consistently opposed the requirement for voter ID since it was brought in under the Elections Act 2022. The requirement is about to take effect for the first time in England. It will effectively disenfranchise many people, including disabled people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Given that only about 50,000 people have applied for the free ID certificate, while the number of voters without the necessary ID is thought to be about 2 million,



and given the gulf between the enfranchisement of older and younger voters, what steps will the Electoral Commission take to make sure that all people, even those who do not vote Conservative, can take part in elections?

**Cat Smith:** The commission has said that voter authority certificate applications were lower than might have been expected. That may reflect the number of people wishing to vote in the elections, the take-up of postal or proxy voting, or some voters not having taken action in time to meet the deadline, as the hon. Lady suggests. The commission will consider the levels of take-up and the reasons for them in its evaluation of the implementation of the requirement for voter ID, and that will include detailed public survey work. The commission has been working with key groups who have been identified as needing additional support to navigate voter ID requirements, including the over-85s; people with sight loss or learning disabilities; Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; people experiencing homelessness or living in refuges; trans and non-binary people; and anonymous voters.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May I raise the issue of the immunocompromised—people who are still shielding for fear of catching covid? If they turn up to a polling station next Thursday, they will be asked to remove their mask. What guidance has the Electoral Commission brought forward to protect the immunocompromised?

**Cat Smith:** I thank my hon. Friend for that interesting question. The guidance that the Electoral Commission has given to polling clerks is that face coverings will need to be removed so that identity can be verified. If he wishes to arrange a meeting with the Electoral Commission, I would be happy to co-ordinate that, as I know that this is an issue that he feels passionately about.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The additional voter processing will place more requirements on staff at polling stations. Has that resulted in any problems for local authorities in recruiting polling station staff?

**Cat Smith:** My hon. Friend is entirely correct: electoral administrators have been reporting difficulties to the Electoral Commission in recruiting polling station staff. That was the case in recent elections, too, but the issue

has been exacerbated by the new role that there will be in administering voter ID requirements. Local authorities are working to address recruitment difficulties, including by calling on staff who work in areas that do not have elections in May to work in the areas that do. Of course, there is the additional challenge of needing a woman at every polling station to verify the identity of women who wear face coverings for religious reasons.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Coronation

**10. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps the Church of England plans to take to mark the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III in (a) cathedrals and (b) other places of worship outside of London; and if he will make a statement. [904709]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):** There will be services and events all over the country in cathedrals and parish churches to celebrate the coronation. The one in Lichfield cathedral will be on Sunday 7 May, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will attend if he possibly can.

**Michael Fabricant:** My hon. Friend has put me on the spot, but I confirm that I will attend. I hope that reassures him. Could he quickly—or even slowly—outline what further work the Church of England is doing to engage people locally in the coronation?

**Andrew Selous:** I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Church is doing a great deal in that area. We are supporting the Big Help Out to promote volunteering, along with many charities and businesses, as well as the Big Lunch to break down barriers and combat loneliness. We also have Sing for the King and Ring for the King to promote choral singing and bell ringing, linked to the coronation. [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** You may well like campanology, Mr Fabricant, but I will leave that there.



## Voter ID

10.30 am

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities if he will make a statement on arrangements in place to record the number of voters who attend at a polling station and are denied a vote because they are not in possession of valid ID.

**The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean)**: It is vital that we keep our democracy secure. This Government stood on a manifesto commitment not only to protect the integrity of our elections but to enhance it. On that basis, this Government won a majority. We have introduced legislation to implement that commitment and we are now in the process of delivering on our promise. Voter identification is central to protecting our electoral system from the potential for voting fraud. Its implementation at the local elections next week brings the rest of the UK in line with Northern Ireland, where people have had to bring photographic ID to vote in elections since 2003. [*Interruption.*] I remind the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who is chuntering from a sedentary position, that that legislation was introduced by the then Labour Government under direct rule.

The data collection processes for polling stations are set out clearly in the Elections Act 2022 and the Voter Identification Regulations 2022. Polling station staff will record details of any electors turned away—should there be any—for the purposes of complaints or legal challenges and, in the short term, to provide data to evaluate the policy, which will be conducted by the Government and the Electoral Commission in line with the legislation that was voted on, debated and passed by this House.

The Electoral Commission has published suggested templates of the necessary forms and has updated its guidance in the polling station handbook to reflect the new processes. As required by legislation, the Government will publish a number of reports on the impact of the voter identification policy. Our intention is that the first of those reports will be published no later than November 2023. The data collected will be a significant part of that evaluation.

There are few tasks more important in public life, as I am sure every member of a political party represented in this House and the general public would agree, than maintaining the British public's trust in the sanctity of the ballot box in our democratic processes. We on the Government Benches take that duty very seriously. I look forward to our first experience of the policy in polling stations in Great Britain on 4 May.

**Mr Betts**: I was not my intention to get into an argument about the appropriateness of the policy. I was trying to recognise that it will be important to know the impact of the voter ID regulations once the elections have taken place. When people go to polling stations and are turned away because do not have the requisite ID, will those numbers be recorded? We know that if someone speaks to a polling clerk and is turned away, the total number of those people—not their names—will be recorded. But because of concerns about the collection

of people around polling stations, some authorities will have meeters and greeters outside who will check in advance, perhaps when people are in a queue, whether they have the required ID. We do not know whether people who are turned away at that point will have their numbers recorded—that is the confusion.

At a recent Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee hearing, Peter Stanyon, the chief executive of Association of Electoral Administrators, made this important point:

“The returning officers are required where they have a meeter-greeter to report those they have advised at the door and turned away, and those at the desk as well. They will be reported as two separate things...The base standard is it is at the desk, because that is where the ballot papers will be and that is where the question is asked. Where there is a meeter-greeter, the commission is asking for that statistic and the Government are asking for that statistic as well.”

So two sets of statistics will be collected. That seems fairly clear.

The problem is that this week the Electoral Commission said something very different. It said that when meeter-greeters turn someone away who does not have the voter ID that they should have, those numbers will not be counted. I have a simple question for the Minister: is it the Government's intention that that information will be collected, so the total number of people who attend a polling station but are denied a vote because they do not have the requisite ID will be counted?

Was the statement made by Peter Stanyon to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee correct? If it was correct, why did the Electoral Commission issue different advice this week? Was that information incorrect? Or, if it was correct, was the information provided by the Electoral Commission this week given with the consent and approval of the Government? If it was, and meeter-greeters are going to turn people away and the numbers are not going to be collected, how can it be said that it is the Government's intention to collect information that includes the number of people who are turned away? Surely both elements have to be added together in order to get the total numbers correct and to properly assess the impact of the measure.

**Rachel Maclean**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his forensic scrutiny, as we would expect from the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. I will make a couple of basic points, but it may be appropriate for me to follow up in writing, because he is referring to some conversations—[*Interruption.*] I would be grateful if the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) would stop chuntering so I can answer the question appropriately, because the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has requested a considerable amount of detail, which I am attempting to give.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I will make that decision; that is why I went shush. Carry on, Minister.

**Rachel Maclean**: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I will make a couple of points. First, the hon. Gentleman asked whether the Electoral Commission has been directed by the Government. That is not the case. As he will know, the Electoral Commission is a completely independent body. I was just present in the Chamber to listen to one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, the hon. Member

[*Rachel Maclean*]

for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), answering questions on behalf of the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission is subject to scrutiny and plays a vital role in these processes.

For the avoidance of doubt, I remind the House that we are very concerned to get the process of data collection correct. As set out in the voter identification regulations, data collection will take place in polling stations via two forms: the ballot paper refusal list and the voter identification evaluation form. The first records data in case of a later complaint or legal challenge. The latter records data for the purpose of evaluation of the policy. As has been discussed many times in the House, Cabinet Office research in 2021 showed that 98% of electors already have one of the accepted forms of photographic identification. An expired identification is also to be accepted if the photo remains a good likeness.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): Following the remarks made by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the key points are, first, whether people know they need voter ID, and I hope these questions and answers will help to encourage that; secondly, they need to take that ID; and thirdly, that if they go to a polling station without it, they can go home and get it. Will the Electoral Commission be able to tell how many people who were initially unable to vote were able to come back and vote?

Finally, did the Electoral Commission recommend voter ID in England in 2015? And am I right in thinking that it is not only in Northern Ireland that voters require ID, but in the Republic of Ireland as well?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank the Father of the House for his comments. He is right in saying that voter ID is required not only in Northern Ireland—introduced by a Labour Government—but in the Republic of Ireland, along with many other European countries and Canada. This country is currently an outlier, and many experts have made that point.

My hon. Friend mentioned the arrangements at polling stations. We all play an important part in raising awareness. All of us who have local elections coming up have certainly been playing our part in reminding voters that ID is essential. There is a free form for which people can apply, as well as the 20 other forms of ID that are acceptable at polling stations. Local authorities have been given additional funds to raise awareness, working with all communities to ensure that voter engagement is as high as it possibly can be.

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

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Colleagues will have been dismayed to learn that fewer than 90,000 of the up to 2 million people without appropriate ID have applied for a voter authority certificate. Voter ID has always been a solution in search of a problem. Millions of pounds have been squandered on this process, and we now find that hundreds of thousands of people have had their votes taken off them. The Minister talks of experts, but all the experts—the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Local Government Association—begged the Government not

to introduce voter ID for the May elections because there was not enough time. Ministers did not listen, and this is the consequence. The sole accountability is theirs. We wait to be shown the scale of this travesty; that is rightly a role for the independent review, but the review will work only if it has the correct data.

Last month, during oral questions, I raised the point that many returning officers intended to use greeters outside polling stations to turn away those without ID, and that those turned away would not count as having been denied votes. That is deeply wrong, and not acceptable. The Minister did not address this point in responding to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), so let me press her again. Whose advice is right? Will people who are turned away by someone outside a polling station who asked whether they had appropriate ID count as people who have been denied a vote, or will they not?

**Rachel Maclean:** I find it interesting that the hon. Gentleman has sought to rehash arguments that we have already had numerous times in this place, and I find it surprising that his party is not committed to protecting the sanctity of the ballot box. The reason we have had to introduce this legislation is the absolute fiasco that we have seen unfolding in Tower Hamlets and Birmingham over the years. We need to protect the sanctity of the ballot box, and that is what we are doing. We are introducing a number of measures to collect the data that will enable us to conduct the detailed analysis that is required by the legislation and by the electorate, and that is the right way of doing things.

May I ask why, if the Labour party is so opposed to voter ID, it requires ID for all its candidate selection meetings? Why have Labour Members stated time and again that they know full well that most people in this country have a valid form of ID? What is good enough for candidate selection in the Labour party should be good enough for our local elections.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I must tell the Minister that I am very uncomfortable with this policy. She is right to say that Tower Hamlets and other parts of the country are having problems, but they are principally about postal votes rather than personation. We have had one conviction in a decade in this context. The Electoral Commission said that the pilot was not big enough for conclusions to be drawn, although there was a reduction of up to 6% in turnout. In Northern Ireland, which the Minister cited, there was, according to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, a 2.3% reduction. I am afraid the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) had a valid point. Will the Minister please write to everyone, not just the hon. Gentleman, giving proper answers to his questions?

**Rachel Maclean:** Pilots have been conducted on a number of occasions in, I think, Woking and Pendle. A thorough study was carried out, and we found no evidence of turnout being lowered. We also observed very high engagement with the new processes. The forms of ID that were available were very clearly communicated to people. What is more, this policy intervention has served the purpose of raising public confidence in the sanctity of the electoral process, and I think we should all welcome that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am sure the Minister did not intend to give inaccurate information when she said that all Conservative candidates and campaigns have been giving out correct information. A leaflet went out in Norfolk saying that people do not need photographic ID, so they clearly failed to pass on the correct information there.

We in the SNP have consistently raised our opposition to voter ID, because it disproportionately disenfranchises vulnerable and under-represented groups such as disabled people, young people, trans and non-binary people, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Given that local councils, this place and politicians at all levels are disproportionately white, non-disabled, older and non-trans, what assessment have the Government made of the impact that requiring voter ID will have on the representativeness of democracy in these isles?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I would reflect that she and her party are extremely keen to rejoin the European Union and that very similar electoral systems operate in many EU countries, and in many other advanced western democracies. That is what we are seeking to introduce in this country.

Of course, the hon. Lady is right to highlight the need to make sure that various groups of society are not disenfranchised. Research has demonstrated that 99% of black and ethnic minority communities already possess a form of voter ID that is perfectly appropriate for voting. It is also the case that some ethnic communities are more disadvantaged by abuses at the ballot box, which is why we will always fight for all people in our United Kingdom to have trust and confidence in the sanctity of our electoral processes.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Mask wearers are to be required to remove their mask. Will the Government issue reassuring advice, drawing attention to the WhatsApp messages of the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) revealing that masks do not work, have no evidential base and were introduced only as a means of keeping up with the ultras in Scotland?

**Rachel Maclean:** I am satisfied that the Government are introducing all relevant public health advice, including to people who are clinically vulnerable. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) set out in detail some of the measures that will be taken in local authority polling stations.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): For this set of elections, bearing in mind they are taking place only in England, the Electoral Commission tells me that 250,000 to 350,000 people should have applied for a voter ID certificate. At the deadline, just 85,000 had been issued, despite the estimated £4 million advertising spend. Given that less than a third of voters requiring voter ID applied for this certificate, does the Minister accept that voter suppression has already occurred?

**Rachel Maclean:** No, I strongly reject that. I can see where this debate is going. Opposition Members are making shrill, hyperbolic and misguided claims that this is somehow voter suppression. I find that quite

extraordinary, given that the hon. Gentleman's constituency Labour party requires and expects its members to turn up with photographic ID when selecting candidates.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is typical flip-flopping from Labour Members, who are now campaigning to repeal laws that they introduced in Northern Ireland in 2003?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. When Labour Ministers introduced voter ID in Northern Ireland, they set out in great detail why the legislation was necessary. Why is it good enough for one valued part of our United Kingdom but not good enough for the electors of Great Britain?

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): As the Local Government Association indicated earlier this month, and as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) has reiterated, there are significant practical problems for polling clerks. Meanwhile, the chief executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators has said that discussions are taking place with the police for extra resources on polling day. With a week to go, can the Minister confirm whether enough polling clerks have been recruited and whether additional police resources have been secured to support the additional burden next Thursday? What strain will this place on police services?

**Rachel Maclean:** The hon. Lady is right to highlight all the practical work that is going on, and I want to thank local authorities very much for the way they have delivered those additional measures that are going to be needed, backed by £4.75 million of central Government funding through the new burdens process. Of course, the Government will take very seriously all the lessons learned about this exercise, but I return once more to the point: when this process was introduced in Northern Ireland, under a Labour Government, none of the issues that are being raised regularly by Opposition Members were found to have turned out in practice to be the case.

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Some elderly constituents have contacted me to say that they know they need voter ID next week and they look forward to their trip to the polling station. Will my hon. Friend confirm what types of voter ID will be acceptable on the day?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank my hon. Friend for the question and encourage all of her constituents, from whatever age group, to go to the polling station. There is a long list of valid forms of photo ID, and we know that 98% of the population hold one of them. I have the list here and it is available on gov.uk. I will not detain the House by reading them all out, but they include: driving licence; passport; blue badge; PASS—national Proof of Age Standards Scheme—card; the Young Scot card; the Post Office card; and of course the free voter authority certificate.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Let us get back to what is really going on here this morning. One week before these important elections, this Minister has turned up in the House of Commons to answer an urgent question to which she does not know the answer and



[Kevin Brennan]

has offered to write to Members of Parliament. That is utterly unacceptable. Will she return to the House later today, having asked Mr Speaker, to make a statement to this House and turn up with the information that she should have had when she got here, so that she can answer the question to which the House wants the answer?

**Rachel Maclean:** I firmly rebut that. I have made multiple comments answering the questions that Members have put to me. I also firmly rebut the accusations from Opposition Members suggesting that something is going on here other than protecting our electoral system in this great democracy, in which we are all proud to serve. [Interruption.]

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): Let us try to calm things down. In my hand, I have a senior railcard, which allows me to enter a polling station and vote. A young person's railcard, which is almost identical and carries a photograph, will not give them permission to vote. The Minister will be aware of allegations of vote rigging by this Government against younger people. What does she have against younger people? When a note is taken of who is turned away because they do not have identification, will the person's demographic characteristics be identified so that we can see whether or not the vote rigging against young people and other groups that has been alleged has taken place?

**Rachel Maclean:** There is no vote rigging going on here. Under the process that has been set out through regulations, when people who are turned away later return to the polling station with accepted ID, which includes many forms of ID that young people are accustomed to carrying because they need to prove their ID on many occasions, such as when going into pubs and clubs and having an alcoholic drink, legally that can be recorded only by a poll clerk or a presiding officer at the issuing desk. If they go into the polling station, the data would be recorded at that point.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): Let me ask a question that was asked earlier. I have grave issues with voter ID, but the Government are going to go ahead in any case, so let me ask a very straightforward question. The people who will be monitoring will perhaps have to turn somebody away, because they have turned up with proof of ID that has an old photograph—the person will think it is representative of them, but it is no longer representative because it is out of date, although apparently still a valid proof of ID. What training will people have had to be able to say to somebody, “You do not have the right to vote here today”?

**Rachel Maclean:** There has been extensive work and engagement with local authorities by the Electoral Commission, the Government and others to make sure that all possible scenarios and processes are followed properly to protect the sanctity of our electoral system.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): At a time when the majority of people are already not exercising their democratic right to vote in local council elections, this Conservative Government have introduced new

voter ID regulations that will remove the right to vote unobstructed for millions of Brits. The Minister is unable to answer the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), but perhaps she can answer this simple question: exactly how many cases of voter impersonation produced enough evidence to lead to a police caution?

**Rachel Maclean:** The hon. Gentleman makes a series of points that I do not accept. I do not recognise or accept in any shape or form the statements he has made on the Floor of this House that we are seeking to remove the right to vote. I think those were the words he mentioned. I remind him that 99% of young people already have a valid form of voter identification, and I have answered the question put to me on multiple occasions—it is just that Opposition Members do not like the answer.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister has said that people who are turned away at the desk by a qualified voting agent will have that fact recorded. However, if we are looking to understand what is going on as a result of the requirement for ID when voting, surely those people who are turned away by a meeter or greeter at the door must also be recorded, and it is important that the people doing that meeting and greeting are properly trained to do it? Will the Minister go away and give some thought to that point, which she has completely ignored? It will obfuscate any attempt to understand what is going on if people are being turned away at the door and not recorded.

**Rachel Maclean:** I have not obfuscated or ignored the point. I have been clear that the data on people who are turned away and who later return to the polling station with accepted ID will be recorded by a polling clerk or a presiding officer at the issuing desk. As has been discussed many times in this House, with the arguments rehearsed by many hon. Members, the greeters outside the polling station have an important role to play. However, I am sure that hon. Members can appreciate that, if someone decides not to exercise the right to vote, in a free and democratic society it is not for an agent of a local authority to ask intrusively why that person decides not to vote.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wonder whether the Minister can help me with this. Will lower turnout in the local elections next month be regarded by Ministers as a success or a failure in terms of what they are trying to achieve?

**Rachel Maclean:** What the Government are trying to achieve, and what this Conservative Government were elected to do, is to improve public confidence in the process of the exercise of our democracy. I note for the right hon. Lady that, when similar systems have been introduced in other major advanced western democracies, public confidence in the process of voting has gone up. We are an outlier at the moment and we need to bring ourselves into line with accepted practice.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am a bit puzzled, so let me ask the Minister this: does she actually understand the difference between universal suffrage elections, such as the local elections coming up, and internal party elections?



**Rachel Maclean:** Of course I do.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Minister simply has not answered the question whether, if people turn up outside and are turned away outside, they will be counted in the data. She has just read out a note that said they will be counted if they later return. If they do not return, will they be counted or not? Will she answer the question?

**Rachel Maclean:** I refer the hon. Lady to my earlier remarks, where I answered the question clearly.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I think the Minister was in her place when my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) answered my question at Electoral Commission questions. There is only a week left until the local elections, and the Minister knows there are a number of immuno-compromised people for whom catching covid could still be deadly. They will be required to remove their face masks at the polling station. Can she look urgently at getting that changed in time for Thursday, so that those people who can prove they are immunocompromised do not face the requirement to remove their face mask in order to get a ballot paper?

**Rachel Maclean:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to the remarks I made when questioned on this precise point earlier. I also refer him to the remarks made in great detail by the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who was answering for the Electoral Commission, about all the work that has gone on to make sure we protect public health in this situation.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): According to reports this week, it is estimated that only 4% of the 2 million people who do not have valid ID have applied for a voter authority certificate. I am extremely concerned that many of my constituents will not be able to vote on 4 May. What assessment have the Government made of the number of people in Wirral West who will not be able to vote on 4 May because they do not have photo ID?

**Rachel Maclean:** I say again that it is a shame that Opposition Members are attempting to engage in this hysterical scaremongering. The hon. Lady's voters in Wirral West, just like voters across Great Britain, have been given all the information they need through the extensive work that this Government have done alongside the Electoral Commission. We know that 98% of her voters in Wirral West will already possess a valid form of voter ID.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It seems that there is considerable anger out there—according to my postbag, anyway—that the desired effect of this Government's actions seems to be discouraging people from voting. I have two concerns. The first is about what will happen in polling stations when volunteers and local authority officers have to confront disgruntled voters. What safety measures will the Minister put in place? Secondly, in terms of the meet and greet, if data is important, surely the simple solution is to place an additional officer outside the polling station to collect that data.

**Rachel Maclean:** I do not in any way recognise the statement that the hon. Gentleman made about considerable anger. In fact, nationwide polling indicates precisely the opposite. The public are actually satisfied, and they are pleased that we are taking the necessary steps to increase confidence in the voting system. It is something that this Government were elected to do, and we are getting on and doing it.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Some 96% of people without ID still do not have any ID at all to show when they vote, so the Government's implementation of their own policy has been completely abysmal. Let us try to be pragmatic. Since it is an electronic process, why can there not be emergency measures at polling stations to enable someone who turns up to vote without ID to create their ID? They would then have the right to vote, and their democracy would not be denied.

**Rachel Maclean:** The Government simply do not recognise the figures that Members are using or the false voter suppression narrative that they are putting forward. We know that 98% of the electorate already have voter ID. We know that many of the people who have not registered for a free voter authority certificate live in areas that do not have elections, so they do not need to register for a certificate. We also know that turnout is sometimes lower than we would like it to be; that is very disappointing, and we all want turnout to go up. We all know from knocking on doors, as I am sure the hon. Lady does assiduously in her constituency, that sometimes people just do not want to vote. We live in a free country. We cannot compel people to vote. We do not have a compulsory voting system.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What an absolute and utter mess! I have rarely seen a performance so inept and ill-informed as the Minister's this morning. The Government cannot even tell us how those they are disenfranchising will be recorded. All I can say is, thank goodness that in Scotland we will have nothing to do with this voter suppression mechanism for elections under our responsibility. Does the example of the Norfolk Tory leaflet not show us that what they are doing is introducing voter fraud where none existed?

**Rachel Maclean:** The hon. Gentleman's comments do him no credit. I will directly address the remarks about the Norfolk leaflet. The people responsible apologised straightaway. It went through, I am told, 200 doors. It was a mistake. The leaflet has been withdrawn. If he has been listening to my remarks throughout this session, he will know of the extensive work that has gone on to set out all the ways people can vote, the Government's position on this, and the way that we have worked with local authorities and the Electoral Commission.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Apologies, Mr Speaker, for missing the start of the urgent question. May I ask the Minister when the data will be published, and will she ensure that it is published within 28 days of 4 May?

**Rachel Maclean:** Yes. I set that out in the earlier part of my answer to the urgent question, which I am afraid the hon. Lady missed.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. In Northern Ireland, most people know that voter ID is a requirement to vote, unlike in the UK currently. I always try to be helpful and constructive in my comments. We in Northern Ireland accept—this is in reference to what the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) said—out-of-date ID that still has a likeness to the individual. May I ask the Minister to consider that when allowing individuals to vote in England, as I believe that there is a legal right to use the franchise? Any form of photo ID, whether it is out of date or not, should and must be sufficient.

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. He is probably the only Member of this House who has real experience of the system working.

**Kevin Brennan:** No, he is not. There are other MPs from Northern Ireland.

**Rachel Maclean:** I stand corrected by the hon. Gentleman who is speaking from a sedentary position. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is the only such Member I can see in front of me, present in the Chamber and participating, bringing his experience of the system in Northern Ireland. He is right that, as I set out earlier, a photographic ID that is a little out of date but in which the likeness can still be established is a relevant form of ID that will be accepted.

**Mr Betts:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just after I started asking my urgent question, I received a letter from the chair of the Electoral Commission John Pullinger, in which he says that the only data recorded will be those recorded by the polling clerks when people get to the desks to try to cast their vote and do not have voter ID.

He accepts that the numbers of people met by meeters and greeters and turned away without voter ID cannot be recorded, which will compromise the data that is collected by the polling clerk, so the Electoral Commission will publish two sets of data: one from polling stations without meeters and greeters and one from polling stations with them. How can that be a sensible and co-ordinated information collection to show the actual impact of the measure?

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you for the point of order. Minister, are you happy to answer that?

**Rachel Maclean:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to be able to answer that. This has been referred to many times during the debate. Of course, I have not seen the particular letter to which the hon. Member refers. To answer the substantive points that he has put to me, the greeters will not collect the data, as I have said already from the Dispatch Box. The chair of the Electoral Commission, the former national statistician, has said that that would risk providing inaccurate data in an inconsistent way. Those are important factors that we need to take into account in our deliberations. All poll clerks have been trained to record data accurately, and we have provided new burdens funding. As is right after introducing any new policy, there will of course be a full evaluation of it, of which formal data collection in the polling station will be only one part.

**Mr Speaker:** As Chair of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, will the Minister write to me as well to clarify whether those data are recorded? Then I have a very clear answer when Members come to me in that role.

## Ukraine

11.8 am

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Defence Secretary to make a statement on the war in Ukraine.

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison)**: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the question. On Friday, the Defence Secretary met his counterparts at Ramstein air base for the 11th meeting of the Ukraine defence contact group. The focus was on accelerating the delivery of military aid packages for Ukraine as they plan to expel Russian forces from illegally occupied Ukrainian territory. The message from Ramstein was clear: international support for Ukraine is growing. More countries than ever are attending; donations are increasing, and their delivery is accelerating.

We are one of the leading providers of military support for Ukraine and were the first country to donate modern main battle tanks. We have now completed delivery of this matériel and training package, which included a squadron of Challenger 2 tanks, along with their ammunition, spares, and armoured recovery vehicles; AS-90 self-propelled guns, sufficient to support two brigades with close support artillery; more than 150 armoured and protected vehicles; and hundreds more of the most urgently needed missiles, including for air defence.

The UK-led international fund for Ukraine encourages donations from around the world and stimulates industrial supply of cutting-edge technologies for Ukraine's most vital battlefield requirements. The first bidding round raised £520 million-worth of donations, receiving 1,500 expressions of interest from suppliers across 40 countries. The second bidding round opened on 11 April, and the UK is calling for further national donations and is calling on industry to provide its most innovative technologies, especially for air defence.

A total of 14,000 Ukrainian recruits have now returned from the UK to defend their homeland, trained and equipped for operations, including trench clearance, battlefield first aid, crucial law of armed conflict awareness, patrol tactics and rural environment training. In all its dimensions, the higher quality of training for Ukrainian soldiers provided by the UK armed forces and their counterparts from nine other nations has proven battle-winning against Russian forces. The UK will develop the training provided according to Ukraine's requirements, including the extension to pilots, sailors and marines. It is now expected to reach 20,000 trained recruits this year.

**Mr Speaker**: Ahem.

**Dr Murrison**: The UK will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes, and will spend another £2.3 billion on military support for Ukraine this year. By making that commitment, we will strengthen Ukraine's position in negotiations, guard its long-term sovereignty and enable Ukraine to deter by denial. The UK people can be proud of their support. We are leading in Europe in providing brave Ukrainians with the training, equipment and ammunition urgently needed to ensure that they prevail.

**Mr Speaker**: Excellent. I do not have a bad chest; if we can stick to three minutes, that is always helpful.

**John Healey**: All eyes are on Sudan. We want British nationals to get out during the ceasefire while they can. We pay tribute to the UK armed forces and to Foreign Office and Border Force staff for leading the evacuation. That is why this urgent question is so important: the Government have to be able to do more than one thing at once. The Defence Secretary has 60,000 MOD staff, but I am concerned that the momentum behind our military help is faltering and that our UK commitment to Ukraine is flagging.

The Defence Secretary has made no statements on Ukraine since January. No new weapons have been pledged to Ukraine since February. There has been no 2023 action plan for Ukraine, which was first promised last August. No priorities have been set for the Ukraine recovery conference in London in June. The Prime Minister said in February that:

"The United Kingdom will be the first country to provide Ukraine with longer-range weapons."

What and when? Like the Minister, the Defence Secretary said on Friday that military aid "delivery is accelerating". How and what? The UK-led international fund for Ukraine, which the Minister mentioned, was launched last August, but only one contract has been signed so far. Why? The International Criminal Court has put out an arrest warrant for Putin. Where is the UK support for the special tribunal? Some 5,000 Ukrainians were registered homeless last month. Who is sorting this out?

The Minister knows that the Government have had and will continue to have Labour's fullest support for military aid to Ukraine and for reinforcing NATO allies. We welcomed the £2 billion in the spring Budget for stockpiles, but with no new money for anything else except nuclear, how will the defence Command Paper in June deal with inflation, fill capacity gaps and respond to the increasing threats? Finally, the British public are strongly behind Ukraine. They want to know that the Government are not weakening in their resolve to support Ukraine, confront Russian aggression and pursue Putin for his war crimes.

**Dr Murrison**: I will do my best to take note of your bad throat, Mr Speaker, and to keep my remarks brief.

I think that the right hon. Gentleman is being just a little unfair. I am sure that President Zelensky would feel the same way—he certainly did when he came here in February to sign the London accord. It is pretty clear that the UK is leading in Europe. As I said in my opening remarks, the Ukraine recovery conference in June proves that. The UK has been instrumental in this process. We led the instigation of the international fund for Ukraine, and £520 million, of which £300 million has been expended, is really quite an achievement. I think the right hon. Gentleman knows full well, because he is smiling at me, that the UK has been in the van of this. I am proud of the UK people in supporting brave and courageous Ukrainians in their fight against Putin's aggression.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about war crimes and he is right to do so. He will know that the atrocity crimes advisory group, which again is heavily influenced by the UK, includes input from, for example, the Metropolitan police's war crimes unit. In every dimension in this country, we are taking a lead. I appreciate his



[*Dr Murrison*]

need to attack the Government in this and other areas, but in the specifics of this—in our leadership in Europe and in Ukraine—the UK is more than playing its part. We are leaders. I am really proud of that, and the British people should be too.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the right hon. and gallant Gentleman.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What estimate has the Minister made of the continuing ability of Ukraine to deny air superiority to Russia?

**Dr Murrison:** Ukraine continues to prevail in all dimensions of this conflict. My right hon. Friend will be aware that we have been active, and the international fund that I just referred to is certainly active, in providing air defence. That is crucial in winning this for Ukraine, and we will continue to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The current situation in Bakhmut is dire, with Russian forces pounding the town with rockets, mortars, attack drones and phosphorous incendiary bombs, which are banned under the Geneva convention. Russian forces have occupied the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant since last month, and they are now taking up positions on the roofs of reactor buildings. That raises the concern of damage in future fighting and the threat to the population should that occur. The Wagner mercenary group has admitted to killing hundreds of people who were sheltering in a basement, including 40 children.

What are the UK Government doing to get defensive weapons, in particular ammunition, to Bakhmut as soon as possible? Are the UK Government co-ordinating with producers and European allies with regard to the provision of iodine tablets and radiation treatment? Will the Government step up further the sanctions against the despicable Wagner mercenary group?

**Dr Murrison:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I share her sentiments entirely. There is no excuse for nuclear blackmail at Zaporizhzhia or anywhere else. I am appalled by the war of attrition in Bakhmut. It is a most appalling slur on the continent that we call home, and it will be an enduring slur on Putin's Russia. In terms of protection, I am pleased to say that the International Atomic Energy Agency is monitoring the situation in Ukraine, and the UK obviously stands ready to be of assistance in any way that it can be.

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): I, too, am surprised at the tone taken by the shadow Secretary of State in this urgent question. The support we have continued to give Ukraine is a great source of pride. Will the Minister say what efforts we are making to replenish our own stocks of weapons? Our generosity has come at a cost, and it is important that Britain continues to keep its own arms ready for any eventuality.

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend is, of course, absolutely correct. He will have noted the £5 billion in the integrated review refresh and the spring Budget, some of which

will be used for the purpose he has described. However, let us be clear: the munitions we are expending in Ukraine are doing what munitions are meant to do, which is to defend a democratic country that has been the subject of the most appalling aggression against its territorial integrity, against international humanitarian law and every recognisable tenet of international law. I make no apology for using our munitions in that way.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State is absolutely right that it is unacceptable that we have not had a statement since January. In order to hold the Government to account, which is our job, we need to have statements on a regular basis. This is not critical of the Government, in the sense that they have been doing quite a lot to support Ukraine, and this Parliament has been very strong in its support for that. However, we are here to hold the Government to account.

My specific question to the Minister concerns munitions. What is the current situation in terms of stockpiles? I know he will not be able to give actual figures—I get that—but, having identified problems earlier this year, where are we now in being able to build up the stockpiles of munitions not only to supply Ukraine, but to keep our own stockpiles?

**Dr Murrison:** Plainly, we have to concentrate on the conflict before us, and that is what we are doing in providing munitions to assist Ukraine. The hon. Gentleman will have noted in my comments to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) the reference to the IRR and the spring Budget, which provided a substantial uplift to Treasury funding to enable the UK to replenish what has been expended. However, I do not think that should diminish in any way our support and donations to Ukraine. That would be very foolish and against our interests, not to mention the interests of our brave Ukrainian friends.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving the House an update on the position in Ukraine. Clearly, we are going to be involved in providing more and more sophisticated weaponry and support to the Ukrainians. What role will our armed forces play in both this country and Ukraine in delivering those munitions and armaments, and will we get involved in an escalation of the war with Russia?

**Dr Murrison:** I hope there will not be an escalation in the war between Ukraine and Russia. The whole point is that ultimately we have to come to a diplomatic settlement, and I would urge all parties to dial this down. However, it is about not just munitions and armaments, but training. I have seen for myself our training efforts. Those are vital, as I referred to in my remarks, and will be ongoing. We will have trained 20,000 Ukrainians by the end of this year—a quite extraordinary effort. There is no point in having matériel without the training that goes with it.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): It will take at least a decade to replenish our depleted ammunition stockpiles, so, besides the £2 billion, what actual action has come from the stockpile review ordered by the Prime Minister back in February, and where on earth is the action plan to grow our defence industrial capacity?



**Dr Murrison:** Negotiations with our defence partners are ongoing. This conflict is—what?—14 months old. The industry can move at pace, and I pay tribute to the rapidity with which it has provided armaments through the co-ordination cell in Poland and the UK-led international fund. I think the hon. Lady should reflect on how fast that has been put together and its effectiveness in delivering what Ukraine wants to have. This is a Ukraine-led process. We need to provide Ukraine with what it thinks it needs to prosecute this conflict.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): I, too, am proud of our nation's history of defending against despots across the world, and of the way we are taking the lead in this horrific war. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that we will maintain our UK military presence inside Ukraine to look after our diplomatic missions there?

**Dr Murrison:** Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Clearly, diplomacy is what will deal with this situation eventually. For that to happen, we need to ensure that those engaged in that diplomacy are properly protected, which is what our troops, such as they are in Ukraine, will be endeavouring to do.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I absolutely believe that what happened to the Nord Stream gas pipeline in the Baltic is connected with the situation in Ukraine. Yesterday, I raised by point of order the fact that the Admiral Vladimirsky Russian spy ship has been sailing round the Beatrice wind farm, the electrical interconnector to my constituency and other North sea assets that are vital to the UK. What assurance can I have that the UK is doing everything to protect these vital assets?

**Dr Murrison:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; it is an issue that probably exercises the minds of policy makers right across northern Europe. He will be aware of an investigation by Sweden, Denmark and Germany on the Nord Stream interdiction. It would be wrong to speculate further on attribution for that at this particular point, but I think we can make some informed guesses about who might be responsible. He is correct about the issue of subsea surveillance; critical national infrastructure needs to be protected. I am more than happy to talk to him at length about where we think this matter is going and what further measures we will take to ensure that there is no maritime interdiction that will attack our critical national infrastructure, particularly that which is subsea.

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): With the much-rumoured spring offensive that is likely to come quite soon, we will see an escalation in the conflict and fighting. What consideration has the Minister given to further humanitarian support, particularly through ambulances and 4x4s? From my trips to Ukraine, I know that they are in desperately short supply and are needed.

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a short-term humanitarian imperative. There is also the task of rebuilding Ukraine for the longer term, and we are engaged with both those things. He is right about the need for ambulances; I would say armoured ambulances, which have been a big ask from the Ukrainians. We have provided a fleet of CVR(T)—combat vehicle

reconnaissance (tracked)—Saracen ambulances in particular, which are doing good work in Ukraine. We will continue to provide those, and to note and take action on all requests we get from the Ukrainian surgeon general.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The courage and determination of the Ukrainian people in the face of Putin's aggression is an inspiration to us all, but it is also a challenge to us to ensure that if we cannot match it, we at least reflect it in the level and consistency of our military and humanitarian support. We cannot do that unless we replenish and backfill our military stockpiles, so can I ask the Minister for a plan or some indication of how our defence procurement is changing or adapting to ensure that our military stockpiles are at the levels that are needed?

**Dr Murrison:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The imperative at the moment is to get to Ukraine the munitions that it needs to prosecute what it needs to do, but in the longer term we need a more agile way of ensuring that we can replenish munitions and that the industry can provide us with what we need more quickly. That work is ongoing, but I refer her again to the announcement made in the Budget, which she should welcome, of an uplift of about £5 billion to deal with our nuclear endeavour and with stockpiles. But that is not enough, because we—and all nations—need to be more agile in our provision for conflicts of this sort, and to ensure that in doing this we do not leave ourselves vulnerable. The point is well made. We are all moving at pace to ensure that we can replenish munitions much quicker than we have been able to previously.

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): We are all incredibly proud of the support that we have given to Ukraine in terms of kit and training. The key enabler of success in modern warfare is interoperability. Will my right hon. Friend update us on what measures we are taking ahead of the NATO summit in July to enhance and strengthen Ukrainian interoperability with NATO forces?

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend is right, and he can be assured that we are working with the Ukrainians to ensure that that interoperability is there. I have to say that historically, even among NATO members, it has often been very difficult to get one system or one country to work with another. That has been a long-standing theme throughout the whole of NATO's history, so it should not be underestimated. Vilnius will deal with it in some considerable depth and detail, and I hope that in future—as we anticipate the defence of Ukraine for the long term—that interoperability will be greatly enhanced.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his earlier response, but can he say what longer-range weapons the UK will provide to Ukraine and when they will be supplied?

**Dr Murrison:** The AS-90 is a good artillery piece, and Ukraine will certainly find it a great benefit in doing what it has to do. The aim of our support to Ukraine is to enable it to defend itself; it most certainly is not to go beyond that. It is defensive, which is why ground-to-air is so important. It is also important to consider the UK's position going forward in terms of the artillery

[*Dr Murrison*]

provided to our own military. That piece of work is going on at pace so that we can find a replacement for the AS-90 that is fit to face down the threat we may have from Russia and others in future.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): May I put on record my thanks to the British Government and public for their ongoing support for the people of Ukraine? We are proud to have a number of Ukrainians living in my constituency. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the package of kit and equipment announced by the Secretary of State in January, which included the Challenger 2 tanks and the AS-90s, has now been delivered to Ukraine?

**Dr Murrison:** Yes.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Can the Minister say when the Defence Secretary last spoke to the NATO Secretary-General about the announcement he has made today and about the Chinese negotiations?

**Dr Murrison:** I cannot give the right hon. Lady an answer to that, but I am more than happy to write to her.

**Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to match or exceed the £2.3 billion in aid funding to Ukraine this year. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that that funding will not come out of the core Defence budget, so that we can keep our troops at home, safe and well equipped, while continuing to support efforts in Ukraine.

**Dr Murrison:** I can give my hon. Friend the assurance he seeks.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As we have already heard this morning, the Wagner Group has admitted killing 40 children, and hundreds of civilian adults sheltering them, in a basement in Bakhmut. It is also implicated in destabilising the situation in Sudan. Why are the UK Government dragging their feet on declaring that organisation a trans-national terror organisation?

**Dr Murrison:** Sanctions have been placed on 1,500 people and 120 entities in connection with this conflict, including the Wagner Group and Yevgeny Progozhin.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I think the Minister was slightly unfair to the shadow Secretary of State in saying that he welcomed and understood his attacking: my hon. Friend was not attacking but doing his proper and constitutional job, as a spokesperson for His Majesty's loyal Opposition, of holding the Government to account. If this war is to drag on for some time, as it seems it will, maintaining the focus of the British Government will be essential. What can the Minister say to us about ensuring that that focus is not lost in Government as we move forward?

**Dr Murrison:** I can assure the hon. Gentleman that it is not lost. I probably would not trust a member of the Government to make that assertion, but President Zelensky himself has made it plain in his remarks that the UK

has played a formidable leadership role in ensuring that his country can repel Putin's barbarism and the atrocity committed upon the state of Ukraine by Putin's Russia.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I am proud that the UK has taken a lead on Ukraine and has brought together allies from across the world to play their part. One of the ways that we have done that is through the British armed forces training programme, bringing those Ukrainian armed forces personnel up to speed with the latest fighting techniques. Given that the winter lull is now ending on the ground in Ukraine and we are anticipating a major increase in fighting, what are the Government doing with our allies to speed up that programme of training Ukrainian forces once again?

**Dr Murrison:** I visited the Ukrainians training in the UK and spoke with them and their trainers. They are an extraordinary bunch of people. I am truly humbled to be able to share some of their accounts. By the end of the year we will have trained 20,000 of them. The quality of our training is peerless, right across the domains that one would expect. It is materially contributing to Ukraine's fighting effectiveness. Importantly, it inculcates the sorts of standards and practices that one would expect of a responsible, civilised country, in stark contrast to Putin's Russia.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Given the seriousness of the situation, why are Ministers pressing ahead with further cuts to the British Army, with troop numbers estimated to fall by a further 10,000?

**Dr Murrison:** The hon. Lady should be careful about what she reads in the press. We have been consistent in our support for the armed forces. I am grateful for the shadow Secretary of State's support for what the Government are trying to achieve in Ukraine, but it is a pity that Opposition Members are sometimes not similarly supportive of the men and women of our armed forces and defence in the UK.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What estimate has the Minister made of the number of Ukrainian children who have been kidnapped by Russian forces? What support has been offered to Ukrainian forces to return those children to their parents?

**Dr Murrison:** The removal of children from Ukraine to Russia is truly shocking and heartrending. The best we can hope for is that Putin sees the reputational damage that it delivers to him and his country and reverses his policy. We have seen some indication in recent times of some children being returned to their parents. It is a truly shocking element of a truly horrendous conflict, and we know precisely who to blame for it.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): We all want the Ukrainian counter-offensive to be successful. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) was right to challenge the Government on whether they are adhering to their commitments. On the point about long-range missiles, which my right hon. Friend and others have pressed the Minister on, can he tell us whether the MOD is now walking back from the Prime Minister's commitment to offer further long-range missiles? If it is, when will we hear more detail and clarity on how many more long-range missiles, and what sort, will be issued to Ukrainian forces?

**Dr Murrison:** Our provision of munitions, in concert with others, is driven by the Ukrainian ask and our ability to deliver them. That was discussed at Ramstein and will be discussed further at Vilnius, subject to the second round of the international fund call that opened on 11 April. It is important to understand that a lot of that will be driven by the international fund's executive panel. Obviously, it will listen closely to what President Zelensky and his advisers feel they need to repel this most awful invasion of his country. However, the hon. Gentleman needs to understand the true extent of what the UK has done. Not only has it led Europe in providing munitions and training, but it has provided the bulk of the £520 million that populates the UK-led international fund for Ukraine. That is a substantial achievement.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** In the face of a Russian invasion, we must continue to support and stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. But this war has exposed how the Conservative Government have underfunded and hollowed out our armed forces over the last 13 years. Six months ago, we were told that we had 227 Challenger 2 tanks. Now the Minister for Armed Forces advises us that, with 14 in Ukraine, we have 157 deployable or deployed tanks. What has happened to the other 56?

**Dr Murrison:** As the hon. Gentleman should know, we committed to 148 Challenger 3 upgrades in the integrated review refresh. That remains our position. But if he is going to make a defence spending commitment on behalf of his party, I will be delighted to hear it—in particular how much more he would spend beyond what was announced in the spring Budget.

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** A few moments ago, the Minister said that we must give to Ukraine what Ukraine tells us it needs. All of us here will have been in Westminster Hall to hear President Zelensky's impassioned speech. Several weeks later, I and many others had the privilege of listening to the Ukrainian ambassador and the Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, who reiterated their needs and demands, which were very clear: they asked for planes and munitions. Can the Minister update us?

**Dr Murrison:** Yes, I can. Ukraine has had munitions from the international community, and in particular from the United Kingdom. I have just said that the UK is in the lead when it comes to donations to Ukraine. The hon. Gentleman is right to press me about planes. We plan to train pilots to operate jets. That will take a long time—it will not happen overnight—and it is no good in the acute war-fighting phase of this particular conflict. But that training is important to guarantee the long-term integrity of Ukraine, and we remain committed to that.

**Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind):** The demand for prosthetic limbs in Ukraine continues to climb owing to the conflict. The director of the Without Limits mechanical prosthetics clinic in Kyiv has stated that the best prosthetics come from the UK. What steps are Ministers taking to ensure that we continue to support Ukraine in meeting that demand?

**Dr Murrison:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that point. Recently, I was pleased to visit the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall, which is recognised internationally as a centre of excellence. Its expertise will undoubtedly influence how Ukraine develops its capacity in prosthetics. I am giving every encouragement to that process. I have also spoken to the Ukrainian surgeon-general about what she feels will be required as we go forward. The hon. Lady is right to point out that we do prosthetics very well, and I am pleased to have been involved with that in the past. I am pleased that, going forward—it will take a long time—the UK will be right at the forefront of the efforts to ensure that those who, sadly, have been injured in this terrible conflict are provided with the prosthetics and rehabilitation that they require.

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Is this relevant to the urgent question?

**Stephanie Peacock:** Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you advise me whether it is in order for Ministers to suggest that Opposition Members do not support our armed forces when we are doing our job in holding this Government to account? I take strong offence at the words the Minister stated. I am a member of the Royal College of Defence Studies, I completed two of the parliamentary armed forces schemes, and I have served on Labour's Front Bench as part of the Defence team.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. It is up to the Minister if he wishes to respond to it; if he does not, I am sure he will consider the points she has made.

**Dr Murrison:** I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for articulating her support to the men and women of our armed forces. I am very pleased she has said that and put it on the record, and I am sure they will be extremely grateful to her.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** We will leave it at that.



## Gambling Act Review White Paper

11.45 am

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the Government's proposals for gambling reform.

Gambling is a hugely popular pastime, which has been part of our British life for centuries. Ours has always been a freedom-loving democracy where people are entitled to spend their money how they please and where they please, and millions choose to spend some of their hard-earned money on the odd bet on a match or a race without any problems. This popularity has seen our betting companies balloon in size and become big contributors to both our economy and, in the taxes they provide, to our public services.

But, with the advent of the smartphone, gambling has been transformed: it is positively unrecognisable today, in 2023, from when the Gambling Act was introduced in 2005. Temptation to gamble is now everywhere in society, and while the overwhelming majority is done safely and within people's means, for some the ever-present temptation can lead them to a dangerous path. When gambling becomes addiction, it can wreck lives: shattered families; lost jobs; foreclosed homes; jail time; suicide. These are all the most extreme scenarios, but it is important to acknowledge that, for some families, those worst fears for their loved ones have materialised: parents like Liz and Charles Ritchie, whose son, Jack, took his own life while travelling in Hanoi after years of on-off addiction. Gambling problems in adults have always been measured in terms of money lost, but we cannot put a cost on the loss of dignity, the loss of identity and in some cases the loss of life it can cause.

We need a new approach that recognises that a flutter is one thing, but unchecked addiction is another. Today we are bringing our pre-smartphone regulations into the present day with a gambling White Paper for the digital age.

Before I go into the details of how we remove some of the blind spots in the system, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), as well as my predecessors my right hon. Friends the Members for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) and for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), who have all led the work at various stages, and in particular the Minister for sport, gambling and civil society, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who has driven this work in government over recent months. There have also been some outstanding contributions to the debate from individual Members of this House, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), my hon. Friends the Members for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), for Shipley (Philip Davies), for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), and the hon. Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), and from the other place.

The proposals encapsulated in our blueprint draw on that knowledge and combine it with the best available evidence and insights in the 16,000 submissions received in response to our call for evidence. That is what this White Paper will deliver, with proposals for reform that cover six key areas. These proposals build on our strong track record of acting in punters' interests through measures such as: cutting stakes on fixed odds betting terminals in 2019; banning credit card gambling and reforming online VIP schemes in 2020; introducing new limits to make online slots safer in 2021; and upgrading rules on identifying and intervening to protect people showing signs of harm in 2022.

First, we want to tackle some of the challenges unique to online gambling. Campaigners have told me that one element that differentiates problem gambling from many other forms of addiction is that it often takes place in secret, so we will force companies to step up their checks on when losses are likely to be unaffordable or harmful for punters. Companies must already intervene when they know that a customer is spending vast sums, but this change will better protect those least able to afford even small losses. We also plan to bring online slots games more into line with bricks-and-mortar equivalents by introducing a stake limit on online slots of between £2 and £15, subject to consultation.

Secondly, we know that many addicts find that each time they break free from the temptation to gamble, they are drawn back into the orbit of online companies with the offer of a free bet or some free spins. To help to stop problem gamblers being bombarded, the Gambling Commission has beefed up its rules on online VIP schemes—which has already resulted in a 90% reduction in the number of those schemes—and will now consult on ensuring that bonus offers are not being deployed in ways that only exacerbate harm.

That brings me to the third item, which is our regulator. We can all agree that we need a robust, data-savvy and proactive regulator that can stand up to the giant companies that it regulates, so my Department will ensure that the Gambling Commission has the appropriate resources to support this work and deliver the commitments in the White Paper. No one should be denied an innocent flutter, but the public should not have to bear the cost of treatment when a punter becomes an addict. One important element that will be introduced—backed by campaigners and also by many in the House—is a statutory levy to turn the tables on problem gambling, requiring gambling companies to fund more groundbreaking research, education and treatment.

Fourthly, we need to redress the power imbalance between punters and gambling companies when things go wrong. People who find that they have lost out owing to operator failures need to know that all is not lost. We will work with industry and the Gambling Commission to create a non-statutory ombudsman who will give customers a single point of contact.

I know that the fifth element—doing more to protect children—unites the whole House. Gambling is an adult activity, and it must remain an adult activity. That is one of the main reasons why I applauded the decision taken by the Premier League a fortnight ago to remove gambling sponsorships from players' shirt fronts in the coming seasons, and it is the reason why we are ensuring children cannot engage in any form of gambling either online or on widely accessible scratchcards.



Finally, we know that the status quo disadvantages casinos, bingo halls and other traditional premises in comparison with their online equivalents. A number of assumptions that prevailed at the time of the 2005 Act now appear increasingly outdated, so we plan to rebalance regulation and remove restrictions that disadvantage the land-based sector.

Nearly every Member of Parliament will have met constituents whose lives have been blighted by gambling harm. The online world has transformed so many parts of life, and gambling is no exception. It is our responsibility to ensure that our rules and regulations keep up with the real world so that we can protect the most vulnerable while also allowing everyone else to enjoy gambling without harm. I look forward to working with every Member of the House to bring our gambling rules into the digital age, and I commend this statement to the House.

11.53 am

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for that update, and for advance sight of her statement. I, too, pay tribute to all the campaigners who have long been calling for better regulation and reform of the gambling industry. I should also inform the House that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), the shadow Secretary of State, had given her apologies for her absence today long before we knew of the statement.

What we all know to be true is that updated gambling regulation is long overdue. The most recent legislation is from 2005, long before the huge rise and growth in online and mobile gambling opportunities. As a consequence, people can now gamble constantly and make huge losses in a very short time. I have met many people whose lives, and whose families' lives, have been devastated by gambling harm. It is because of them that Members of this House are coming together from across the parties to call for better regulation of gambling. Anyone can fall into gambling addiction, so we need a modernised, robust system that is fit for the future.

Some forms of gambling, from bingo to the races, are of course a traditional British pastime. Around half of adults participate in some form of gambling, the vast majority with enjoyment and in moderation. Indeed, bingo halls are important in sustaining our local communities, especially in coastal and rural towns. Let us be clear: bingo halls, adult gaming centres and casinos face pressure as a result of sky-rocketing energy bills, and concerns about the sustainability of their business model in the face of significant online competition. It is therefore welcome that the announcement distinguishes between bricks-and-mortar bingo halls and low-stake adult gaming centres on the one hand, and the unique dangers of the online world on the other.

However, I must push the Secretary of State further. We have waited a long time for the statement, but it is very light on substance. Can she confirm exactly how the levy contributions of land-based and online gambling forums will differ? That is an important point, and I urge her to clarify that for the industry and the 110,000 people employed in it. What is the Treasury's economic impact assessment of this announcement? The Government have delayed the White Paper many times. Everything that they are announcing today was ready to go a year ago. Six gambling Ministers and four Culture Secretaries have promised to publish this White Paper imminently.

That being said, we welcome many of the measures announced; they are things we have long called for, and are a move in the right direction.

The Secretary of State mentioned the Premier League's voluntary ban on gambling adverts on the front of shirts. That really is quite weak. It does not cover hoardings, or even the side or back of shirts. It also will not come into effect for three years. In that time, what is to stop the Premier League from reversing the voluntary ban once public attention has moved on? Will the Minister press the Premier League to go further?

There are further points arising from today's announcement on which I must press the Secretary of State. First, as I say, we welcome the levy, but can she tell us exactly what the levy will be? Labour welcomes the new powers for the Gambling Commission, but she must confirm whether it will get extra resources to match the additional responsibilities. The National Audit Office has already found that the Gambling Commission has insufficient capacity to regulate the industry, and now it will have more to regulate. Is she confident that it will have the capacity for the expanded role that it will take on? On affordability checks, further sharing between gambling companies is badly needed, and I await details of the checks after the consultation. However, it is vital that rules on affordability checks be set independently, not by the industry. Will the Secretary of State provide reassurance on that?

The Secretary of State refers to stake limits and "safer by design" mechanisms, which of course we welcome, but will stake limits be based on how dangerous a product is? Who will decide that? It took years, and the resignation of a Minister, to get stake limits for fixed odds betting terminals, so will the Secretary of State reassure the House that the limits will have teeth, and will reduce harm from day one?

Finally, it is clear that we need greater protections for children and under-18s, so will the measures provide for stronger action on loot boxes, and other in-game features that are proven to make young people more likely to experience harms relating to gambling and problem gambling, harm to their mental health, and financial harm? Labour has been clear that we stand ready to work with the Government to tackle problem and harmful gambling; we have been for a long time. We have repeatedly called for updates to the completely outdated legislation. The Government have a real opportunity here to do the right thing, and make positive, real-world change. The Secretary of State must commit to getting these updates over the line in good time. The time for more and more consultation has been and gone. Will the Secretary of State confirm that all the necessary statutory instruments will be passed before the House rises for the summer? She must crack on and make good on these long overdue promises. I look forward to further clarification from her on the points that I have raised, and to working together to tackle gambling at its root.

**Lucy Frazer:** I thank the shadow Minister for her comments. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), made her apologies to me, for which I am grateful; I understand the reasons for her absence.

I am pleased that the shadow Minister said that we need to update the rules, and that the measures will have cross-party support. I very much look forward to working

[Lucy Frazer]

with the shadow Front Benchers on this matter, which is so important. She mentioned the delay; I would reiterate a number of points, including the fact that we have taken measures over the past few years, including cutting the stakes for fixed odds betting terminals, banning credit card gambling, reforming online VIP schemes and introducing new limits to make online slots safer. She will know that I have been in post only two and a half months, but this has been a priority for me. I have brought this White Paper in with some speed and timeliness, I would say, and she can be confident that we will continue to ensure that these measures make it into the necessary regulations. We are bringing many of them through via statutory instrument, which will speed up the process, and I very much look forward to the co-operation of those on the Opposition Front Bench in ensuring that we can do so as soon as possible.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

**Damian Green (Ashford) (Con):** I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on finally—finally—getting this White Paper published. I particularly welcome the introduction of the statutory levy, which she will know has great support in all parts of the House. The most disturbing fact I have learned in preparing for the Select Committee's upcoming investigation into gambling is that at this moment there are something like 50,000 children in this country who are problem gamblers. That is a truly shocking figure. Can she expand more on the essential measures in her proposals that will protect children from this terrible scourge?

**Lucy Frazer:** My right hon. Friend makes some important points. I think all of us across this House want to ensure that we protect children. That is why, in addition to measures already in place, such as ensuring that there is no advertising targeted towards children, there are a number of new measures in the proposals, including the voluntary ban on gambling advertising on football shirts, but not limited to that. As I mentioned, we are ensuring that monetary gambling is illegal until the age of 18. We will be making it illegal for children to use scratchcards or slots that produce cash. The statutory levy he mentions is also important, because through that levy we can continue to look at research on how gambling affects children and take any necessary measures in due course.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. We have consistently encouraged and pressed the Government for action in this area and, as other right hon. and hon. Members have said, a dozen Ministers responsible for gambling have come and gone since change was first promised. The 2005 Act is clearly out of date and grows less relevant to modern gambling realities by the day. Those vulnerable to harm, especially children, are not well protected under the current legislation.

My party and I will approach this important discussion with constructive dialogue to support evidence-led legislation from the outset. Will the Secretary of State

outline the precise role of the ombudsman, especially when it comes to protecting children? I know that hon. Members on all sides are deeply concerned by the huge rise in gambling among children. We know that gambling destroys lives. I pay tribute to the many charity workers and others who have pressed for these changes, including hon. Members across the House—particularly, on the SNP Benches, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who has worked tirelessly on this. We will work constructively with the Government in assessing the right way forward to protect the vulnerable from harm.

**Lucy Frazer:** I am very grateful for that constructive approach and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on the measures as they progress. He mentioned the non-statutory ombudsman, which is an important measure to redress the balance between punters who feel that their issues have not been addressed sufficiently and the companies involved. That is why we are bringing it forward, and we will be consulting on it in due course.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con):** I welcome this announcement, and I pay tribute to the members of the all-party parliamentary group and its leadership, the hon. Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). The hon. Lady is with us today and has driven this with unstoppable power, like a force of nature, so I pay particular tribute to her.

I welcome this announcement because it is at least a start. It is a positive start, and it includes most of the recommendations of the all-party parliamentary group on gambling related harm, which is welcome, but there are a couple of other areas to mention. First, we should recognise that gambling is an online harm, with most of the harm being caused by online companies. Physical betting shops and so on are not part of that process, and the Minister will recognise that the majority of the statutory levy should be borne by those causing online harm.

The second area is advertising and children, on which the announcement simply does not go far enough. I do not mean to be churlish, because I welcome the announcement, but it should not be voluntary for football clubs to take gambling advertising off their shirts. I am a season ticket holder at Tottenham, whose shirts do not advertise betting companies, but many clubs' shirts do, and children wear these things and sometimes go to school in them. They are therefore advertising gambling companies on their shirt. We need to recognise that this is a permanent process. Even if advertising is moved to the sleeve, in two years' time, who knows, it might creep from the sleeve to the front. After the consultation, the Government should come back with a decision that we need to take control.

I welcome this announcement. It is a step towards security, safety and common sense, and that has to be welcomed by the House.

**Lucy Frazer:** I commend my right hon. Friend for all the work that he and others have done in this area. It is because of their tireless campaigning, along with that of people and families who have suffered harm, that I am standing here today to introduce this White Paper.

My right hon. Friend mentions young people, and I share his concern. We must do more, which is why we are taking steps to make gambling illegal, in many

forms, for under-18s. I welcome the Premier League's announcement on banning gambling advertising from the front of shirts. Footballers are role models for our children, and we do not want young people to advertise gambling on the front of their shirts. They like to wear football shirts, so I welcome the Premier League's voluntary move, which my predecessors and I encouraged.

Of course, we will look carefully at the evidence on the funding from the statutory levy, and we will keep all these matters under review.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I have just managed to get a copy of the White Paper. It was widely reported that it might introduce restrictions on over-18s, but it appears to be more of a commitment to consult on asking gambling companies to think 25, rather than think 21, when verifying people's age. Given that we are trying to address the real issue of gambling by children, can she explain the thinking behind that provision?

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is appropriate to protect people who are aged between 18 and 25. When he reads the whole White Paper, he will see that it proposes a consultation on reducing the amount of money that young adults, aged between 18 and 25, can bet on online slots.

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and her officials on their work to produce this review. I agree that the Gambling Commission needs to be a data-savvy regulator. Can she confirm that it will be able to run independent background affordability checks without causing friction in the system? Importantly, many of the industry rules covering the gathering and use of data to target the advertising that drives customers towards loot boxes were written for the pre-smartphone world. The Gambling Commission needs to make sure that vulnerable players are not being data-profiled and targeted.

**Lucy Frazer:** As always, my hon. Friend makes an important point. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to discuss these issues with him, given his expertise and knowledge of this area. He mentions player protection checks, which will largely be seamless and frictionless background checks that affect only 20% of people, most of whom will not know they are taking place. These secret checks are important in ensuring that gambling companies are taking their responsibilities seriously.

My hon. Friend will know that the Government are working with companies to ensure there are protections on loot boxes, too.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on gambling related harm, I welcome this long overdue White Paper. In the APPG's 2019 interim report, we asked for affordability checks, parity between land-based and online stakes, an independent ombudsman, a curb on advertising and, most importantly, a statutory levy. Job done.

The APPG pushed for all the reforms the Secretary of State mentioned earlier against a strong backlash from the industry, not least on fixed-odds betting terminals, VIP schemes and credit cards. Today's announcement

shows progress. It may have taken eight years of campaigning, nine Secretaries of State for Culture, Media and Sport and ten changes in my hair colour, but it is progress none the less.

Today is a momentous occasion that many thought, and many wished, would never happen, but now the commitments need to be fulfilled. We do not need more consultation—we have had two and a half years since the review. We need swift action, immediate implementation of the proposals and urgent legislative change where necessary. After 18 years of the gambling industry's dominance over this agenda, now is the time for levelling up. Will the Secretary of State commit today to ensuring that these changes are brought in as a priority, with no delaying tactics? Let us protect those whose lives have been affected by gambling-related harms and let us stop lining the pockets of an industry that has had it its own way for far too long.

**Lucy Frazer:** I thank the hon. Lady and commend her hugely for all her work. As she has highlighted, we have listened and taken action. I really do commend and thank her for her work.

I have been in post for two and a half months. I have brought this proposed legislation forward and she can be reassured that I, together with the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), will continue to ensure that action happens swiftly. As she will know, following a White Paper, various technical consultations need to take place. We will bring forward these measures largely through statutory instruments, and she has my utmost commitment that I will ensure that process is done as speedily as possible.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. How many regular punters did the Secretary of State speak to before bringing forward these proposals, particularly in relation to the affordability checks, including the bizarre and arbitrary figures of £1,000 in a day or £2,000 over 90 days, which amounts to £22 a day by my reckoning?

The Conservative party used to believe in individual freedom and individual responsibility, but that seems to have gone out of the window with these affordability check proposals. Will the Secretary of State tell me who decides whether or not an individual can afford the amount that they are gambling when an affordability check is made? Will it be the Government, the Gambling Commission, the bookmakers or the banks? Do the punters themselves get any say at all about how they spend their own hard-earned money?

**Lucy Frazer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement on this issue. I know that he, like many others, wants to ensure that people—punters—who enjoy a flutter are not prevented from doing so. He asks what engagement we have had. Some 44% of adults gamble, and we have spoken to quite a lot of them. We have had 400 meetings on the issue to ensure we take all perspectives into account.

The White Paper is about balance and ensuring that people can go about their business, doing what they enjoy, without restriction, but at the same time protecting those people who need protection. Most people will not



[Lucy Frazer]

even know that the checks he talks about are happening. They will be frictionless and happen behind the scenes: 80% of people will have to do nothing at all and 20% will have a simple check on whether they have been made bankrupt or have a county court judgment against them. They will not know that that check is taking place. Those sorts of checks take place in a variety of different instances, but they are there to ensure that in the very small percentage of cases where an operator needs to double-check whether somebody might be going down the wrong road, they can do so. I should emphasise that those checks are already taking place; gambling companies already have a responsibility to ensure the protection of those who gamble with them. We are trying to protect to people such as the nurse who spent £245,000 over a few months, when the gambling company knew that she had a salary of £30,000. Those are the sorts of instances that we want to stop with our proposals in the White Paper.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome today's White Paper, but may I ask a question on the statutory levy? It is all well and good imposing a statutory levy, and I welcome that, but how that money is used is vital and has to be independent of the industry. The researchers must have free and open access to the data, and they have to be free to choose what research they undertake. Those in the gambling industry should not have any sway over what is researched and what is not.

**Lucy Frazer:** I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurances he wants that the gambling companies will not have a say in what the money is spent on and that we will ensure that the money is spent appropriately.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I welcome the tone that the Secretary of State is striking today. Tackling problem gambling and, in particular, protecting vulnerable people is, of course, essential. Does she recognise that the gambling industry, whether it is to everyone's taste or not, has a symbiotic relationship with grassroots sport in this country, and not just horse-racing? What steps is she going to take to ensure that with the regulation that she is rightly taking forward we do not damage grassroots sport in this country?

**Lucy Frazer:** I am very grateful for my right hon. Friend's intervention, because he has made an important point. We have a world-class industry that has revenues of billions of pounds and which is putting in money, through its taxes, to support many of our public services. For the majority of people, it is offering something that they enjoy, so we are trying to strike a balance between allowing that to continue and protecting problem gamblers, of whom we estimate there are 300,000.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the statement, although I have not had time to read the 250 pages of the White Paper. I am sure that the devil will be in the detail. I am not as enamoured of this statement as other Members seem to be. I am delighted that our hard work has been recognised, and it is important today that we recognise the hard work of the campaigners, the people with lived experience and the people who have lost loved ones who have committed

suicide because of their addiction to gambling. We must recognise the hard work they have done to bring me to this place and allow me to express their opinion too.

I was delighted to hear in answer to the question about the levy that the industry is not going to have its fingers in that pie. That money must be ringfenced and channelled through the NHS so that it is used properly. I see one line in the statement reads:

"work with industry and the Gambling Commission"

I urge caution, because they are part of the problem. If we are going to work with them, we have to work with people who have experienced gambling harm in the first place, in order to get a balanced view.

I echo the sentiments of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who said that we are taking gambling adverts off the front of English Premier League team shirts on a voluntary basis—that should be enshrined in law—but what happens to kids who follow a team in the Championship, League 1, League 2 or the Scottish Premiership? Those children will still be exposed to the adverts, even though we acknowledge that they do harm. If the adverts do harm, they have all got to go: from all shirts; from all around the stadium and all around the pitch; and from in between games on the television and the radio. Advertising does harm, so all advertising has to go.

**Lucy Frazer:** I commend the hon. Gentleman for the work he has done in this area. He rightly recognises the work of a range of gambling campaigners, and I am really pleased to have met many gambling campaign groups to hear their stories and see how they have been affected. He is right to talk about advertising aimed towards young children, which is why such targeting is already prohibited. We must welcome what the Premier League has done and, as I said, the statutory levy will enable us to look at this issue further. If necessary, of course, we can take other steps in the future.

**Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. My right hon. and learned Friend said that she wants to protect the vulnerable with this review, which is an aim that everybody in this House shares, but Members will understand my surprise that there was no mention in her statement of the fact that in just under half an hour people can google non-gambling-aware bets and find more than 400 regulated sites with no protection or checks for the vulnerable. There was little or no mention of protecting the vulnerable from the scourge of scratchcards. I also did not hear her mention companies that are for-profit fundraisers, which openly advertise to the vulnerable as well. Does she agree that unless gambling is considered in the round and in a balanced way, the aim of protecting the vulnerable will still be being debated in this place in the next 20 years?

**Lucy Frazer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his points. This is a very extensive White Paper. Many people have mentioned its 250 pages, within which there are a lot of provisions to protect a lot of people. He rightly mentions that we need to stop punters going to the black market, and strengthen Gambling Commission and local authority power and resources. That is one of the things highlighted in the White Paper, which Members will have an opportunity to read when they have a little more time. The regulator will be able to block or take down black

market operators, and where necessary suspend or take away licences from companies that break the rules. As I mentioned, we are also increasing the age for a number of other types of gambling.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for acknowledging the work of my constituents Liz and Charles Ritchie, and for her engagement with them, and indeed that of her predecessors. While warmly welcoming much in the statement, as I do, I know that Charles and Liz will, along with other families bereaved by gambling addiction, be deeply disappointed by the failure to tackle advertising, particularly in football. The Secretary of State rightly highlighted, as have others, the shocking number of children who are addicts or have problems with gambling—those 11 years old and younger. For many, football is the hook. The Premier League recognised in the action that it took that advertising is harmful, but a front-of-shirt ban is not enough. Fans are exposed to an average of 700 ads at every premier league game. Other countries have acted. Will the Secretary of State think again on that issue, because the campaign for comprehensive action on advertising will not stop?

**Lucy Frazer:** I thank the hon. Member for his points. It has been an honour to speak with the Ritchies, who have articulated their case so well. I know that they and others would like us to go further, as I am sure the gambling companies would like us to go less far. The White Paper seeks a balance between allowing people who are not suffering harm to go about their lives, and protecting those who unfortunately are harmed. It is already the position that advertisements should not target children. We have seen the measures taken by the Premier League. The Government were very firm and made their position very clear to the Premier League regarding the action that it ought to consider taking. As I mentioned, we will look carefully at any further research that comes out, and take action if necessary.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to review the dated and rather severe regulatory regime under which the postcode lottery and hospice lotteries have to operate?

**Lucy Frazer:** I know that society lotteries bring in valuable revenues that are enjoyed by communities. One of the changes that we are making relates to raising the age to ensure that we protect young people, but I am always happy to continue looking at the work that such lotteries are doing.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Minister read out almost a race card of her predecessors, so let me congratulate her on the short time in which she has managed to get out this White Paper to enable much better public debate. Is there not a danger that any regime will be vulnerable to offshore, out-of-jurisdiction operators, who flout the regulations and undermine legitimate companies? Will she mobilise a whole-of-Government approach—including the crime agencies, the Treasury and the banks—to tackle the gambling black market and ensure the success of her reforms while protecting a major British industry and its workers?

**Lucy Frazer:** The right hon. Member makes an important point. People have said to me, “If you tighten up the rules in relation to legitimate gambling, all you will do is drive punters offshore.” In this White Paper we are stopping punters going to the black market, because we are strengthening the powers and resources of the Gambling Commission and local authorities. The regulator will now be able to block or take down black market operators and, where necessary, suspend or take away licences from companies that break the rules.

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): My question is very much in the same vein. I welcome so much of today's announcement, and the Secretary of State is quite right that it is with the advent of smartphones that we have seen such a change in gambling behaviour. Some people might choose not to pursue a legitimate operator because they do not want to go through the affordability checks or other elements of the new regime. If that is the case, they can just use Google to find many more options, so will more be done really to clamp down on the black market, particularly when it is so accessible through hand-held devices?

**Lucy Frazer:** Yes; I can confirm that the regulator will be able to block or take down black market operators or, where necessary, suspend the licences of companies that break the rules.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): About 400 people take their own lives each year owing to gambling harms. It is rather a personal issue for me and my home community, because a much-loved local GP did exactly that in 2007, and is still missed today. We all mourn his passing; there is a very moving memorial to him outside the local health centre. Can I ask the Government to crack on with this as fast as humanly possible? If we had had this legislation some years ago, that gentleman might still be with us.

**Lucy Frazer:** My thoughts are with all those who have lost family members. I hope that they will look on today as a moment to which they have contributed. I know it has taken some time, but this is the largest reform of the industry since 2005, and it is game changing. It is of course right that we take the time to get the regulations right when we bring them up to the smartphone age.

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): I welcome today's statement and look forward to reading the measures in the White Paper. However, there is a sense of déjà vu in that every time we look to clamp down on an area in which vulnerable people are being exploited and the gambling industry profits from that vulnerability, the sector moves on to find a new platform or new method by which it can exploit. What confidence does the Secretary of State have in the future-proofing of these measures? Will she commit to ensuring that there are constant reviews of the legislation? The gambling industry is powerful, and has a big and very persuasive approach to this place, and it is important that vulnerable people are protected.

**Lucy Frazer:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course we need to keep matters under review. The statutory levy will help us to do that, ensuring not only that we keep up with what is happening in technology, but that we have the evidence to back up any policy changes that we need to bring forward.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): The end of gambling company sponsorship on premier league team shirts is a welcome step, but it will not come until the end of the 2025-26 season—three years hence. It is not good enough; there is not enough urgency in that. Everyone who watches sports coverage, particularly football on TV, is constantly bombarded with images and repetitious advertisements urging them to partake in gambling games, spot bets and betting offers for particular scores or match outcomes. What are children watching those matches on TV meant to do—hide behind the sofa, cover their eyes, put their fingers in their ears? They are being constantly bombarded. It has become far too normalised, and we know it is damaging lives with regularity. Action and urgency are imperative.

**Lucy Frazer:** I recognise the points that the hon. Member is making, but I would like to congratulate the Premier League on the action it has taken. It has talked about it for a long time, and it has now taken action. The White Paper today brings in a large number of actions that will make a significant difference. We will obviously keep matters under review, but the statutory levy will help us and enable us to do that.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): It was ever thus that when Governments ban or curtail legitimate activities, underground markets bubble up to fill that void. I was struck by some evidence from the Institute of Economic Affairs that shows that even without things such as stake limits, 5% of UK gamblers have used unlicensed and unregulated sites and half could name a site where they could gamble in an unregulated way. While I hear the measures that the Secretary of State has outlined around greater powers for the Gambling Commission to shut down black market operators, what assessment has she made of the volume of current gamblers who could move to underground gambling? Does she think that the Gambling Commission, even with its new powers, would be able to keep up with that?

**Lucy Frazer:** It is important to ensure that we protect people from legitimate gambling where we have problem gamblers, but also from the black market. I emphasise one important point, because some of the measures we are bringing in today are already in place for some companies. Some responsible companies have already taken the measures we have announced today, and they have punters and successful operations. The issue is that not all companies are doing the right thing, so our measures seek to ensure consistency across the board to ensure that the system is not prejudiced against companies doing the right thing and that we protect those who might become problem gamblers.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Secretary of State said in her statement that she will ensure that children can “engage in no forms of gambling”, including online gambling. Can she confirm whether that will be through an age verification process, and how exactly will that operate?

**Lucy Frazer:** It is already the case that it is illegal for children to gamble online, and there are some protections in place. We will continue to ensure that those protections are strengthened.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Clearly there is a delicate balance between addiction and the safe enjoyment of gambling, and as always the devil will be in the detail. What assurances can my right hon. and learned Friend provide that these proposed reforms will not negatively impact people’s enjoyment of a day at the races, a football bet on a Saturday, a night at the bingo or our much-loved British sports, including horse-racing, that employ thousands of people directly and indirectly across the UK?

**Lucy Frazer:** For those who are betting occasionally and as a matter of enjoyment, these measures will not make any difference—they will still be able to enjoy their leisure activities. These measures are designed to help and protect those who are problem gamblers, whose lives are potentially going to be ruined. I encourage those who want to still to take part in an enjoyable leisure activity, which is what it is for millions of people across the country. We are trying to strike the right balance here.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome a number of the measures that the Secretary of State has set out today, including the statutory levy, but also, importantly, for most if not all of us in this House, the protections for children and young people, particularly in the online sphere. Given that technology moves at great pace, and that many of the technological advances we have seen since 2005 and the problems associated with that when it comes to gambling could not have been foreseen 18 years ago, what assurances can she give that not only the rules she is setting out now will be updated in future, but that the powers, resources and capacity of the new regulator will be kept up to date with the moves in technology?

**Lucy Frazer:** It is fundamental that we continue to consider this issue as technology changes. The hon. Member mentions the statutory levy. The statutory levy will enable us to have research and make evidence-based policy, but it will also allow, if appropriate, the education of young people, so that even when technology changes, they understand the issues they may face.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for her statement on the Gambling Act review. Many of us feel that there has been positive progress, so I say well done, Secretary of State. I have concerns about the accessibility of gambling on smartphones. Photographic ID proving age is necessary on betting apps, so some under-18s have been buying fake IDs to enable them to bet online. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with large betting organisations about more in-depth scrutiny of the legitimacy of the IDs used for betting?

**Lucy Frazer:** It is, of course, important that we protect young people and that people under the age of 18 do not gamble. Betting companies have to ensure that people are following their rules.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on gambling-related harm, I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and welcome the long-awaited White Paper. I do not agree with parts of it, but that is



for another day. This month saw the opening of the UK's first women-only residential treatment for gambling addiction. It caters towards women's needs, including a consideration of childcare demands, which means that, on average, women spend less time in treatment than men. Does the Secretary of State agree that that highlights the need for an intersectional public-health-focused and free-to-access treatment programme offering tailored support to those who require it?

**Lucy Frazer:** I was very pleased in my engagement to speak with clinicians who are dealing with gambling harm, and I am pleased that the statutory levy will ensure that NHS trusts will take the funding that they have previously turned away because of where the money was coming from. The measures that we are bringing forward will help those people to get the support that they need.

## Business of the House

12.38 pm

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** The business for the week commencing 1 May will include:

MONDAY 1 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 2 MAY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, followed by general debate on support for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 3 MAY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the National Security Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill.

The House will rise for the coronation recess at the conclusion of business on Wednesday 3 May and return on Tuesday 9 May.

The provisional business for the week commencing 8 May includes:

MONDAY 8 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 9 MAY—Second Reading of the Energy Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 10 MAY—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Bill.

THURSDAY 11 MAY—Debate on a motion on the future of overseas territories, followed by general debate on no recourse to public funds. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 12 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 15 May includes:

MONDAY 15 MAY—Second Reading of the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. First, on behalf of the 43 staff members who have asked me directly because they want to book their holidays, and all the others who have not, please can we have some recess dates? As soon as we get back, perhaps—there are no business questions next week, so maybe the week after.

It is amazing to see that the Leader of the House still has it: the former magician's assistant can abracadabra a brand-new Illegal Migration Bill just like that. That is what it felt like yesterday, with countless Government amendments to their own Bill. Report stage is the new Second Reading. Can she tell us why they were not in the Bill when it was published two months ago, or debated in Committee? Is piling the Bill with last minute amendments not just another tyrannical Tory tactic to swerve scrutiny?

We can add illusionist to the Leader of the House's magical talents. She must have conjured up the image in my head of her telling me that she hoped to see the Bill's impact assessment. After so many times of asking for it, I was hopeful. She seemed so confident. She said that she would ask the Home Secretary directly, yet here we are the day after, and here it is not. Could she magic it up now, so at least the Lords can see it before they debate the Bill? It seems that Home Office Ministers cannot even answer the most basic questions on how

[*Thangam Debbonaire*]

the Bill will work. Perhaps the Leader of the House will have a go at just one: does she know how many former RAF bases the Government need to accommodate the tens of thousands of people who will be detained under the new law? I say that she does not, and the Home Secretary will not tell her, either. Has anyone worked it out, or is the Home Secretary just winging it?

The Tory party is in disarray. The highly respected right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), a former Prime Minister rightly respected for her work on modern slavery, attacked this Tory Bill for giving traffickers greater leverage over victims to keep them in slavery. The blue on blue continued, with others concerned about safe and legal routes. We had amendments on both those issues, on tackling terrorism and on any number of things that Government Members could have voted for.

At the end of business yesterday, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) gave his Minister a tough time over a lack of local consultation on asylum seeker accommodation. That reminds me: just an hour before, Labour had given him the opportunity to vote for—wait for it—an amendment on local consultation on asylum seeker accommodation. Where was he when it came to a vote?

Pick a Bill—any Bill—and the Government's utter disdain for this House, its Members, and by extension the British people, is clear. Bills chopping and changing as they wrangle their Back Benchers into place—that is no way to run a rodeo. Poor policy, lazy lawmaking and a gutless Government who know that their policies cannot withstand proper scrutiny. One of our scrutiny tools is Opposition days. The Leader of the House cannot just wave her magic wand to cut the cost of living—she has to vote for it. Why, then, did she and the rest of the Tories vote against Labour's plans on Tuesday to cut the cost of living for her constituents? Thirteen years of Tory Governments crashing and mismanaging the economy. Wages squeezed, inflation at more than 10%, soaring mortgages and rents, food prices rising the fastest in 45 years, and the Government's answer to their own mess is no rabbits out the hat, just 24 Tory tax rises since 2019 and the highest tax burden in 70 years.

On Tuesday, Labour gave the Tories another chance to abolish the non-dom tax loophole, so that the super-rich who live and work here can pay their fair share of taxes. Labour would choose to spend that on more health staff and breakfast clubs for kids, but the Tories voted against it. We also gave the Tories the chance to extend the windfall tax on oil and gas profits. Labour would choose to spend that on easing the cost of living crisis by freezing council tax this year. But no, the Tories voted against it.

Politics is about choices, and the Government are choosing non-doms and oil and gas giants over working people. Labour will not waste valuable time here on performative Bills that only make people's lives worse, as the Tories are choosing to do. Labour will cut the cost of living, cut waiting lists and cut crime. That is the difference. That is the choice next Thursday. I wish all Labour candidates in the elections the very best of luck.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I want to start by echoing what the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said earlier with regard to the coronation and thanking all

Members who are helping their constituents to prepare for that incredible moment for our country, and everyone working to ensure that the event can go ahead safely, including many members of House staff. I encourage everyone to take part.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) rightly presses me on recess dates. I understand how important that is not just for Members but for staff. I hope to be able to announce those very shortly and will ensure that we do so.

The hon. Lady raised the very important matter of the Illegal Migration Bill. I can only conclude from Labour's behaviour this week, and from what the hon. Lady has said, that they are happy with the status quo. We are determined to ensure that the finite resource we have is best used to support the most vulnerable and those to whom we have a particular moral obligation. That is the purpose of the Bill. It is difficult stuff that we are doing. That is why we have carefully thought this out. I agree with her that impact assessments are very important. The impact assessment for the Bill will be published today, in advance of its swift progress, hopefully, through the House of Lords.

The hon. Lady has told many jokes at my expense about my former career as a magician's assistant. It is a little rich, because if there are people in this place who should be accused of illusions and sleight of hand, it is Labour, given its approach to even its own Opposition day debate this week. Her accounts of what happened rival the narratives of Comical Ali for their accuracy and situational awareness. What happened was that Labour, together with the Liberal Democrats and the Green party, passed up the chance to vote for or against a motion this week that would set targets for reducing sewage discharges and financially penalise companies that do not honour their duties. Only the Conservatives voted for that, and only the Conservatives have done something about it—and ditto on the cost of living issue, which she also mentioned.

On sewage, the hon. Lady may know that Labour has pulled all its attack ads on this issue for the local election campaign, because it has been found out. Its campaign has been a deliberate distraction—or perhaps, given the matter under discussion, I should say a stool pigeon—from the reality of ending storm overflows, which is an important matter for our constituents. Labour is being found out. It has been found out on sewage this week. It has been exposed for saying that it will freeze council tax when it more than doubled it in government, and every single one of Labour's councils covering every single member of the shadow Cabinet have not frozen it; they have hiked it up.

Labour says it wants a compassionate, fair, effective asylum system, but it will not take the tough decisions to deliver one. Labour says it is tough on crime, but it consistently blocks measures to protect the public. The Labour party is supposed to be an alternative Government—that is what it is supposed to look like. This week it has not even looked like an effective protest group.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): This morning, the Center for Countering Digital Hate issued a shocking report on the online activities of Press TV, particularly its use of a video series called “Palestine Declassified”, which focuses its hatred on British Jews. Among other things on social media, Press TV has been promoting

claims that Jews were involved in 9/11 and in covid conspiracies, and it has promoted articles claiming that the holocaust is the greatest lie ever told. While Press TV may be banned from our airwaves, this foreign state hate operation is continuing online. May we have a debate at some point on what more we can do to ensure that social media platforms tackle this outrageous content?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important matter. It should be a concern to all Members of the House that these dangerous and, in many cases, antisemitic conspiracy theories can still be promoted and do gain traction. As my hon. Friend will know, I take this matter very seriously and gave a speech on it a couple of months ago. It is an excellent topic for debate. The current Members survey includes questions, among many others, on what further services the Library could provide. I think that ensuring we can all understand what is going on with these kinds of campaigns, and who is behind them, is something we should consider.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Last week, while gleefully celebrating the supposed woes of the SNP, the Leader of the House and her opposite number, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), pitched their tents so high on the moral high ground that it is a wonder they did not get altitude sickness. But my goodness, life comes at you fast! Seven days on and a bullying scandal has claimed the career of a Tory Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), while Labour's inter-factional warfare continues to spill out into the public domain, with a former shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), following their former party leader out the door. Tempted as I am, given last week's shenanigans, I will make no further comment, save to say that perhaps we should have a Government-led debate on the UK glazing industry and the benefit it would gain from people in glass houses being addicted to throwing stones.

However, I will add a thank you, because the more hysterical their attacks on us, the more our membership grows—it is up 3,000 in the past couple of weeks to 75,000. How that compares to the number of members of other political parties in Scotland we will never know, because as far as the Unionists are concerned, transparency is strictly for other people. For all we know, there could be literally hundreds of Scottish Tories running around, and we just would not know.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will tell you who was transparent this week: Lord Frost. The unelected—indeed, never elected—brains behind Brexit finally said out loud what they have all been thinking when he said

“not only must no more powers be devolved to Scotland, it's time to reverse the process”.

The emboldened lord doubled down when, on Toytown TV, he said that there had been a lot of private messaging from sympathisers in the party saying, “Keep talking—this needs to be said.” Can we therefore have a debate so that the Leader of the House and her colleagues can rally around the noble Lord Frost and his attempts to quell Scottish democracy?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Whatever political party people support, I am always encouraged to hear that membership of political parties is growing. However, I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if we do not trust him on the figures.

**Brendan O'Hara:** Let's compare!

**Penny Mordaunt:** I would be happy to. In all honesty, I am really surprised at what the hon. Gentleman has said and his choice of questioning today. There was no humility, no regret and no apology. Whatever our political beliefs and the differences over our ambitions for the Union, there is a common understanding among all of us in this place of the shared values and principles that underpin our democracy—I hope that is the case. I will never share the beliefs of the hon. Gentleman's party membership on Scottish independence; I may also disagree with Lord Frost, on occasion. However, I think I do understand the ambitions of the SNP membership and what they are based on, because my ambitions for our country are based on the same things: self-determination, agency, moral courage, progress of humanity and love of country.

How devastating it must be for SNP members and supporters to have placed their hopes and trust in the hands of people who have been so reckless with their dreams and the mandate that they have given them. Now they know how many Scottish taxpayers also feel when they look at the SNP's ruinous sell-off and sell-out of their country. Just when we think the farce that has been going on in Scotland over the past weeks—the SNP's great closing down sale—cannot get any worse, it has just offered a two-for-one offer of a coalition with Labour. Braveheart has turned out to be Brutus.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Hundreds—some reports say thousands—of blind and partially sighted people, such as my amazing disability campaigner Jill Allen-King OBE, face long waits of up to 18 months for replacement guide dogs. That is devastating for their mental health and their ability to socialise and, for some, their ability to work. May we have a debate in Government time on ways to improve access to work for blind and partially sighted people, and to guide dogs and modern technology, which make such a difference to their lives?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for that timely question. I know that she and her constituent recently met the Prime Minister, along with her constituent's companion Jagger, who I understand reluctantly faces retirement shortly. My hon. Friend is right that we want to increase access to that vital means for people to go about and achieve their ambitions in life. She has missed Women and Equalities questions this week, which happened yesterday, but I will follow up on this for her with the Department for Work and Pensions.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing Backbench business for the next two weeks. Can she help me with some words of consolation for my good friend Mr Mark Allen, who I took as my guest to St James's Park last Sunday? Mark is the proprietor of



[*Ian Mearns*]

licensed premises known to me in Kennington, but he is also, sadly for him, a Tottenham Hotspur supporter. He is a very stoical supporter but, despite that stoicism, Sunday's events came as a bit of a shock. Can the Leader of the House say a word of consolation for him?

Tomorrow is Workers Memorial Day, when we commemorate all those killed, injured or made unwell by their work. Can we recognise 28 April every year to remember the dead and fight for the living?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for all the work he does with his Committee and the debates that we were able to announce in the business statement. I will commiserate with his friend and Spurs fans everywhere, who are familiar with coping with Spurs being a bit Spursy but have been tested to their limits. I wish them well for the future.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of the important memorial day. As a Portsmouth MP, I have a volume of constituents and family members who have suffered from mesothelioma and other related issues.

**Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I would like to request that time be made available for the House to discuss the growing issue of houses in multiple occupation. In the towns of Beeston and Chilwell in my constituency, a growing number of HMOs are being approved by the Government following initial rejection by the local council. One of those HMOs resulted in contractors damaging a water main and multiple houses being destroyed as a result. Those decisions are having a huge impact on local families and communities and it is essential that time is made to discuss that increasing problem and ensure that such decisions are made for the community and not to its detriment.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point on an issue that will be of concern to many Members, particularly those in constituencies that are already very densely populated. He will know that the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, and consultations done as part of its going through this House, looked at how we can ensure that we have the right type of houses in multiple occupation; for example, young professionals who want to share accommodation might want separate bedrooms and bathrooms, but shared living rooms. We want to encourage the right kind of development that will enhance communities. I certainly encourage him, and all other Members who are concerned about the issue, to apply for a debate on the subject in the usual way.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is Lesbian Visibility Week. My alma mater, Edinburgh University, flew the lesbian visibility flag yesterday and advocated for inclusion, but last night it failed for a second time to stop a masked mob preventing the screening of a documentary called "Adult Human Female". The film features feminists and lesbians, including my friends Dr Shereen Benjamin, Lucy Masoud and Professor Jo Phoenix, talking about how important it is to be heard on the subject of their lesbian identity and experience. Can we have a debate about how we prevent lesbian erasure and the intimidation of lesbians in our civic life, including at our universities?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. and learned Lady for raising this important point, and may I say how sorry I am to hear that? It is incredibly important that we allow people to debate and discuss issues, and view films. It is incredibly disappointing to hear of people being presented with a situation that is intimidating, upsetting or violent. This is a particular issue for lesbians, because historically the LGBT movement has given them a lower profile than gay men, for example. It is incredibly important that we be very aware of these sorts of issues. I shall certainly make sure that the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Home Secretary hear her concerns.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I too was at St James' Park, and I am still getting over it. At least Tottenham are refunding the gate money after that game.

Today is the 64th day that Vahid Beheshti is on hunger strike opposite the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Last week, together with 125 other Members of both Houses, I wrote to the Prime Minister about the hunger strike. The letter was copied to the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, and drew attention to the plight of the poor people in Iran, and the need to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety. I am pleased that Mr Beheshti had a meeting with Lord Ahmad and the Security Minister relatively recently, but there is still no action from the Government. Can we have a debate in Government time on what measures we will take to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety? Let us have a vote on that, so that the Government can support it and then make it actuality.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. We are all extremely worried about the fact that Mr Beheshti is on the 64th day of his hunger strike. I visited him much earlier, in the first month of his strike. He is doing this not just because of the situation in Iran, I think, but also because of the situation that we increasingly face in the UK, with people being intimidated, threatened or worse by the regime and its proxies. I hope that he will soon bring the hunger strike to an end, but I understand why he is doing it. I am glad that Ministers have met him. The hon. Gentleman may wish to raise the matter again with the Foreign Secretary on 2 May.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): One of my constituents has been part of the BBC Singers for 15 years and her husband is currently on trial with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, which takes years of training and practice. They were just beginning to get their lives back on track after covid when the BBC announced it was closing the Singers and cutting orchestra jobs by 20%. Although that decision has been paused, their futures, and those of these great cultural institutions, remain uncertain, so may we please have a statement from the Culture Secretary outlining what the Government will do to help save these jobs and protect our rich musical heritage?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady and all Members who have raised the matter particularly of the BBC Singers, which is the BBC's only choral group; the campaigning and concerns of Members of this House has greatly contributed to the BBC pausing that decision. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to continue to raise

her concern about this; she will know we have just had Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions and I will make sure the Secretary of State has heard her continuing concern.

**Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): Adrienne Edwards, the Mayor of Holyhead is due to step down soon. She has given many years to Holyhead and has helped raise vital funds for the charity, Holyhead Cancer Support Group. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Adrienne and all those across the UK who go the extra mile to support their communities, and will she say pob lwc—good luck—to Adrienne for the coronation event she is organising in Llaingoch village hall on Sunday 7 May at 2 o'clock?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in saying thank you to Adrienne for all she has done, and also to say pob lwc for her future, particularly the coronation event she is organising. I also note that my hon. Friend has done her constituency a huge service in providing a mile of free bunting to anyone putting on a coronation event. Historically, because of political differences in the area, such bunting has not been readily available, and I am glad she has rectified that and hope everyone has a wonderful time.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Leader of the House's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) was just about as disastrous as her bellyflop in that daft diving contest she was part of, because we do need that debate on the real intentions about devolution, because we know they opposed its creation and we know they tried to undermine it over the past few years and have heard Lord Frost saying it now needs to be reversed. Will the Leader of the House tell me exactly what it is she does not like about a Scottish democratic institution that keeps rejecting Conservatives?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am very proud of my bellyflop on "Splash!": I have a lido to show for it, and although it has a considerable number of views on YouTube, that is dwarfed by the number of views I get for my exchanges with the Scottish National party every Thursday. I have no objection to democratic outcomes; I object to the Scottish National party's objection to democratic outcomes.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): We in Rutland and Melton were recently successful with our £23 million levelling-up bid. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I know colleagues are very happy for me that that went ahead. As part of that, we will be building a medi-tech hub to build the technologies of the future to support our older loved ones to live safer for longer. Rutland County Council is currently Conservative and is also the No. 1 rated council in the country for social care, despite being a very small council with a significant elderly population. Will my right hon. Friend advise me on how to secure a visit from the Minister for Social Care, because I am very keen that our model is rolled out around the country to improve social care for all?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all she has secured for her community through the levelling-up fund and her work with her county council leader Lucy Stephenson to bring that £23 million into

her constituency. I am very pleased to see that her local community is not resting on its laurels and is pressing forward with further innovation in this area, and she is right that it is wonderful to share best practice; it is one of the strengths we have in this place, and I shall certainly make sure that the Minister for Social Care has heard her invitation.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Monday's bank holiday will be warmly appreciated by hard-working families in Harrow—and, no doubt, in the rest of the United Kingdom—but 1 May will also be celebrated by many British Gujaratis as the day on which the state of Gujarat came into being in modern India. There are more than 800,000 British Gujaratis in all walks of life and in all parts of the UK. Will the Leader of the House take this opportunity, ahead of Gujarat day, to welcome the contribution that they make to our country?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for affording me that opportunity, and I am sure that his sentiments will be shared by everyone in the House in advance of this important anniversary. British Gujaratis do make a huge contribution to the nation and their local communities.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): Doncaster City Council does not maintain a register of derelict and empty buildings in my constituency or anywhere else, although we have plenty, such as the Old Police Station in Conisbrough, Tyram Hall in Blaxton, and various houses in Prince's Crescent, Edlington. Surely every council should maintain a register, require the owner of a building to sort it out if it is in disrepair, and then step in if the owner does not do so. How long must a community suffer the eyesore and blight of derelict buildings before the local authority comes to its aid? May we have a debate on this problem, which blights so many neighbourhoods?

**Penny Mordaunt**: Since 2017 local planning authorities in England have been required to maintain and publish brownfield land registers, and I am very disturbed to hear that that basic requirement is not being adhered to. We are committed to making the most of brownfield land in line with the national planning policy framework, but it is obviously hard to do that if sites are not identified. I shall make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities knows about this, and ask his officials to provide some advice for the hon. Gentleman.

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House to imagine the position of a family who are unable to acquire a house, then rent one, and suddenly—having put all their love and money and investment into that house—receive, with less than a month's notice, a section 21 notice to quit from the landlord? That happened to my constituents Chris and Sandra Taylor, as was highlighted in the television programme ITV Calendar. May I just quietly say to the Leader of the House that Ministers, over the years, have made commitments to end this situation? As she looks to the next parliamentary Session and the King's Speech, will she give an undertaking to the House that that loophole will finally be closed?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising an important point. As he will know, my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Prime Minister are very focused on ensuring that those who are renting are protected. As well as the circumstances that he has described, there are knock-on effects for kids attending school. It is an incredibly difficult situation, but the hon. Gentleman knows that we are focusing on it, and we will continue to focus on it as we go into the fourth Session.

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): The Manchester ship canal runs right through the middle of my constituency. There are three main A-roads crossing it, in addition to the M6 Thelwall viaduct, which opened 60 years ago this year. Three of the roads that cross the canal via swing bridges are regularly opened and boats pass through, but they are all controlled and owned by the ship canal owner, Peel Ports. This is regulated under the Manchester Ship Canal Act 1885, which set out the original obligations at a time when there were not many cars on the roads.

The bridges need urgent, essential repairs, but because the council and Peel Ports cannot agree on a closure schedule, they frequently break down and are stuck open, so cars cannot cross the canal. May we have a debate on reviewing the 1885 Act to ensure that the highways infrastructure in Warrington is no longer under the control of a business that is not playing its part in minimising delays and disruption in my town?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue, and for knocking heads together. It sounds as though the council and Peel Ports need to sit down and work this out for the benefit of all. If my hon. Friend's question today has not had that result, he will know how to apply for an Adjournment debate, but I hope that that will not be necessary.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am about to have an "Aw, mum" moment; when I go on about something, my children always use that phrase, and today I am going on about the redundancy modification order again. The Leader of the House very helpfully told me on 9 March that she and her noble Friend Lord True had

"met all the permanent secretaries...to make very clear the level of service we expect from their Departments"—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 424.]

I said on that occasion, "Let's cut to the chase—it's 10 years since this was looked at." The addition of different organisations to the order has still not happened, and there are people all over the country waiting for it to, because it will affect them and—as always happens—their pensions. Please can we get this sorted?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for her tenacity and determination on this issue. I will ensure that the relevant Secretary of State and perm sec have heard her concerns, and I shall also ask the Pensions Minister to contact her.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): There have been great strides in the field of low-carbon aviation in recent years, not least the development of hydrogen and electric aircraft. Given those developments, will the

Leader of the House consider holding a debate on the role that regional airports such as Blackpool can play in not just improving regional connectivity but doing so while meeting our net zero commitments?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend raises a matter that is of concern to many people across the House, which is why we have shown our support for regional airports through the £161 million airport and ground operations support scheme that we provided during the pandemic. The Transport Secretary in particular is very focused on ensuring that we are developing and enabling our very important regional connectivity to thrive. My hon. Friend will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House might be able to help me. I know, having sat on the Intelligence and Security Committee, that there are some matters that the Government have to keep secret, but could I suggest that my written parliamentary questions to the Cabinet Office, asking how many meetings have been held between different Departments to discuss the infected blood compensation and who chairs those meetings, are of little interest to Vladimir Putin or any other hostile state? Might she be able to help me to get the factual information that I have requested in those written parliamentary questions?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I would be very happy to assist the right hon. Lady in getting those answers. I am aware of the particular situation and am already making inquiries with the Cabinet Office with regard to it. What the hon. Lady says is true with regard to any issue raised in this place, but I think in particular for those victims—those infected and affected by the infected blood scandal—it is doubly important that we have transparency, and demonstrate focus, pace and determination to get the situation resolved. I will be in touch with her later today.

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you and the Leader of the House will join me in wishing everybody in Milton Keynes a happy #LoveMK Day. But is not so rosy for many of my constituents, who are fed up with hitting pothole after pothole on our roads because the Labour-Lib Dem coalition council put just £100,000 aside for fixing potholes. I am pleased to have secured an extra £1.1 million from the Government, on top of the £2.8 million a year that the council already gets from the Government, to fix potholes on MK's roads. Is it time for yet another debate on potholes in this place, and will my right hon. Friend join me in urging the council to stop wasting millions of pounds of taxpayers' cash and to use this money to end the plague of potholes in Milton Keynes?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Happy #LoveMK Day to everyone celebrating it. I do not think the residents of Milton Keynes should love their council, though, by the sounds of it. Potholes are a blight on the motorist; that is why we are investing £200 million in maintaining and improving roads and filling in those potholes. I understand that my hon. Friend's council has spent £11 million on placing moss on the walls of the town hall. That seems a bizarre priority, and it has provided no upside to the public—other than, perhaps, providing an amusing metaphor for the most undynamic council that that place has seen.



**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): A constituent of mine discovered in November that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs had handed over £972 to the company Mortgagesmiths, which took almost half of it in commission fees. As he had not commissioned the company in the first place, he demanded to see the application form. It was such a poor forgery that both his and his wife's signatures were clearly in the same handwriting. With the Government repeatedly warning the public not to fall for financial scams, it is incredible that HMRC fell for that one. Can we have a Treasury statement so that we can understand the extent of the problem, what is being done to prevent it in future and when constituents such as mine will get their money from HMRC?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that case; I am very sorry to hear it. She may wish to raise it at Treasury questions on 9 May but, given that that is a sizeable chunk of money for her constituent to be out of pocket, I will certainly raise it today with HMRC and ask it to contact her about it.

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): The Government committed to bringing forward a consultation on the regulation of rehoming activities for animal sanctuaries and rehoming organisations this year. Dogs Trust, which operates in my constituency, is keen that that should take place. Might my right hon. Friend grant Government time for a debate on the issue, or advise me of other ways to expedite the consultation? I know other colleagues will be as concerned as I am by the possible mistreatment of dogs in non-regulated establishments and the effect they are having on the legitimate rehoming centres that do such fantastic work.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for all the work she has done in championing this issue and in supporting Dogs Trust, which does a huge amount of good work in this area. She will know that the action plan for animal welfare includes commitments to pursuing the licensing of animal sanctuaries and rescue and rehoming centres for cats, dogs and horses; I will certainly ensure that the relevant Department hears her concerns.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Residents of Acomb and Westfield were hopeful about York's £5.8 million shared prosperity fund award for much-needed regeneration, but then horrified to wake up to find that £400,000 of it had been squandered on a half-paved high street barricaded by 136 bollards. Can we have a statement on how the Government are scrutinising that much-needed fund? York residents want to know why York's Lib Dem and Green councillors have been allowed to waste even more public funding on a barricade of bollards.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear that. The hon. Lady will know that, as well as the checks and balances in place for awarding the funding, there are evaluation works that go on. I am sorry that that is not delivering a better impact for her local residents. I shall ensure that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities hears her concerns, as the next questions are not until 5 June, and I encourage the local authority to ensure that it is doing something worthwhile with the sizeable chunk of money that it has secured.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Yesterday, I attended a very touching moment at the Cenotaph to mark the 108th anniversary of the genocide in Armenia. That poor, benighted country has shrunk over many years and decades. There has been an ongoing fight in the Nagorno-Karabakh region for decades, and the Lachin corridor is being ineffectively policed by Russian so-called peacekeepers. Some 120,000 people in the region are undernourished and not getting supplies. Will it be possible to have a debate on this issue in Government time?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend will not have long to wait to raise this with the Foreign Secretary, as the next Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions are on 2 May. I am pleased he was able to attend the event he mentioned, and Parliament will have an inward visit from Armenia in the not-too-distant future. I will make sure the Department has heard him, and I encourage him to attend on Tuesday.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Not a week goes by without high-profile allegations of workplace sexual harassment hitting the headlines, of which the CBI is just the latest example. My private Member's Bill to protect workers from harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace has cross-party and, crucially, Government support. It has passed all its Commons stages, and it was expected to pass through the House of Lords unopposed. However, three rebels have tabled amendments and the Bill is now stuck in the other place. The Government have assured me of their continued support, and they are working hard to find a solution. If a solution to the impasse is found, we will need a small amount of extra time in this place to resolve the Bill's remaining stages. Will the Leader of the House and the Government Whips support me in finding that extra time so that this important Bill to protect workers from harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace can pass into law?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Yes, we support the Bill, and the hon. Lady will know that discussions are ongoing. Ministers are engaging with their lordships and others who have raised concerns. She has my assurance that the business managers are alive to this matter, and we will do all we can to ensure these important measures are able to be considered.

**Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend facilitate a debate on greater restrictions on off-road motorcycling, which is causing huge problems on rural lanes and in rural communities in my constituency, particularly in the Ceiriog valley? These problems are being caused by people from miles away, and they are leaving the council tax payers of Wrexham to pick up the bill for repairing the roads.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear of that situation. Most issues involving greenlaning stem from illegal use, and they are a matter for enforcement by the local police. We have provided the police, local authorities and other agencies with a number of powers and tools to respond quickly to such antisocial behaviour, and to reduce the environmental impacts that my hon. Friend describes. The next Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions are on 25 May, and the next Home Office questions are on 22 May. I hope he will use both opportunities to raise this case.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): In the two years since this Government recklessly disbanded the Industrial Strategy Council, other economies with a more proactive approach to decarbonisation, artificial intelligence and automation, sciences such as genomics and cyber are fast overtaking us. Not only are we not a world leader in the technologies in which we should and could be a world leader, but we are barely even a world follower at this point. In recent weeks, countries such as Sweden have showcased to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee fully zero-carbon steel and battery gigafactories at commercial scale, on which this country has no realistic pathway even to begin work. When will we see substantial Government time for horizon scanning for an industrial strategy that is fit for the future, instead of tinkering around the edges as we get left further behind?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I disagree with the hon. Lady's description of what is happening in those growth sectors. I point her to the machinery of Government changes that the Prime Minister instigated to ensure science and tech are given the right profile in Whitehall. The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation is currently touring the UK, going to the new clusters to see what more we can do to ensure that we make use of every opportunity. As the hon. Lady will know, there are questions to the Department next week; I encourage her to ask for more information from the team.

**Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): Local staff at BBC Radio Cumbria are rightly concerned about proposals to slash services. There are plans for hours of content to go, as well as our only full-time journalist. Morale in the team is at rock bottom. At best, the plans put forward by the BBC will mean that the popular drive-time show is more likely to cover Accrington than Askham. At the weekend, when people tune into the breakfast show, it will cover Manchester, Liverpool, Cumbria and Lancashire—I struggle to see what is local about that.

This is the BBC turning its back on local communities such as those in Barrow and Furness. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate in Government time so that Members across the House can share their views about the shadow of a service that the BBC seems to want to leave behind?

**Penny Mordaunt**: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. Local broadcasting is vital not just in strengthening a community, in getting messages and news out, but as an important tool to protect democracy. I understand why my hon. Friend has raised it and why he is working so hard to make sure that the BBC really understands the impact of some of these changes. The issue would be an excellent topic for a debate; the concerns will be shared by many Members. I encourage him to apply for a debate in the usual way.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee rightly highlighted International Workers' Memorial Day tomorrow, when we will commemorate those who we have lost through injury or death in the workplace or due to their job—including the former, and now late, Member for Halifax, who died from malignant mesothelioma;

I do not know whether the Leader of the House knows that the coroner attributed that in part to exposure to asbestos in this very House.

Does the Leader of the House agree with Clydebank Asbestos Group, the West Dunbartonshire joint trade union group, the STUC and TUC that, building on the commemorations tomorrow, there should be Government time to debate and vote to enhance workers' safety across these islands?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for raising this important memorial day and the sad case he referred to. There is obviously huge concern in the House of Commons Commission and the other place while we consider restoration and renewal proposals for this building. I will certainly make sure that the relevant Departments have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. He will know how to apply for a debate—given that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee has also raised the issue, that might be his first port of call.

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): A number of constituents have written to me in recent weeks pointing out that fuel prices at forecourts in my constituency seem to be higher than others of the same brands nearby, and that the prices in my constituency seem to drop at a slower rate. I have previously written to Tesco about its forecourt in Clowne; it said that it determines the cost of fuel with reference to the prices set by nearby forecourts. My constituency runs alongside the M1, and there are two service stations within those nearby forecourts; that artificially increases the fuel prices in what is also a rural area. May we have a debate on the cost of fuel and whether fuel providers are passing on the benefits of falling fuel prices—or profiteering in rural and poorer constituencies?

**Penny Mordaunt**: This incredibly important issue is a concern to many across the country. FairFuelUK is running the PumpWatch campaign, for example—an initiative supported by *The Sun* and other media. That shows that readers, viewers and listeners are concerned to ensure that there is fairness at the pump.

The Government welcome the Competition and Markets Authority's decision to investigate this matter, and we will carefully consider any recommendations it makes. It is important to ensure that companies and individual motorists are not being overcharged and that there is fairness in the system.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Leader of the House may well be surprised to learn that her Cabinet colleague the Secretary of State for Transport is named as legally responsible in the Environmental Protection Act 1990 for keeping England's roads on the strategic road network clean from litter and tipping. I say that she might be surprised by that because some of the dirtiest roads in the country are those operated by National Highways, including the M67 and M60, which run through my constituency. I reported the state of cleanliness of those roads to National Highways, only to be told that they were judged to be grade B, which meant that no action was required. They are utterly filthy and would be grade D at best if the local authority had judged them. What is the Secretary of State going to do to reassure Members of this House? May we have a statement on the cleanliness of National Highways' roads?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman has raised an important matter and I shall make sure that that Department has heard his concerns, given that its next questions is not until June. Clearly, there are statutory duties that certain organisations have. These things are also best solved in partnership with local authorities. I know that that is what local councils do, but I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May I underline the importance of International Workers' Memorial Day and the need for reflection on those killed, injured, or made disabled or unwell? I will be attending, with the Inverness and District Trades Union Council and others, a memorial event to reflect on those who are killed through their service to others during their work, as well as a rally on Saturday. May we have a debate in Government time on the need for further protection for workers, to give the Government the opportunity to change tack and support such enhancements?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of this important memorial day. He is the third Member to do so, and I certainly hope the event he is attending goes well. As I have said before, I will make sure that the relevant Departments focused on these matters—there are more than one—have heard that Members have raised this matter today.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): Daniel Futers from South Shields committed suicide last year while on leave from a mental health hospital in the Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust. Daniel's inquest found that

"appropriate precautions were not in place to prevent him from doing so."

The coroner subsequently sent the trust a regulation 28 report to prevent future deaths, with recommendations for improvement. The trust disagrees with the coroner's findings and is not obligated to act on them. May we please have an urgent debate on the effectiveness of regulation 28 reports?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady raises a very important matter, and I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard her concerns. I have heard other Members raise it with particular regard to that provision. The hon. Lady will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way, perhaps through the auspices of the relevant all-party group.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This week is the 10th anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster, where 1,138 garment workers in Bangladesh were killed when the factory collapsed. Union workers had to dig through the rubble to find out what labels were involved, and it was found that brands sourced in UK shops such as Primark, Mango, Matalan and Benetton were but some of them. Many countries are moving to a situation where companies have responsibility for supply chains, so may we have a debate in Government time about the need for legislation to introduce strong legal frameworks for corporate accountability?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for bringing to our attention the 10th anniversary of that terrible and sad event. She will know that the Foreign, Commonwealth

and Development Office has done a huge amount of work to ensure that the likelihood of such events happening again is reduced by having good practices in garment factories across countries that we work with. We have also worked with the UN to introduce a number of measures to strengthen transparency in supply chains, but she is absolutely right: there has to be accountability for that. The Foreign Secretary is sitting on the Front Bench, but I will also ensure that the Department for Business and Trade is focused on the issues that she raises.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Immigration Minister said at the Dispatch Box that the Government inherited a backlog of 460,000 asylum claims from the last Labour Government. Using figures supplied to him by the Immigration Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) has been able to demonstrate that the figure is fewer than 19,000. Should the Immigration Minister not come back to the Dispatch Box, as required by the ministerial code, to correct the record? What can the Leader of the House do to ensure that the record is corrected, either today or as soon as we return after the weekend?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. He knows that he can raise it in a point of order, but I have to say that I do not recognise the figures that he cites. Ministers do correct the record if they have not given the correct figures at the Dispatch Box, and that is what should happen, but I do not think that that is the situation in this case. What we should all be focused on in this place is ensuring that we can take forward the legislation that this Government are proposing, so that we can strengthen and make more effective the systems that deal with these very vulnerable people.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): If the Leader of the House really is keen on debates on the Government's record on sewage, I hope she will timetable some more in Government time, because then we could point out that after 13 years of Tory government, with falling real wages and the shocking state of our rivers, we have gone from the affluent society under Labour to the effluent society under the Tories.

**Penny Mordaunt:** How very droll. I am reluctant to have a debate where we could compare the Labour party's record in government with our record in government on this matter only because I would not be able to take part in it. When I took my seat from Labour in 2010, raw sewage was running through the households and gardens on Portsdown Hill; it was contaminating land that animals grazed on, threatening their health. Despite being the only island city in the UK, we did not have any effective sea defences; we had major flooding. Thanks to the investment that has gone into my constituency, which totals hundreds of millions of pounds, we now have beautiful sea defences that are not just protecting the insurance payers of Portsmouth but promoting biodiversity. We have new pumping stations. We have repaired the damage to the sewerage system. We now have all storm overflows monitored—the figure was just 6% when I took over the seat—and by 2030, we will have eliminated storm overflows from the Solent.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Leader of the House may not know that the Royal Mint, which makes all the coins in circulation across the UK, is



[Alex Davies-Jones]

proudly located in my constituency. The Royal Mint is a key local employer, and we must ensure a sustainable future for highly skilled jobs in Llantrisant, particularly in our circulating coin industry, given the rapid rise of a cashless society. Can she help me to secure a meeting with her colleague, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, to discuss this further?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady's question affords me the opportunity to thank her constituents. The Royal Mint has been very busy recently, for various reasons, and I thank them for their role in the important events that are coming up. I would be happy to ensure that the Economic Secretary hears her request for a meeting and to do what I can to facilitate that. She will also know that the relevant questions are on 9 May, so she will not have long to wait for that.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): This week, I was to meet the Minister with responsibility for energy consumers and affordability to discuss long-standing green deal casework. Two hours before the meeting, it was cancelled, and no replacement meeting was offered until the Leader of the House promptly stepped in. That was not the first time Ministers have cancelled meetings on this issue. Will she schedule a debate in Government time on the lack of adequate support for unresolved Home Energy and Lifestyle Management green deal cases?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about this situation, although the hon. Lady kindly mentions that I have already intervened on the matter. The Minister cancelled due to votes and a Westminster Hall debate that they were involved in, but they have reiterated today that they are very keen to meet the hon. Lady, and I will ensure that that takes place.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On Tuesday past, an orthodox church in Ukraine's Kherson region was destroyed by a guided bomb. The church became one of hundreds destroyed by recent strikes, but significantly, according to President Zelensky this week, the use of such munitions shows a new development of the deliberate targeting of churches by Russia—an attack by Russia on the right to hold a religious belief. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I take this opportunity to bring the matter to the attention of the House, and of the Leader of the House in particular, to see what we can do. Will she help to facilitate a meeting with a Minister to discuss the impact on freedom of religion and belief?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that appalling case. Churches and other places of worship are never legitimate targets in conflict situations. It is further evidence, I am afraid, of the appalling atrocities and war crimes that Russia is waging against civilians in Ukraine. I thank him for drawing the House's attention to the matter, and will certainly ensure that Ministers have heard what he has said.

## Sudan Update

1.47 pm

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement to the House on the situation in Sudan.

Thirteen days ago, intense fighting broke out in Khartoum. The conflict quickly spread across the country, and was being waged on residential streets in Omdurman, El Fasher in Darfur, and other Sudanese cities, until a US-led ceasefire was accepted by both sides. I am proud that we contributed to calling for that ceasefire, and we will continue to do our utmost to secure a lasting peace, but I remind the House that we anticipate that the ceasefire will end tonight at midnight local Sudanese time. I commend the hard work of officials from across Government and the military, not only those on the ground in Sudan but those who have been working day and night in our crisis response centre in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Their extraordinary efforts have been an inspiration to me and to all those who have taken the opportunity to visit them over the last few days.

The struggle for power between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces has killed hundreds of Sudanese citizens and threatens to claim the lives, sadly, of many more. This is a monumental tragedy—one with the potential to destabilise not just Sudan but the wider region. It is therefore in our interests, and more importantly those of the people of Sudan, to secure a peaceful and sustainable settlement as quickly as possible. However, our ability, and that of all outside powers, to determine the course of events within Sudan is limited. What is within our power is the safe extraction of as many British nationals as practically possible. I am pleased to confirm to the House that the supported departure of British nationals from Sudan, facilitated by the UK, started on Tuesday. As of yesterday evening, six flights carrying 536 people had landed safely in Cyprus. More flights continue today, so that number is rising, and I will ensure that I find the opportunity to give updates to the House.

A ceasefire is due to elapse at midnight local time, and no one can predict the situation on the ground after that. We are encouraging those who wish to travel to make their way to the airport today. We will continue to engage with our international partners to attempt to extend the ceasefire and bring a permanent end to the violence, and I will of course keep the House updated on developments on that front. For those on the ground, as Members would expect, we are prioritising those in greatest need by allocating seats based on vulnerability, starting with families with children, the elderly, the disabled or people with documented medical conditions. We have been notifying British nationals registered with us about the evacuation flights, as well as announcing them through our travel advice and organic social media networks of British nationals in Sudan.

We are working with the Home Office, UK Border Force and FCDO staff on the ground to facilitate clearances for those boarding the flights, and we will continue to co-ordinate intensively with our international partners. Several countries without a diplomatic presence in Sudan have requested that we assist their nationals.

We are energetically exploring options regarding how best to do this without compromising our duty to British nationals.

A ceasefire is not necessarily a prelude to peace and the situation could deteriorate over the coming days. We will continue to support British nationals, which is why we have established a temporary presence in Port Sudan on the Red sea coast and have put consular officials on the border points in Egypt, Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia. Sudan is the third largest country in Africa. It is more than 800 miles from the capital to Aswan in Egypt and over 500 miles from Khartoum to the Red sea. Even if there were not a war, Sudan's vastness makes the logistics of moving large numbers of people extraordinarily challenging. We are aware of a number of British nationals who have now left Sudan by other means, including some who were able to join evacuations led by our international partners. We are working with our diplomatic missions in the countries where they are arriving to provide consular assistance where required.

Although we are making every effort to evacuate our nationals, peace in Sudan will also be a key objective. We call on both sides to end the killing for the sake of the people of Sudan. They have already suffered enough, after decades of civil war. We are pursuing all diplomatic avenues to end the violence and de-escalate tension. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary, the Development Minister and I are in regular touch with our international partners. The role of the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and our partners in the region, in the Gulf and beyond will of course be critical.

The United Kingdom has profound ties and a historic friendship with the people of Sudan. We stand in solidarity with them and their right to demand a peaceful and democratic future and a return to civilian rule. When conditions allow, the UK is ready to join international efforts to rebuild the Sudanese economy and ease human suffering. That will not be easy, but it is vital for the region, and of course for Sudan, that we try. We will bring as many of our nationals as possible to safety, and we can and will play a pivotal part in rebuilding that great and ancient country. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

1.54 pm

**Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab):** I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement, and the briefings that he and his officials have provided. The ceasefire announced on Monday night opened a crucial window in which to evacuate UK nationals and pause the needless bloodshed. I place on record Labour's sincere thanks to our brave armed forces and tireless FCDO staff. None of us doubts the complexity and very challenging circumstances of this operation. The whole House sincerely hopes for its success.

We welcome the fact that more than 500 UK nationals have now boarded planes out of Sudan, but just hours of the ceasefire remain, and 500 is only a quarter of those who we know have registered with the FCDO. The true number of British citizens in Sudan is closer to 4,000. Amid the very welcome stories of families reunited,

there are tales of real concern: there are those unable to reach the airfield because of violence on the route; there are patchy official communications; and there are British citizens travelling hours overland only to find the borders closed.

Yesterday, *The Times* reported that a British doctor is stuck at home with a bullet wound in his leg and dwindling supplies of antibiotics after the Government rejected his 86-year-old mother's request for a temporary visa. It is not right that British nationals should be unable to leave because their close Sudanese family members are excluded from safe passage, especially as we know that planes have left the airfield without being full. I urge the Foreign Secretary to take swift action to ensure that British citizens can travel with their family now.

We all hope that the ceasefire will hold, but there is every chance that it will not. How confident is the Foreign Secretary that all who want to be evacuated will be by the time the ceasefire expires at midnight? What are the prospects for an extension? Will flights continue tomorrow anyway? What planning is under way to create alternative routes out of the country, should fighting return to Khartoum?

In the coming weeks, the Government will face legitimate questions about their handling of the crisis. Germany ran the Wadi Saeedna airfield when the UK's initial diplomatic evacuation operation was completed and stood down. The Germans managed to evacuate 700 people from over 30 countries before our evacuation of UK nationals had properly begun. Why did other countries choose to evacuate nationals straight away when there was no ceasefire in place, while we chose not to? Why were both the ambassador and the deputy ambassador reportedly out of the country when fighting broke out? Why are Hercules aircraft, which have been used in two airlifts in two years, still set to be scrapped? And the elephant in the room: which lessons of the Afghan evacuation have been learned and properly implemented?

The immediate priority of the British Government is rightly to ensure that as many UK nationals as possible can leave quickly and safely, but we must not allow the world's gaze to turn away from Sudan once foreign nationals have left. Sudan is at risk of lurching into deeper crisis—a crisis that its people did not make or deserve. They face the threat of intense fighting, dwindling supplies of food and water, and a wider humanitarian catastrophe. As I heard at first hand on my visit to Kenya this week, there is real concern that fighting could bubble over and cross borders, amplifying this conflict and human suffering. While we press the Government on their vital efforts to support British nationals abroad, we will continue to press for action to end the bloodshed of the people of Sudan and the wider region.

**James Cleverly:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman, particularly for his kind and thoughtful words about the military and other officials on the ground who are supporting British nationals in their evacuation. I also commend him on the tone that he has taken; he rightly pushes the Government and holds us to account, but is also being constructive and supportive of our first priority: the protection and evacuation of British nationals, where possible.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly spoke about communications. Communication with British nationals in Sudan remains a significant challenge. The mobile

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phone network is inconsistent and often down, the internet likewise. We have used multiple channels, including telephone calls, SMS messaging, and cascading information through organically created WhatsApp groups that existed before the conflict, but communications remain a huge challenge.

That brings me to the right hon. Gentleman's questions about the total number of British nationals in Sudan. The UK does not routinely request that British nationals inform us when they are overseas. We did so when this conflict started, but just as it is difficult for us to communicate with British nationals in Sudan, it is very difficult in many cases for them to communicate back to us. We know that a number will have made their own arrangements for leaving Sudan. It is not possible for us to have an accurate assessment of how many have done so at this point. We hope to do so as they get in contact with us from third countries. We will continue to push information in whatever ways we can to the people we are seeking to help in country.

On an extension to the ceasefire, we are pushing hard for that. We are amplifying the voices of those in the region and more widely that a ceasefire is in the best interests of Sudan. I say here at the Dispatch Box to either of the generals, who might be watching this statement, that if they aspire to be the leader of Sudan, demonstrating a willingness to protect the people of Sudan would be an important starting point. We will continue to push, but it is almost impossible for us to predict whether there will be an extension and what the circumstances might be like if the extension does not happen. We will endeavour to keep evacuating people through the airhead in Wadi Saeedna, but we cannot guarantee our ability to do so. We are exploring the support to other routes, which is why we have set up a temporary presence at Port Sudan, and it is why we have officials at the border in neighbouring countries.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a couple of specific questions about members of staff who were in the embassy when the conflict started. The head of mission, our ambassador, was out of the country at the time, but we have a well-established chain of command passing-on process, and the formal No. 2 in the embassy was in command and control of the embassy when this initiated. The fact that the ambassador was able to plug in to the crisis response centre in the UK was invaluable. The right hon. Gentleman asked specifically about C-130 Hercules. The simple truth is that they are an old airframe. There are newer and better aircraft that will be replacing their functions.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that in parallel with our evacuation operations, we have to work on the immediate and long-term stability of Sudan and make every effort to prevent this conflict from spilling over into neighbouring countries and destabilising the region, and we will continue to do so.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con):** I place on record my gratitude to the Foreign Office staff, those on the rapid deployment teams, those in the crisis centre, our armed forces and Border Force. May I also point

out how unacceptable it is that some media have been outside not just the homes of civil servants who are not senior civil servants, but their parents' homes? That is utterly unacceptable, and I urge the Foreign Office to make clear to the media that that cannot continue.

Moving back to the crisis on the ground, when the ceasefire was agreed, the clock began for how we would make sure that hostilities did not return from midnight tonight. What reassurances can my right hon. Friend give me that we will not see westerners removed and the Sudanese left to face appalling violence? The point was made just now about our criteria for evacuation, and I urge my right hon. Friend to please review them. The reality is that we treat children as dependents, but very elderly, sick parents should also be treated as dependents. On the specific case that was just raised, the family have made their way to the airstrip, after my suggestion that they travelled. The NHS doctor has had to receive emergency medical treatment at the airstrip under local anaesthesia because of how advanced the infection was following his having been shot. He has not been allowed on the flight that departed about three minutes ago, because he wanted to take his mother with him. I urge the Government that we have the ability to change the criteria. I cannot quite determine whether it is the Foreign Office or Home Office who have determined the criteria, but a key recommendation from Afghanistan was to recognise that dependents are also the elderly and not just the young.

**James Cleverly:** I am grateful to my honourable friend for echoing those words of support for our officials both on the ground and at home. It is completely inappropriate that people who have dedicated their lives to public service and have operated through incredibly intense situations should be hounded by the press in that way, and I call for responsible journalism in all respects.

I recognise that my hon. Friend has personal experience of some of the complexities of consular work from her life before politics and I always listen carefully to her suggestions and recommendations, which I know are all made with a genuine desire to improve the situation. There is a real challenge about extending the criteria for who we evacuate; we instinctively desire to be as generous as possible, but we must ensure that we discharge our primary duty to British nationals and the traditionally recognised dependents. I understand the point she makes about more elderly members of the family and of course we will look at what we can do to be as supportive as possible.

How many others we might be able to take is entirely dependent, as I said to the shadow Foreign Secretary a few moments ago, on whether we can get the ceasefire to stick and on our ability to continue the evacuation if the ceasefire collapses. We will keep all those decisions under review in the regular Cobra meetings that we hold.

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

**Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP):** I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. He is right that we must do everything we can to ensure a lasting peace and he is right to praise the performance of the men and women of the armed forces and others who have facilitated evacuations so far. However, time is of the essence. The



Minister for Development and Africa said on TV last night that we cannot guarantee how many further flights will depart once the ceasefire ends, adding that,

“we hope there will be enough capacity to...get them all out”.

With the numbers arriving at evacuation points doubling or even trebling, why are we relying on hope rather than action?

The Minister also admitted on TV, when asked about safe and legal routes for Sudanese refugees, that they “don’t exist”. Will the Foreign Secretary comment on that? What is the current status of people who have fled from Sudan to neighbouring countries to escape the violence? Bordering countries such as Ethiopia, Chad and the Central African Republic have already become politically insecure. What are his plans to ensure that people fleeing here will be safeguarded?

**James Cleverly:** My right hon. Friend the Minister for Development and Africa is right that we will endeavour to continue to support British nationals in their evacuation when, or if, the ceasefire is not extended. We are one of only three nations in the world that have established an airhead in the vicinity of Khartoum to facilitate air evacuations. We, the French and the Germans are the only three countries in the world to have done so and that has allowed our aircraft and the aircraft of a wide number of other countries to airlift their nationals out. However, no one can guarantee what will happen when the ceasefire comes to an end.

With regard to the wider push of refugees because of this conflict, I remind the SNP spokesperson and the House that Sudan is not the only live conflict in the world. I know it is at the forefront of many people’s minds, and it is therefore completely legitimate that he asks questions specifically about it—[*Interruption.*] If he stops interrupting, he might hear, and I will answer his questions. Now that the Illegal Migration Bill has, despite his attempts to thwart it, gone through its parliamentary stages in the Commons, we will, as we have promised, establish safe and legal routes as part of our plan to control illegal migration. Further details will come through.

With regard to preventing regional instability, we remain closely aligned with the African Union and our partners in the region, with whom I speak regularly, to try to ensure that the conflict does not escalate and spill over into neighbouring countries.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): This country will always play its part in providing sanctuary to those fleeing war, and I thank the Government for their actions in Sudan to date. Is my right hon. Friend able to confirm that the UK is indeed the fourth-largest recipient of individuals from Sudan through those routes operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and that those routes will remain open for as long as feasibly possible?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. This country has a long-standing reputation for and tradition of hospitality and generosity to those from around the world who are fleeing individual persecution or violence, and we have demonstrated that time and again. There have been tens of thousands of people who have come to the UK using safe and legal routes over the last few years since we have been in government, and we will continue to establish safe and

legal routes. Our ability to do so will be enhanced by the legislation that he, I and our colleagues voted on last night.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): I am grateful that constituents have been airlifted out and I thank the teams who have worked so hard on that. Can I raise with the Foreign Secretary the plight of those stuck because they are waiting for visas? A constituent’s partner has been in Khartoum for more than a year now, waiting for UK Visas and Immigration to handle her visa in the east Africa processing centre. She has now had to flee to Uganda, another very dangerous journey. Will the Foreign Secretary impress on the Home Office that its backlog has been pushing people into further dangerous situations?

**James Cleverly:** I will ensure that I pass on the hon. Lady’s concerns. I pay tribute to the intense work that Border Force and Home Office staff have done in conjunction with officials from my Department, the Ministry of Defence and others to try to ensure that we facilitate as quick a flow of British nationals and their dependants out of war-torn Sudan as we can, and we will continue to do that work.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on the progress he is making and the calm way in which he is operating in very difficult circumstances. Clearly, we have a large number of UK nationals in Sudan and it is difficult for them to move around, let alone be airlifted out. What actions is he taking to enable our citizens to get away from Sudan by road or sea, if that is what they wish to do?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. One challenge is that our travel advice must enhance the safety of British nationals overseas and not inadvertently put them at greater risk. There is often a lag between our finding out information, broadcasting it and its being acted on. One of the things that we have seen—not directly because of the advice that the UK has given, but the advice that other Governments have given—is that inadvertently people have been called into more dangerous circumstances and come under attack. We have to give general advice. We have given the advice that we have the airhead operating in Wadi Saeedna, and we have officials at Port Sudan and at the border crossing points of nearby countries. We cannot recommend safe routes. We cannot advise at that level of granularity because that advice may be out of date and therefore counterproductive by the time it is acted on.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Can the Foreign Secretary confirm what is happening to those visiting Sudan on refugee travel documents? To echo what the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) said, how long does he estimate it will take to process those people who were waiting for papers from the consulate in Sudan?

**James Cleverly:** Ultimately, the processing of visas is a Home Office function. We are working closely with the Home Office, but I am not able to give her those details. The prioritisation that we have broadcast is to discharge our duty to support British nationals and

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their immediate dependants. I will of course make sure that my Home Office colleagues are aware of the hon. Lady's question.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): The FCDO is rightly focusing on the immediate need to evacuate nationals. For that they have my thanks and, I suspect, the thanks of everyone in the Chamber. When that is completed, however, we will leave behind a nation in conflict. What steps will my right hon. Friend take to galvanise international support, perhaps led by the African Union, to help to end the bloodshed?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That action is happening in parallel with our evacuation options. I have spoken directly to one of the generals and spoken through intermediaries to express my views to the other. I know that our action replicates the actions of our international partners, particularly those in the immediate region who have influence. We must push for peace in Sudan. The country has suffered enough, and we must ensure the conflict we are now seeing does not spill over into nearby countries. In particular, we must ensure that malign actors do not interfere in the events in Sudan in order to turn this into a regional conflict.

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for updating the House on what he is trying to do to extract British nationals in what is obviously a very difficult situation. In common with my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), I am currently dealing with the case of a constituent. My constituent's husband, who is in Sudan, has been waiting 15 months for documentation to join her and for the family reunion visa to be processed. His passport is currently with the British embassy, which took it as part of the application process, and he is now stranded in Sudan.

When my office inquired about the situation, it received the standard reply that there is no timescale for dealing with the application. I appreciate that the Home Office is the lead Department in this situation, but surely we should have concern for all the people who are in this predicament. From what we have heard already, I suspect a lot of Members will raise this issue. We should have concern for all these people; we need to know there will be some attention to their situation.

**James Cleverly:** As I have said in response to previous questions, the issuing of visas is a Home Office function, but its officials work in close co-ordination—often physically close—with officials from my Department. There is the ability to issue temporary travel documents in lieu of a passport. Obviously, I cannot comment on the specific details of the case he raises, but the traditional functions of the Home Office and the FCDO will continue in parallel with the additional function of evacuation. Where appropriate and where they conform to the criteria we have set, we will continue to facilitate the issuing of family reunion visas. That is one of the reasons we have established a diplomatic presence not only in Port Sudan but in nearby countries.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. It is now just under 10 hours 45 minutes until the ceasefire ends, so speed is of the

essence. I thank him for the statement about the aircraft that have left, taking so many hundreds out, but surely shipborne evacuation would provide us with volume as well. Will ships be going to Port Sudan and elsewhere to get people out of Sudan?

**James Cleverly:** The short answer is that we have, as a pre-emptive measure, diverted a Royal Navy vessel towards Port Sudan; that decision was made a number of days ago. We do not envisage that it will be used as a ferry, a relief platform or anything like that, but it will give us command and control capability and a protective platform in the region. We have also put forward a team of officials from across Government to facilitate the onward passage of people who get to Port Sudan. As I say, we already have diplomatic presence, which has been enhanced in Ethiopia, Egypt and across the Red sea in Saudi Arabia.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I just want to put it on record how refreshing it is to see a Secretary of State appear to make a statement himself. I do hope that other Departments can follow his lead.

There has been a puzzling story, put around by German politicians, that in some way our rescue efforts have hampered their own attempts to extract their own citizens. Secondly, there is a story that our soldiers did not have permission to land in Sudan. Could the Secretary of State throw any light on those stories?

**James Cleverly:** I can assure the House that I have a very productive bilateral relationship with my German opposite number. We speak regularly and have been in pretty constant text communication throughout this. I want to put on the record my huge gratitude to her, and through her the German military, who helped to facilitate the evacuation of British nationals and others. We have been working very well.

I see the concerns raised in the press; none of them have been directly raised with me. From the regular conversations I have with the Defence Secretary, it is not my understanding that at any point we flew without permissions, nor that that had a negative knock-on effect on others. I will, of course, in the near future, have the opportunity to have an extended conversation with my German opposite number. If there are any lessons that we need to learn about the complexity of operations like this, we will do so. However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they have not been raised with me.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure we all share the deepest concern for the people of Sudan who are suffering this unfolding tragedy, as they have suffered so much tragedy in the past 20 years. We will have time in the future to debate why we failed to have a transition to civilian government in Sudan, but now we have the immediate issue of UK citizens trying to flee. One question that has not yet been raised is about the British and other international citizens stuck on the land border with Egypt, some of whom are in acute medical need. What is the Foreign Office doing to facilitate and work with the Egyptian Government to ensure that those citizens can traverse that land border and seek safety?

**James Cleverly:** I can assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that I remain in regular contact with my Egyptian opposite number. I have spoken to him directly

a number of times during this operation and, as is the nature of modern diplomacy, we are in pretty regular text communication as well. I know he will have been made aware of the situation at the Sudanese-Egyptian border. I am planning to speak to him again at some point in the near future—either today or early tomorrow—and this will be one of the issues that we discuss. As I say, we have put forward an enhanced consular presence from the FCDO in those neighbouring countries to help to facilitate border crossings, which are always tricky, particularly during times of conflict.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement this afternoon. Like many other Members, I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned about friends and close family members who find themselves stuck in this terrible situation out in Sudan. Further to the questions raised by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), can I ask whether the Foreign Office is considering reviewing the eligibility criteria and, in particular, whether any consideration has been given to Sudanese passport holders who have entry clearance to the UK, be they students or other individuals, and whether there is any capacity to evacuate those individuals as well?

**James Cleverly:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his praise of the work that officials across Government have done on this. I do not want to pre-empt any decisions by Cobra. We will of course look at the criteria, which we have kept constantly under review to ensure we are able to discharge our duty to support British nationals, which is the primary duty of the Government. I would make the broader point that if we were to change the eligibility, we would need to do so in a non-discriminatory way. We would not necessarily be able to say, “Sudanese people who—”; it would just need to be, “Foreign nationals who—”. That could potentially create an unsustainable degree of demand for evacuations that we might not be able to address. However, we always look at these things very carefully. We want to ensure that we not only discharge our duty to British nationals, but remain, as we have been, a generous at heart nation.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On the point about safe and legal routes, there are, of course, no safe and legal routes for people to come to the United Kingdom. In fact, in 2022, Sudanese nationality was among the five highest for the number of people travelling in small boats across the channel. Has the Foreign Secretary had any conversations with the Home Secretary about establishing safe and legal routes in the light of this particular crisis, and in the light of the vote last night on the Illegal Migration Bill, which means that anyone arriving irregularly, in the United Kingdom after 7 March which people in small boats will be counted as, will be detained and sent to a third country, which I assume the Government would say is Rwanda?

**James Cleverly:** I think the right hon. Lady meant to say that there are no current safe and legal routes established from Sudan. She said in her question that there were no safe and legal routes, but of course there are many specific to Sudan.

Let me also point out that Sudan is not the only conflict zone in the world. The Bill on which the House voted last night contains an explicit commitment to establishing safe and legal routes in parallel with ensuring that the people who come here illegally are administered quickly, fairly and efficiently, and it is right that we do both. Ultimately, establishing those safe and legal routes will be a Government decision, led by the Home Office with input from other Departments such as mine, and that is a discussion that we will of course have.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Reports have shown that people operating fake Twitter accounts are impersonating key players in this conflict, and are being legitimised by the recently introduced subscription service on the platform. One tweet falsely reporting the death of the RSF leader gained more than 1 million views before being removed. What consideration has been given to the role that social media plays in spreading misinformation about this conflict, putting lives and operations at risk as a result?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady has raised an incredibly important point. I cannot express the level of frustration I feel with what seems in many instances to be proactively and intentionally dishonest messaging. As I said to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) earlier, the passage of information to British nationals and others is extremely difficult, and if it goes wrong or is manipulated by bad faith actors, it could put British nationals and others in enhanced danger.

I do not have an answer for the hon. Lady here and now, but she is right to raise this issue. It is a classic example of why we have to be very careful and check the provenance of information, and I would advise all people to do that, particularly if they are about to make life-and-death decisions based on it.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I have some real clarity from the Foreign Secretary about people who are not British nationals but who are nevertheless in the position of one of my constituents? My constituent has been working for Public Health Wales for the last two years and living in my constituency, and they went to Sudan to celebrate Eid with their family. They are now trapped there and, I understand, are being told that they will not get help from the British Government enabling them to return to their home and workplace in my constituency. Is that the Foreign Secretary's policy, and if it is, can he change it forthwith?

**James Cleverly:** The eligibility criteria have been part of our travel advice throughout this situation. I completely understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but, as I said earlier, we cannot expand the criteria just for those mentioned by Members. To do so could substantially and unsustainably increase the number of people to whom we have given the implication that we could evacuate them. As I have said, the window is limited, the ability to evacuate beyond that is completely unpredictable, and we have a duty to ensure that we do everything we can to evacuate British nationals and dependants as per the criteria already published.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): We have all watched Sudan's descent into civil war with horror, but for the Sudanese diaspora in Britain and



[*Chi Onwurah*]

British nationals in Sudan this is a time of immense trauma and suffering, recalling the trauma and suffering involved in the evacuation of Kabul. The situation is different, but the casework that I am seeing and what we are hearing today are very familiar. The Secretary of State says that visas are not his responsibility. Will he confirm that he is working with the Home Office, as a matter of urgency, to establish a consistent and humane approach to those who do not have the requisite travel documents? That includes babies born recently, spouses in the process of applying for visas, and, as we have heard, people who live here and are on holiday in Sudan.

**James Cleverly:** It is inevitable that comparisons will be made between this operation and the evacuation from Kabul, but they are fundamentally different. The operation we have conducted—both the initial military operation to evacuate our diplomatic staff and those of other nations, and then the ongoing airlift of British nationals and their dependants from Wadi Saeedna—is fundamentally different from the situation in Kabul. As I have said, I am very proud of the fact that we are one of the three framework nations who have facilitated the operation from Wadi Saeedna, which has allowed the French, German, British and others to airlift people out. We will of course always make sure we protect the vulnerable where we can; I have said that in my statement and it is reflected in the travel advice. Ultimately our duty is towards British nationals and their dependants, and we have of course facilitated the evacuation of Sudanese nationals who are dependants of British nationals.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his determination and leadership at a time when we look to him for that. Some 512 people have died and thousands have been injured since the power struggle began two weeks ago. The Foreign Secretary has urged all UK nationals to leave before the ceasefire ends at 12 o'clock tonight. I understand, and the Secretary of State can of course confirm this, that a number of UK nationals could still be left behind due to poor mobile phone contact or due to embassy staff not being available—that is not their fault, by the way; it is just about contact for people. I believe we have a duty to ensure protection for each and every one, and I know the Secretary of State also believes that, so what will he do to protect those UK nationals who were not fortunate enough to get out in time?

**James Cleverly:** The airhead at Wadi Saeedna is one of our preferred options; that is why we made the commitment to be one of the three framework nations to facilitate the use of that airbase. The hon. Gentleman

is absolutely right to identify the fact that it is very difficult for us to make any kind of commitment beyond the ceasefire. One of the best things we can do to protect British nationals in Sudan is try to make sure the ceasefire continues, and we work incredibly hard, both directly and with partners and regional powerbases, to facilitate that and bring a lasting peace. Even if the airhead is no longer operational, there will be other routes out, and our presence at the borders and at Port Sudan will be to facilitate that. We will keep communicating best advice on evacuation and keep-safe options through all channels, notwithstanding the point I made earlier that communication remains incredibly difficult.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I have been reading reports about two NHS doctors who have been denied passage on planes evacuating from Sudan, and that struck me, because I have constituents who are NHS doctors themselves who are in Sudan with their young children. I am therefore very keen to hear what the plan is in relation to NHS doctors. I do not believe for one minute that the general public would expect that they will be abandoned by this Government to their peril in Sudan. How many children who are British nationals are in Sudan and not yet on one of the planes? What will the Foreign Secretary do to maintain proper food and water supplies for British nationals, and how does he plan to get these children home?

**James Cleverly:** As I said in response to the initial question from the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), it is not possible for the UK, or indeed any other country, to know exactly how many of their nationals are in Sudan, or any other country. We do not demand that British nationals register with the Government when they are overseas. We have put out a “register your presence” website, which gives us some idea, but no Government in the world can say what the numbers are with certainty. Indeed, people who have registered on that “register your presence” website may well have already left. That is why no one can give a complete figure on the number of nationals in Sudan. We have pumped out messages across a wide range of channels letting people know that the airhead exists and we have called them forward. We will make sure that British national children, and of course dependants of British nationals, are airlifted out. Even if we are not able to maintain that airlift capability from Wadi Saeedna, we have a presence at the borders; we have a presence in Saudi Arabia and in Port Sudan.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I thank the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary for their presence. Will anybody who wishes to leave the Chamber please do so quietly?

## Point of Order

2.35 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have asked the Speaker's Office for clarity on this matter, which relates to the voter ID and electoral fraud question this morning. When nominations closed for the Northern Ireland local government elections, I became aware that a man listed as one of the proposers of Gerard Magee in Ballyclare was the victim of identity fraud by Sinn Féin. The victim met the chief executive officer of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, and established that his identity had been stolen; he was fraudulently listed as a proposer on the nomination papers of Sinn Féin's Gerard Magee, and this purportedly included the act of forging the victim's signature on official nomination papers. For clarity, the victim does not know Gerard Magee and did not sign his nomination papers. The problem occurs because this matter cannot be investigated until the election is over. Can you advise me on how best I can stand up for democracy in this case in advance of polling day?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale)**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for informing the Chair that he wished to raise this matter as a point of order but, as he is fully aware, it is not in fact a matter for the Chair. More importantly, given that the actions he describes are potentially criminal, it would be inappropriate for me or anybody else in the Chair to seek to pre-empt or interfere with what might become a judicial inquiry. I am afraid I cannot help the hon. Gentleman further.

## BILL PRESENTED

### NORTHERN IRELAND (INTERIM ARRANGEMENTS) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Alistair Jack, Secretary David T. C. Davies, John Glen, and Mr Steve Baker, presented a Bill to extend the period during which departmental functions may be exercised in the absence of Ministers to cover the whole of the current period in which there is no Executive; to give the Secretary of State power, during that period, to commission advice and information for the purpose of developing options for raising more public revenue in Northern Ireland or otherwise improving the sustainability of public finances in Northern Ireland; and to require certain accounts and related documents to be laid before the House of Commons in periods in which the Northern Ireland Assembly is not functioning.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Tuesday 2 May, and to be printed (Bill 300).*

## Backbench Business

### Reforms to NHS Dentistry

2.37 pm

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered progress on reforms to NHS dentistry.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for once again granting this important debate, and my co-sponsor, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for all his work in helping to secure it.

When preparing for the debate, I thought it was useful to consider and reflect on the foundations of our NHS in the Beveridge report, which was published 80 years ago last November. Although it would be an understatement to say that the world has changed since its publication, the identity of this country is still proudly centred around our national health service—an idea so powerfully contained in the pages of the report. For the great British social reformers of the 20th century, dentistry was not some Cinderella service of secondary importance. Beveridge concluded that no one could seriously doubt that a free dental service should become as universal as a free medical service. Eighty years after the report's publication, it is time that the House reaffirmed our commitment to universal dental care in this country.

It is worth noting that the Beveridge report, in its proposition for universal access to NHS dentistry, was published by a multi-party coalition Government. As I stand here today, Members on both sides of the Chamber will agree that the crisis in NHS dentistry deserves the same cross-party attention that it was afforded 80 years ago, because the system has decayed: access has fallen to an historic low, and inaction over the past 13 years has caused untold damage. There can be no more half measures or excuses. Now is the time to establish a new preventive dental contract that is fit for the 21st century.

The words of my campaigning over the past eight years now serve as a compendium of forecasting doom. In 2016, I warned of a mounting crisis and drew the Government's attention to a digital report warning that half of dentists were thinking of leaving the profession. Between 2017 and 2019, I warned that 60% of dentists were planning to leave NHS dentistry. In 2020, after years of repeated warnings, I once again informed the Government that 58% of the UK's remaining dentists were planning on moving away from NHS dentistry within five years. The Government once again fudged and ignored, and more than 1,000 dentists left the NHS.

This NHS dental crisis has been a devastating slow-motion car crash of the Government's own making, yet year after year, Minister after Minister, they have assured me of their commitment to reform. Last year, when I pressed the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), for action on this matter, she informed me that she had started work on a dental contract reform. However, just yesterday, we became aware that after 13 years in power, the Government are once again starting with an announcement of a plan to publish a new plan to improve access to NHS dentistry—a plan for a plan.

[*Judith Cummins*]

We would all welcome further clarification on what that plan might involve. I can only hope that sustained campaigning on this issue by me and other Members will mean that the plan will result in positive change for my Bradford South constituents.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this excellent and incredibly important debate. In Newcastle, where NHS dentistry access has become almost impossible for so many of my constituents, a whole generation of young people and children are growing up without access to an NHS dentist. Does she agree that that is causing immense suffering now and storing up not only pain and suffering but additional costs for the future?

**Judith Cummins:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I will specifically cover access to NHS dentistry for children later in my remarks.

On the Government's plan for a plan, experience suggests that positive change for my constituents may well be wishful thinking. My constituents are suffering and take no solace whatever from the Government's commitment to plan for a plan for reform. The contract has been in place since 2006, and the Government have been undertaking a review of the process since 2011. After 12 years, it is still a work in progress.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): The British Dental Association has shown that over half of dentists have reduced their NHS work since the start of the pandemic. Official workforce data counts people, not how much NHS work they do compared with private work. Does she agree that it is important that the Government collect that data?

**Judith Cummins:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Member's important remarks. Collection of data is paramount for solving the issue.

The dodging of responsibility for more than 12 years is nothing short of a disgrace. Now, we all bear witness to the human consequences of this crisis. The victims of Government negligence are—as they almost always have been—the most vulnerable people in our society. In Bradford, 98% of dentists are now closed to NHS patients. As I informed the Prime Minister just last month, 80% of practices are now refusing to accept children as new NHS patients.

The lack of access is having crushing consequences. In the financial year of 2021-22, 42,000 NHS hospital tooth extractions were carried out for 0 to 19-year-olds—an 83% rise on the previous financial year. A dental nurse has recently spoken of routinely extracting up to 10 teeth from a single child, so children are routinely losing half their teeth. This dental crisis is now ultimately a crisis of inequality. The rate of tooth extraction is more than three times higher in Yorkshire and the Humber than in the south-east of England. Children living in our country's most deprived communities face an extraction rate three and a half times greater than those living in the most affluent areas.

In care homes for the elderly, the access crisis has been just as devastating. In 2019, 6% of care homes reported that they were unable to access NHS dental care services, but by 2022, that figure had risen more than four times to 25%—a quarter of all care homes.

As this Conservative Government continue to mull over minor reforms, they fail entire generations of people, who deserve a reasonable standard of care. No more are the cradle-to-grave principles of the NHS.

A 21st-century Britain requires a 21st-century approach. We need more than mere revision of the contract. My right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition has spoken of the need for a new healthcare system that is just as much about prevention as about cure. It is a concrete fact that no dental treatment is stronger than protecting a healthy and original tooth, but in 2021-22 tooth decay was again the most common reason for hospital admission of children between six and 10 years old. For zero to 19-year-olds, hospital tooth extractions cost our NHS a shocking £81 million a year. In 2022, instead of children visiting the dentist on a regular basis, it cost our NHS an average of more than £700 for a single minor extraction of a child's tooth in hospital.

We are paying for the cost of catch-up with our failure to prevent tooth decay, so prevention should be at the heart of our Government's agenda for dental reform. We owe that to the generations of people currently being let down by the system. This country once had a strong school dental service. With the current shocking rates of tooth decay among children, now is the time to resurrect that policy as an interim prevention measure. It is not only the right thing to do but a sensible option for the country's finances. Care homes would benefit from a dental contract that commissions stronger community dental services, as used to happen.

By using integrated care systems, upskilling care workers, and further involving local authorities, access can be increased and the pressure on dental services reduced. Prevention really is better than cure. We have a duty to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent effectively in areas right across the country. A decade of savage cuts by the Tory Government has left long-term damage. An estimated £880 million a year is now required just to restore to 2010 levels of resources. There will be no escaping the need for more investment, but it must be thoughtful investment. One answer could be the introduction of a prevention-focused capitation-type system, where lump sums are provided to NHS dental teams to treat sections of the population.

Successful targeted investment is possible, and in 2017 I developed a project in Bradford with the former Health Minister, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). I thank the hon. Member, who is now the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee and who is present in the Chamber. He worked with me on the pilot scheme, which invested over £250,000 of unused clawback over three years into my constituency of Bradford South. That went straight back into local services and ensured that patients were able to access roughly 3,000 new NHS dental appointments in an area with high dental deprivation—targeting extra resources straight into an area where they were needed.

Although that was never meant to be a long-term solution, it proved that targeted investment is possible. Where there is a will, there is a way. With a staggering 10% of this year's £3 billion national budget for NHS dentistry set to be returned, the system is clearly broken. Taxpayers' money is returned not because people are not desperate for NHS dentists, but because the Government continue to push an underfunded and unworkable system.



They lack the will to act and to find a way forward to protect dental health in this country. Now is the time to put “national” back into NHS dentistry.

The Government may once again list the challenges that stand in the way of re-establishing a truly universal dental care system. We are in a time of extraordinary change, with unprecedented cost of living crises, war on the European continent, and a society impacted by a deadly virus. Our health system is undoubtedly challenged, but 80 years ago the Conservative-Labour coalition Government published a guiding principle of NHS dental reform, just as this country fought for its very freedom and independence. In Sir William Beveridge’s own words:

“A revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolutions, not for patching.”

It is time for real change, not empty promises. This is the time for a Government dedicated to acting in the public good, to revitalise and resurrect NHS dentistry once again, ending the shoddy record of this Government’s patching of our NHS dental services.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I call the Chairman of the Select Committee.

2.49 pm

**Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the opening speech of the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who has brought back many happy memories of our time together when I was public health Minister. She has been consistent on this issue over many years.

Today’s debate is timely; it comes in a week when the Health and Social Care Committee, which, as you rightly say, I am privileged to chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, held a crucial oral evidence session with the Minister, who is in his place on the Front Bench.

Dentistry is a subject close to my heart from my time serving as public health Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care. It is also one of the Select Committee’s top priorities. We launched our inquiry on the subject shortly after I became Chair in November last year. We are looking at what steps the Government and NHS England should take to improve access to NHS dental services, and at further reform of the NHS dental contract. Rarely has an inquiry been more needed or welcome. It is clear that there are huge problems facing NHS dentistry. I am sure that every colleague, whether in the Chamber today or not, is familiar with stories of constituents having trouble accessing NHS dentistry. I am no exception to that, as a constituency MP; neither are my family, as patients.

One of the many submissions that the Committee received talked about people extracting their own teeth with pliers, something that should not happen in the 21st century. The problem is particularly acute in some areas of the country—we will hear talk today about dental deserts, I am sure—and among some groups of people, but challenges and capacity issues are experienced across the board. Our inquiry received a wide range of written evidence, including from nearly 30 local Healthwatch groups. We also held two detailed oral evidence sessions examining the problem and, of course, potential solutions. We heard from Healthwatch that the majority of complaints that it receives at the moment are about dentistry. Day

in, day out, local Healthwatch groups receive emails and calls about problems accessing an NHS dentist. That is reflected in other evidence that we received; I know it is not easy for some to hear this, but as a Select Committee Chair, I can only follow the evidence that I receive. We have also heard again and again about the challenge of recruiting and retaining NHS dentists.

The Government have, I am pleased to say, started to act, and to pick up where some of the previous tinkering reforms left off—reforms for which I take some of the credit, and some of the responsibility; I did not fundamentally reform the dental contract during my time as dental Minister, either. In July last year, the Government announced several changes to the 2006 dental contract, including a change to the way that units of dental activity are awarded. They also advised longer recall intervals for adults with good oral health, in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines.

In our first evidence session, we heard from Shawn Charlwood from the British Dental Association, who told us that the reforms to the dental contract represented tweaks, rather than the fundamental reform that is needed. He said:

“In essence, what we are doing at the moment is rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic while the service slowly slips into the sea.”

To be fair to the Minister, for whom I have a lot of respect, and who spoke really well before the Select Committee earlier this week, I was delighted to hear him acknowledge in that session that he wants “quite fundamental reform” to the dental contract; that has to be right. He argued that the existing reforms were “welcomed”, but noted that they were “only a start”. That was good to hear, and it was well covered by the media on Tuesday evening. I worry, though, that even if significant reforms to the NHS dental contract were made tomorrow, it would be too late, or an extreme challenge, to bring back those dentists who have already left the NHS dental workforce. It is really hard for people to make that decision; they came into dentistry to work in public service. I fear that once they have made the change, it will be final for them, and it will be very difficult to get them to change their mind. I touched on that with the Minister earlier this week. Perhaps he can tell us a bit more about what he will do to address that issue of return.

In our session, I asked the Minister about his ambition for NHS dentistry. Tony Blair famously said in his 1999 conference speech that his ambition was for everybody to have access to an NHS dentist within two years. It never happened, but it was a clear ambition; I give him credit for that. The Minister said that “the No. 1 thing” on his mind was improving access to a dentist for those who do not currently have that access—quite right. But when I pressed him on whether that meant that everyone would have access to an NHS dentist, he said that he wanted everyone who needed an NHS dentist to be able to access one. That is welcome; it is a repeat of that ambition. It is good that the Government have that ambition—although the key, obviously, is whether and when they deliver on it. I will ask him to expand on that when he sums up.

The Minister also talked about making NHS dentistry more attractive to dentists, which is clearly crucial. He said that the problem is not a shortage of dentists per

[Steve Brine]

se, but a shortage of dentists undertaking NHS dentistry. The figures certainly bear that out. Our work has highlighted the point that there is a problem with data as well. There are headcounts for the number of NHS dentists, but we do not know whether they are part-time or full-time and how much NHS activity they do. That gap needs closing.

We need to know about the workforce available to deliver the Minister's ambition; until then, it is unlikely to be achieved. The Minister reminded us this week that the Government are in the final throes of drawing up their workforce plan, which I understand will include dentistry. That is good. I hope that that plan will be published in the not-too-distant future—maybe once we get past a certain electoral event next Thursday.

I also want to touch on overseas recruitment. According to the General Dental Council, almost a quarter of dentists registered in the UK gained their dentistry qualifications overseas. That is fine, but for those dentists the primary means of assessment is the overseas registration examination, or ORE. The pandemic created a backlog in the number of overseas dentists waiting to take their exams—that is the good part. The ORE is subject to practical and legal constraints that make it difficult to adapt capacity to meet changing demands for places. A recent list of changes should help ease the problems, but are unlikely to make a significant difference in the short term; the Minister can correct me if I am wrong.

One of my constituents, Christopher Hilling of SpaDental Group, who has spoken to me about the subject on several occasions, has outlined the difficulties he is facing. He has a number of dentists waiting for the opportunity to sit the ORE exam, but he has struggled in the past to get accurate information about when the exams will even take place. He is concerned that he might lose more of his overseas dentists due to a lack of exam opportunities and of General Dental Council communication about when those dentists might be able to practise in the UK. Given the delay in the taking effect of changes to overseas registration, what are the Government doing to support the GDC, especially with regard to clearing the backlog of applications?

I was encouraged to hear this week the Minister and chief dental officer Sara Hurley talk in our evidence session about the importance of driving forward work on prevention. That is a passion of mine, and colleagues will know that it is a major inquiry that the Select Committee is undertaking. One of our witnesses at this week's session talked about the importance of early prevention work, focusing on young children. The expression she used was "getting gums on seats", and that is a great place to focus. We must get more gums on seats, Mr Deputy Speaker—that is the catchphrase for today's debate.

Finally, I want to talk about integrated care systems, on which the Select Committee has also done a lot of work. We heard in our session about some of the changes that have come into effect as a result of integrated care boards taking responsibility for commissioning dental services. Some were early adopters, including the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB that looks after my constituency. But the boards do not include dentistry. I asked the Hampshire ICB representative, who appeared as one of our witnesses this week, about that. They said that they do not want to make their boards too big.

I find that disappointing, surprising and unhelpful. To be fair, some ICBs have managed to include dentistry on their boards without any problems; if they can do it, all should. It sends a strange message to the dental profession if it is not included on integrated care boards. It is a great opportunity for flexibility in commissioning, which is why we created the boards. Dentistry needs to be within them.

To conclude, the picture is bleak, but it does not have to be—it is also improving and there are grounds for optimism. We have a Minister who understands this subject inside out and is committed to providing access to NHS dentists for everyone who needs it and a thorough overhaul of the current system and the contract, as he confirmed to us this week. In integrated care boards, we have the possibility of being able to target local services to local needs. But the time for action is running out. I hope the Minister can outline in his response to the debate that he recognises the urgency of the situation, and that, when my Committee produces its report on dentistry, he will read it and act promptly on our recommendations.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** Order. I do not intend to put a time limit on the debate at this stage. Colleagues will have noticed that the Chairman of the Select Committee was commendably brief; if everyone emulates that, it should be possible for everybody to have their say without putting a time limit on. However, there is another debate that it is intended should follow this, and I hope that that will have a hearing as well.

3 pm

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Sadly we have been here before, time and again, and this Conservative Government still refuse to act, consigning yet another public service to the scrapheap. Once again my constituents are paying more and getting less under this Tory Government. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this very important debate. We need this crisis to be urgently addressed.

It cannot be denied any longer: we face an existential crisis in NHS dentistry. It really is at breaking point. The latest area in my constituency to be affected is Pennywell in Sunderland, where the Bupa branch will close its doors in June, affecting 7,800 NHS patients. Not a week goes by without correspondence from a constituent in dire need, in despair and often in acute pain, unable to find an NHS dentist and unable to afford a private one. The nearest NHS practice accepting new patients for those constituents is in South Shields, nearly an hour away from Pennywell on public transport. That is completely unacceptable.

We cannot accept dental care becoming a luxury available only to those who can afford it. To add insult to injury, during this Conservative cost of living crisis the Government have hiked dental care prices by 8.5%. Those choices are being made by the Prime Minister and his billionaire buddies, who have never had to worry about the cost of anything such as this and do not understand the effect that that record increase will have on the cost of living pressures facing ordinary people in my constituency and across the north-east.

The hike will not put a penny into NHS dentistry, either; it will just force millions to reconsider whether they can afford necessary dental treatment. We risk the horror of DIY dentistry becoming the norm.

Across 13 years, the Conservatives have chosen millions of pounds of short-term cuts, but the long-term cost of health inequalities is a price my constituents will pay for generations. The Government chose not to listen to dentists and they knew that the woefully inadequate NHS dentistry contract was not fit for purpose. That is not a new problem. Make no mistake, not only are the Conservatives allowing this crisis to worsen, but their inaction suggests to me that this is actually the result they desire.

My constituents are furious, as am I. They are either forced to pay over £100 more for the exact same NHS care they could get under a Labour Government in Wales or they are left unable to access any treatment at all. We need a Labour Government who will prioritise healthcare access for all, clear up 13 years of Tory underfunding and mismanagement, and abolish the Prime Minister's precious non-dom status in order to provide the treatment and dental care that the British people deserve. The people of Sunderland and Washington should not have to suffer because of Tory chaos and managed decline that leave dental care a luxury for the few.

3.3 pm

**Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. It is the third in a trilogy that the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and I have secured, and that in itself tells a sad and sorry story. Complaints about access to NHS dentistry have been the No. 1 item in my inbox for getting on for two years and, while there is a particular challenge in Suffolk and Norfolk, I am conscious that this is very much a national crisis.

The fundamental causes of the collapse of NHS dentistry go back over 25 years, with a gradual withdrawal of funding by successive Governments and the poorly thought-through 2006 NHS contract. Covid was the final straw that brought the edifice crashing down. The challenge now in front of us is to put NHS dentistry on a secured long-term footing, but in a way that enables our constituents, many of whom are in acute agony, to see a dentist straight away.

**Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend for his part in securing successive debates. On emergency dentistry, in my constituency people are asked to travel an hour and a half by public transport for emergency treatment. Great changes have happened in the last three months, but we must improve on that in the next three months so that that no longer happens.

**Peter Aldous:** I think we all have tales of constituents who have had to go a long way to see an NHS dentist, if they can find one at all. In Lowestoft, people have had to travel to Basildon, which is not straightforward by public transport.

The task of delivering the plan for NHS dentistry is on the shoulders of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien). From my perspective, the purpose of the debate is to be constructive and to

provide him with ideas and suggestions that could be included in his plan. It should be ambitious, visionary and innovative, not just a sticking plaster to get us through the immediate crisis.

To achieve that, and to ensure that our constituents are able to see a truly local NHS dentist quickly, three immediate short-term challenges need to be addressed. First, the up to £500 million due to be clawed back into the main NHS budget should remain available exclusively for NHS dentistry this year. Secondly in the short term, there is a need to recruit more dentists from overseas to address the acute shortage of NHS dentists. I acknowledge the measures that the Government put in place, as the Minister set out in his answer to my question on Tuesday, but more needs to be done to eliminate the queue as quickly as possible. Thirdly in the short term, the 2006 NHS contract needs replacing, and we must move completely away from the discredited UDA system.

In the longer term, the ingredients for rebuilding NHS dentistry and transforming it into a system fit for the 21st century of which we can justifiably be proud, are as follows: first, as I mentioned, we need to put in place that new contract, and address the current contract's fatal flaw. It should facilitate a focus on prevention and should motivate dentists and dental practitioners to work in rural and coastal areas such as Suffolk and Norfolk. Secondly, a long-term fair funding system should be put in place. I acknowledge that Governments do not like ringfencing, but NHS dentistry must be provided with an assurance that the funds are available to make the long-term strategic investment that ensures that service will be both resilient and robust.

Thirdly, the recruitment and retention arrangements need to be significantly improved. Dentistry must feature prominently in the Government's forthcoming NHS and social care workforce plan. Many colleagues, including myself, have highlighted the need for dentistry schools in their areas. Locally, both the University of East Anglia and the University of Suffolk have come forward with proposals. In East Anglia, my sense is that a vacuum must be filled, but I am mindful that a strategic approach right across the country needs to be pursued on where dentistry schools are best located. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister could commit to carrying out such an assessment. In the meantime, I urge him to immediately support the University of Suffolk's dental community interest company, which has the twin benefits of providing much needed NHS dental treatments and training in such areas as dental therapy and hygiene.

There is also a need to improve the accountability and transparency of NHS dentistry. The move to integrated care boards that happened throughout much of the country on 1 April, including locally with the Norfolk and Waveney integrated care board, is very much a step in the right direction. In our local area it is taking steps to put in place a long-term plan and to ensure proper representation from dentists.

Finally, at the heart of any health strategy must be prevention. Such an approach will help spare people from hours of agony and ultimately impose less of a burden on the public purse. I will briefly outline three possible strands to intervention. First, the Government must press ahead with plans to fluoridate the water supply. All the evidence is that that will bring significant



[Peter Aldous]

results. Secondly, we must come up with a strategy for promoting better oral healthcare for children. In 2021, with support from local councillors, Lowestoft Rising provided free toothbrushes and toothpaste to the under-sevens. The take-up was high and the feedback was extremely positive, and it recommended that such products should be exempted from VAT. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to promote that policy with the Treasury. Thirdly, as we have heard, we must not forget the elderly, particularly those in care homes, and that must be covered in the new dental contract.

In conclusion, the emergence of dental deserts across the country, which are now joining up to create an area of Saharan proportions, is a crisis that must be tackled head-on with proper funding, root-and-branch reform and bold and imaginative policies. My sense and my hope is that the Minister is up for the challenge, and I look forward to the publication of the Government's NHS dentistry plan. As I have said, this is the third Backbench Business Committee debate that the hon. Member for Bradford South and I have secured, and I hope that a fourth will not be necessary.

3.11 pm

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on their persistence. Let us hope it starts to pay off and they do not need that fourth debate on the subject.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South has said, NHS dentistry is in crisis. There is a recruitment and retention crisis, which the Government have allowed to develop and grow to the point that many of my constituents in Hull North have been left with no access to an NHS dentist. We all know what needs to be done to fix the problem, but the Government have continued to drag their feet over the need for a new dental contract, for new dental schools and for expanding the number of dentists that we have in this country. It is almost like they have hoped that those who can afford to do so will go private, and those who cannot will just sit and let their teeth rot.

Right now, people in Hull North are paying for the Government's time wasting with their dental health. One constituent has told me of waiting lists at a local NHS dentist of more than 1,500 people, and another has tried to call every NHS dentist within 30 miles, but the earliest appointment they have available is January 2025. A concerned parent tells me that their 11-year-old has not seen a dentist since they were six years of age, and their four-year-old has never seen a dentist, despite being on several waiting lists across Hull since they were a baby. I have had headteachers tell me that children do not go to school because of dental pain and being unable to get access to a dentist.

In Yorkshire and the Humber, as my hon. Friend referred to, in the year ending 2022, 4,560 children under the age of 10 were hospitalised for tooth extractions. That shocking figure includes more than 1,500 babies and toddlers under five with cavities so bad that they have had to have their teeth removed. The situation is shocking and considerably worse in Yorkshire, the Humber and the north-east than elsewhere in England.

What we need are more NHS dentists. We need to recruit more NHS dentists, and if we want to tackle the dental recruitment problems, we obviously need to train more NHS dentists. Years ago, the University of Hull, in partnership with the University of York—I am very pleased to see in her place my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who represents that university—put in a joint bid for a dental school.

It was to go alongside the brilliant Hull York Medical School, which had been established under the Labour Government when there was a real need for more doctors to be trained. The idea was that we would “grow” our own doctors from the area where the medical school was based. Let us imagine what would have happened and the situation we would be in today if we had been allowed to have that Hull York dental school.

After all the dither and delay that we have been talking about, we can correct our course today. There is plenty of existing support and the capability to deliver a high-quality training facility in the Humber area, which could directly serve one of the worst affected regions in the country, but we need the Government to step up to give us the resources and provide the funding for places.

I am, however, grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), for agreeing to meet me after I raised this issue in Tuesday's Health questions. I also commend him for the speed with which his office contacted mine to arrange that meeting. Getting a ministerial meeting that quickly is unusual these days, so I thank him for that. A Hull dental school could be part of a long-promised workforce plan for the NHS. It could mean that we have sufficient UK-trained, highly qualified dentists and, with the necessary changes to the dental contract, a decent reward for their hard work. We also need to remember that we are competing in a global market for dentists. I was struck by the fact that if a dentist goes to Canada, they receive a £63,000 golden hello and the offer of residence. That is clearly tempting for many dentists who train in this country and feel they are overworked and get too little pay.

To date, the Government have been missing in action, dentists have been voting with their feet and patients in Hull have been paying with their teeth. We need more NHS dentists. Let us train them. Let us get on with it and do it now, and let us do it in Hull.

3.16 pm

**Jill Mortimer** (Hartlepool) (Con): I, too, thank everyone involved in securing this important debate, including the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who so eloquently laid out the terrible state of NHS dental services in this country today and the desperate need for reform of that terrible Labour 2006 contract, which, in effect, destroyed NHS dental services in the UK. That is why I welcome the general direction of the Government's plans for NHS dental reform, as outlined in the statement on 19 July last year. It is a good start, but we must do more. We must take this opportunity to not only put NHS dentistry back on track after disruptions during covid, but ensure we create a long-term sustainable plan to enable good NHS dentistry for all who want it.

I wholeheartedly agreed with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), when she said that

“the contract is the nub of the problem; it is currently a perverse disincentive for dentists to take on NHS work.”—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 135.]

That contract is the primary structural issue in NHS dentistry at the moment and has been since 2006. I have spoken to a dentist who owns 17 NHS practices across England, including two in my constituency. They are struggling financially to keep those practices going, but are totally committed to providing NHS dental services to my constituents and so push on despite the difficult environment.

**Mrs Hodgson:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Jill Mortimer:** No, I want to make progress.

That dentist’s many problems include the unfair way UDA rates are calculated, which ironically disadvantages areas such as Hartlepool, which have severe health deprivation. That has knock-on effects on their ability to employ staff at competitive rates and leads to a reliance on expensive locum dentists, further stretching the viability of the business. Dentists find a way to make their practices work with access contracts, but the lack of certainty they face because of the difference in competences between different integrated care boards adds further issues. For example, under one ICB’s access contract they were provided with clarity for a two-year period, but under our ICB they were still waiting to hear at the end of the month whether a contract would be renewed four days later. Not only did the survival of the practice and the jobs of 30 staff depend on that contract, but the dental care of 20,000 patients also depended on it. Thankfully it was renewed, but it is unacceptable that the ICB provided them with no indication of whether the contract would be renewed so close to its end. No business can run like that.

For areas such as mine that have a desperate need of NHS dental services, we should be fully valuing and supporting good dentists like that to ensure the survival of their essential services. I urge the Minister to consider radical reform of the way in which NHS dental service contracts are remunerated, so that established NHS dentists continue to offer NHS services to new patients. I would also like to see changes to stop newly qualified dentists being tempted into private work. It costs the taxpayer a significant amount of money to train a dentist, but they are not then required to work in the NHS. It is only fair on working people who have subsidised these professionals to train in their chosen career to expect a degree of payback. I would therefore welcome the Minister looking into the possibility of a staggered mandatory amount of NHS work per year for the first few years after qualification.

Good dental care starts with good preventive care, and I want to see a day when everyone who wants it can access NHS dental services for all routine procedures and check-ups, not just emergencies, without the difficulties that my constituents are currently facing.

3.21 pm

**Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): Across Durham and the whole country, dentistry is in crisis. It is a system in need of urgent reconstruction, not tinkering. To be clear, the problem has not been caused by NHS workers or dentists. It has been caused by the Conservative Government, who have ignored the concept of prevention rather than cure. Dentists have told me that the key

issue is the chronic underfunding of NHS dentistry. Let us not forget that it has been subject to cuts unparalleled elsewhere in the NHS.

There is a real recruitment and retention crisis in the workforce, but the situation cannot be improved by simply recruiting more dentists. The fact is that NHS dentists are made to work in a fundamentally flawed system that does not have prevention at its heart. I fear that if NHS dentistry continues down this road, England may have an entirely private dental provision, and the facts speak to that. In August last year, the BBC showed that eight in 10 NHS practices were not taking on children as patients, nine in 10 practices were not accepting adult patients, and a third of council areas were not taking on adult NHS patients. How can we have a preventive approach if my constituents cannot get to see a dentist? In addition, tooth decay is the most common reason for A&E hospital admissions in young children. That is a disgrace.

Nothing could reflect the current crisis more than DIY dentistry. People are fitting their own fillings and extracting their own teeth without anaesthetic or professional training. This week alone, I have been contacted by eight constituents who have performed DIY dentistry. The situation is compounded by the cost of living crisis, which is blighting the lives of ordinary people. If someone needs to choose between eating and heating, they will probably not want to fork out for an expensive root canal; they will probably choose to have an extraction instead or do it themselves. This is a stark example of health inequalities.

I have some questions for the Minister. When will the Government adopt a preventive approach to health and social care, particularly to dentistry? When will the Government provide NHS dentistry with the funding it desperately needs? Has the Department had meetings recently with the Treasury to discuss funding? When will the Government work with the British Dental Association to reform the current dental contract, to stop the exodus of staff from the NHS?

In 1948, Labour recognised that it was vital to integrate dentistry within the NHS and that oral health is not an optional luxury but integral to our national health and key to the NHS. How we tackle it must therefore be a priority, not an afterthought. Only a Labour Government can save dentistry from the rot and decay that has set in under the Tories’ watch.

3.24 pm

**Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): Like many colleagues, I have received a large volume of communications from constituents in Broxtowe regarding the ongoing problems with securing an NHS dentist appointment. Polling conducted by YouGov on behalf of the British Dental Association has shown that one in four adults in England have already delayed or avoided much-needed care due to cost. I am aware that improving access to NHS dentistry is one of the Government’s key priorities for our health service. It is evident that waiting times have been affected by the infection control measures required during the pandemic. Despite these pressures, dental services in many parts of England have been slowly recovering, which is good to see. However, much more must be done to reduce waiting times and ensure that appointments are available. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) said, we need more gums on seats.

[Darren Henry]

The BBC recently contacted every NHS dental practice in England and found that 91% were not able to accept new adult patients and 80% were not able to accept new child patients. This is not acceptable. Oral health inequality is rising, and we must act now to ensure that we focus on retaining current dentists, recruiting new ones and ensuring that adequate funding is in place.

My constituent Sacha told me about the difficulty she has had. Not being able to book a dentist appointment has caused her great stress and anxiety. She will potentially lose her teeth if a dentist is not found. Sacha has gum disease and is supposed to see a dentist four times a year. She faces great pain and does not have the option of visiting a private dentist. I have heard many cases like hers, and a private dentist is often not an option. People should not have to turn to private dentists. Sacha is currently waiting for a response from NHS England.

Another constituent, Joan from Toton, recently shared her difficulties with me. She rang multiple practices in her area but was told there are no NHS dentists available. Joan is 70 this year and should not be unable to get basic dental care. It is essential that we fix this problem by ensuring that new NHS dentists are entering the workforce and that we retain the ones we currently have.

The Government have rightly been holding talks since 2021-22 with the British Dental Association and other stakeholders on reforming dental contracts. Through these talks, a number of steps have been and are being taken, including improving financial incentives for dental practices, supporting new practices to take on patients and supporting people with dental costs, but more must be done.

The Department of Health and Social Care has stated that it will publish a plan for dentistry in the coming months. I welcome that announcement and look forward to receiving the plan. In the meantime, I implore the Minister to do all he can for those, such as Sacha and Joan, who face not being able to access dental treatment.

3.28 pm

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this debate, and I thank other hon. and right hon. Member for their persistence in pursuing this matter and ensuring it remains a priority. It is worth repeating that this debate is about the progress on reforming NHS dentistry. The two colleagues I mentioned made the case for this debate:

“Underfunding and the current NHS dental contract are to blame for long-standing problems with burnout, recruitment and retention in NHS dental services. Morale amongst NHS dentists is at an all-time low and we are facing an exodus of dentists from the NHS. Reform of the dysfunctional NHS dental contract is a matter of urgency—a reformed service won’t work if there is no workforce left by the time it’s finally introduced.”

To solve the problem, it is crucial to accept that there actually is a problem, and it is important to recognise the extent of that problem. The first question I want to ask the Minister is whether he accepts that there is a problem with access to NHS dental services.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care** (Neil O’Brien) *indicated assent.*

**Peter Dowd:** I am pleased that the Minister nods and recognises that. The second is whether he acknowledges the extent of the problem with access to dental services. What progress has actually been made—that is what the debate is about—and has it been significant enough? The Minister accepts that there is a problem, but I am still not convinced, on the evidence we have, that the progress has gone far enough. That is my view. The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) talked about the 2006 contract, which we all know needs to be redesigned. The Labour Government recognised, in good faith, as early as 2009 that it had to change. We are now 13 years on, so we have to get to grips with it now. I do not point the finger in that regard, but that is the context for the debate today. Actions speak louder than words. Have there been sufficient actions to resolve the problem that the Minister recognises? I am not convinced there have been.

We had a debate in Westminster Hall on 10 February last year—over 12 months ago—in which I asked Conservative Members to

“press the Minister and ask the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister—their colleagues—to listen to the facts, because, unless Members opposite can get that message across to an indurate Government, things can only get worse.”—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 473WH.]

Let us take a rain-check a year or so on. Have things stayed the same? Have they got better? Have they got worse? In my view, and that of many others, things have not stayed the same and they have not improved substantially, so it does not take Hercule Poirot to work out that things have deteriorated. I accept, in good faith, that Conservative Members have lobbied the Government, but I am sorry to say that, looking at the situation on the ground in my constituency—and, no doubt, in other Members’ constituencies—their exhortations have fallen on nearly deaf ears, or at least have not been listened to sufficiently.

From Monday gone, there has been an 8.5% increase in NHS patient charges for dentistry in England—during a cost of living crisis. That increase will hit millions of people on modest incomes, including patients in my constituency, and that is those who can actually get to see a dentist. Many statistics have been mentioned today and I could rehearse them, but I will not do so for purposes of brevity. Everybody gets the gist that things are in a grim state.

One statistic I will mention is that dentistry is now the No. 1 issue raised with Healthwatch, with four in five people—79%—who contact it saying they found it difficult to access timely dental care. The British Dental Association has said:

“The Government’s support package for NHS dentistry launched in November consists of marginal changes that will do little to arrest the exodus of dentists from the service or address the crisis in patient access.”

On top of that, we have low morale in the service and dentists quitting in great numbers. I do not think it goes too far to say that we are facing meltdown. The BDA sees an existential threat; I say meltdown—we all get the gist.

Despite the £3 billion dentistry budget, some 10% of the money allocated will be returned, not because of lack of demand but because of dentist shortages. That is the irony. The money is returned, but that must be set in the context of underfunding over many years, on top



of which is the poor contract. Retention issues are borne out of burn-out and consequent recruitment issues in NHS dental services. The BDA is right to say that marginal changes will not sort out the problem. I am pleased that the Chair of the Select Committee is on board on that.

First, fundamental reform of the contract is needed. Despite discussions between the BDA and NHS England, the fact remains that unless there is a substantive and substantial change to the contract, matters will continue to deteriorate. Second is the question of resources. It will take up to half a billion pounds annually to restore the funding of NHS dental services to 2010 levels. After a decade of attrition, that is the situation. In real terms, net Government spending on NHS dental services was cut by a quarter between 2010 and 2020. Again, I am not finger-pointing; it is just something that we have to factor in as we try to resolve the problem. Of course, as has been mentioned, the question of prevention has a crucial role to play, as it always does in health services. That, too, must be a priority for the Government.

Having heard what hon. Members, the British Dental Association and the NHS Confederation have said, and what constituents in their droves are telling us, I really hope that the Minister will take action and get to grips with this major problem with provision in this crucial part of the NHS. I started with the issue of progress being made. The question is: can we really say that we have made sufficient progress after three Backbench Business debates? Alas, at this stage, I do not think that we have done.

3.36 pm

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and of course the Backbench Business Committee, for securing this important and necessary debate—the third in this trilogy of dentistry debates; and, we hope, the last.

My constituents tell me that dental care in Milton Keynes is failing to meet demand and the complex needs of many families dealing with challenging circumstances. That is, quite frankly, unacceptable. For instance, an unpaid carer with three disabled children told me that her local NHS dentist would no longer be able to see children for NHS treatment. In her case, the alternative is to pay £4.75 a month per child for their dental plans; doing the maths, that works out at £171 a year. The only other option for her family is an NHS dentist over 12 miles away from their home. She explained how the children require one-to-one support and can therefore not access family appointments, so in effect this option would mean going to and from the dentist three times every six months. Factoring in fuel costs and other things, is either option more favourable than the other? The last thing that people caring for three children with disabilities need is further pressure on the family budget and schedule. Many families such as hers are faced with similar difficult choices.

Access to NHS dental care should not be determined by a postcode lottery. Another constituent told me a similar story. They moved to Milton Keynes recently and inquired as to their nearest NHS dentist, but were told that the closest NHS dentist was in Bedford. Once again, their only alternative would be private dental care.

Dental care in Milton Keynes, not for a lack of policy and plans from the Government, is on the rocks—mainly, as Members have said, due to the contractual situation dating back decades. For too many, dental care is out of reach and too difficult to access. Without serious change, the consequences for patients and our health system are severe. In fact, when we talk about policy reform, we often forget to pair the reform of the material improvements with our infrastructure and capacity. As a result, the good work that we in Parliament do to reform the system can fail to have an impact on the situation on the ground in the way that we want. What makes this debate so important for me is that it speaks to that wider, broader constellation of dental care reform issues that remain overlooked. I have touched on that previously with the Minister in regard to a different healthcare area.

In my constituency, the Labour-Lib Dem coalition that runs Milton Keynes City Council has given developers permission to build thousands of extra houses as part of the MK East development. Those in surrounding towns such as Newport Pagnell and Olney are already seeing more traffic and more pressure on their public services, including GP surgeries and dentists. I will continue to hammer away at that issue. Who thought about the impact on local services and on people who struggle even now to get dentist appointments for themselves and their children? That level of incompetence makes it difficult for Government reforms to have the desired impact. Let me be clear: it is always expansion before infrastructure when it comes to Milton Keynes City Council—short-term wins instead of planning for the longer term. This is why we plan and have planning departments. We should always put infrastructure before expansion.

I am convinced that there was little to no foresight of the effect on vital public services such as dental care, which are already spread dangerously thin. Ultimately, the knock-on effect of that ill-thought-out planning and reckless over-expansion is a significant and long-term problem for my constituents. We are already seeing the consequences. Yet by getting the infrastructure right, we can make dental reform far more effective.

I welcome the fact that the Department of Health and Social Care will publish a plan for dentistry in the coming months, and I look forward to seeing how it will help my Milton Keynes constituents. I hope that, with the right changes, we can create a system to ensure that the most vulnerable families can access dental care without having to make costly travel arrangements. I am keen to see dental care access improve across my constituency and across England, and I am in no doubt that many others across the House feel the same.

3.41 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The ever-growing despair has left York and North Yorkshire a dental desert. Thousands of my constituents cannot even get on a waiting list. If they are lucky as they phone around, they may be put on a list, but they then have to wait a minimum of five years to see a dentist. Children are having their teeth pulled out, and adults are getting the pliers out. Although this Government have to own the last 13 years, I want to look forward, not back, because we have a crisis to solve.

Dentistry being left like this is a reminder of what things were like before the NHS was created, and before Labour stepped in and demanded equality of health for

[*Rachael Maskell*]

all. The model does not work; the system of payment does not work. We need radical reform—not tweaking of the system of units of dental activity. In my constituency, three dental practices have withdrawn from NHS contracts and, over the past four years, 126,130 UDAs have gone. We know that that crisis is deepening. In fact, by the coming June, Bupa NHS—an oxymoron in itself—will have seen a loss of 6,000 more NHS dental spaces. My community cannot get dental healthcare, and they are suffering and struggling because of that.

I, too, sit on the Health and Social Care Committee, and I listened carefully to the Minister, as well as to the chief dental officer, who I thank for her candour and for restoring my hope. She set out a programme of how it can be possible to deliver a future NHS dental service creatively through the integrated care boards, as did the chair of my local dental committee and the associate postgraduate dental dean for primary care dental foundation training in my constituency. They set out a vision which is practical, with purpose and can deliver. If I mesh that with my dental charter, which I have given to my ICB, starting with the ambition to have a children's dental service within a year, we can start building back. The second year could aim to help older people and those in care homes, as well as those who live in the greatest deprivation. In years 3, 4 and 5, we could build back for the rest of the adult population so that people can get their timely oral health appointments.

However, we need co-operation from the Government, who have now become the servants, with the ICBs as masters. In particular, we need Government support to train more professionals. I too welcome the meeting with the Minister about the proposed York dental school, and I have met the University of York to prepare the way for that. It is important that we train more dentists, but it is also an opportunity to embed a centre of dental development in our city. The ambition is there and the vision has been created.

In addition, we need to ensure that we have good foundation training. I recognise what the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) said about having a training bond, because if we are spending £100,000 on dental training, we need to see a return on that investment. A foundation training programme that consolidates practice will upskill dentists in a more coherent way, with supervision and mentoring to ensure that they are the very best professionals. I have to challenge the GDC about its oversight of the dental profession particularly in primary care, and say “Up your game.”

On top of that, we need to ensure that our whole communities can have confidence in what is being created. Through prioritising our young people and ensuring that we take a preventive and proactive approach to dental healthcare, we will start to see other people taking on those competencies and drive that through a public health agenda.

Listening to the opportunities set out by our chief dental officer, the professional on the pitch, it is clear that the Government are not up to the job, and in some places they have been an active block. She has the ideas and the formula, and, my goodness, she has the drive and the energy. Just meeting her and hearing her set out that vision gave me hope that I can go back to my

constituents in York and say that there are some people who can really deliver the national dental health service that we need for the future.

3.46 pm

**Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this timely debate. Hopefully, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) said, this is the end of the trilogy. I am glad to see the Minister in his place; I asked him about the issue only a few days ago at Health and Social Care questions.

To set this in context, in Barrow and Furness we are not well served by our dental provision. We have excellent dentists, but we do not have enough of them. We also have a problem with practices closing. Bupa in Barrow has announced its closure, as has my dentist in Dalton. One dental practice in Millom, just outside my constituency but serving my constituents, has closed, and Avondale in Grange-over-Sands has handed back its NHS list. So I now have constituents who have not seen a dentist in years and who are in a very poor situation. There are pregnant mothers who are unable to make their appointments, constituents who are self-medicating every night because they cannot find care, seven-year-olds who have never seen a dentist and constituents performing their own dental care with packs they buy from Boots the Chemist. That simply is not good enough.

Before the first of the practices in Furness closed, because of the volume of constituents who came to see me to discuss their frustrations at being placed on waiting lists for waiting lists, or not being able to be seen at all, I hosted a couple of roundtables with local dentists. They were candid with me about their concerns—candidly frustrated, to be honest. I also met the senior management at Bupa and my dentist and spoke to local healthcare leaders, before our ICB came into force.

In those discussions, two issues came up repeatedly. They have been well rehearsed in the debate already, so I will not labour the points. First, there was the inability to recruit the dentists we need to deliver NHS care. Bupa told me that half of its 85 practices currently have vacancies that have been open for over 6 months. It needs over 150 dentists nationwide to provide the kind of NHS care that it would like to provide. In rural, isolated areas such as mine, recruitment is compounded by the additional challenge of trying to draw people into those areas.

Dentists also raised the issue of recruitment from abroad. I fully recognise that we would like to be sustainable and grow our own. I have heard a few pitches for dental colleges in the debate, although I am not asking for one. When demand is outstripping supply, we have to be realistic. I am told that the overseas registration examination does not meet demand, while the process for registering performer numbers is long-winded and overly complex, which puts off some dentists who might be attracted to the UK. We have to look at reforming that.

The second issue raised is that dentists are often put off from practising NHS care in more deprived areas, where the work is more complex and more expensive to deliver. I know we have all seen this. It leads to ever-decreasing circles of care: poor dental health leads to worse provision, which leads to a lack of appointments, which leads to even worse dental care and dental health.

I could go on and on, but I am sure Members get the picture. There was hope that the reforms to the UDA system would address this, but practices are telling me that they do not go far enough, certainly in rural and isolated areas such as mine, to address the disparity in the system. The fact is that since the announcement of these changes, I have seen a further two practices close, which I think is testament to the challenges that these issues are throwing up. Following the most recent announcement of closure, I wrote to the Minister, who kindly responded very quickly, saying:

“We are aware that we need to go further in improving the NHS dental system. We are planning further reforms...and discussions are underway with dental stakeholder groups, including the BDA and patients, to improve NHS dental services further.”

I would welcome an update from the Minister on those plans and details as to how my remaining dentists can feed into that process, because they certainly have things to say.

Before I draw to a close, I must say that it is not all doom and gloom. I am incredibly grateful to the current Minister and his predecessors for engaging so openly and actively seeking to find solutions. The movements on UDA pricing are welcome—although they can go further, as can contract reform—and the aspiration to make visa schemes more workable is music to my ears. I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say on that.

However, as I said at the start, what was a bad situation is now a dire one for my constituents in Barrow. We need to act quickly, improving UDAs, streamlining the visa process and working on recruitment as priorities. It is not an unreasonable expectation to hope for dental care to be available closer to where we live. We often chance our arm in here and ask for big projects to come to our constituencies. This is a minor but crucial ask, and it is one that I very much hope we will soon be able to deliver.

3.52 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): May I say what a pleasure it is to speak and give a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate, as I do in every debate I attend? The Minister has no responsibility for Northern Ireland—he knows that; I know that. Nonetheless, I would like to add a Northern Ireland perspective, which will back up the comments that others have made.

This is a matter of increasing concern as more and more dentists are refusing NHS clients and leaving a wide number of people without access to basic dental care. I will give two examples. One constituent came to see me after her front teeth bridge had fallen out, and we could get her a dentist only outside of the constituency, because there are no NHS dentists prepared or able to take that work on. It took one of my staff more than an hour to find someone accepting NHS dental charges, as all dentists have switched to a pay monthly plan. It is clear that covid-19, Ukraine and the rising prices are all taking their toll as the pressure lines up against dentists as well. Another lady came to see me who was in her 80s. She told me that because she does not do online banking, she had to pay a year in advance to stay on her dentist's books. I find that reprehensible to say the least. While that lady did have the wherewithal to do so, not everyone does. With this happening, I believe that we can see the end of free NHS dental care. It cannot be that those on a low income ignore a loose filling until they lose a tooth, and yet that is what is happening.

Having said that, I have to make it clear that I am not saying that the dental industry is greedy. I am saying that I believe the Government must step in and devise a new scheme that will adequately compensate dental practices and allow people to access the dental service they so desperately need.

I received an interesting briefing from Denplan that highlighted the fact that more than 19 million dental appointments were lost over the course of 2020. Some 70% of Denplan member dentists reported concerns about the future financial stability of their practice, while

“the pandemic also exacerbated issues with mental health and wellbeing.”

The surveys included in the briefing

“indicated that dentists believe there is a misunderstanding of the industry in general”

—this is what the industry itself is saying—

“which has manifested into a relatively poor relationship between policymakers and the dental profession over the years. Member dentists who responded to the October 2020 survey, indicated dental services are often treated as an afterthought, with the government's communication with the sector considered to be lacking.”

If I were to take one ask from today's debate, that would be it. I know that this is a Minister who understands: he is always easy to speak to and engage with, and he understands things very well. May I ask him now to engage with the dentistry sector to come up with some ideas about how to move forward? That is what they desperately need.

The briefing states that

“67.52% of respondents to the 2020 survey, said they ‘strongly disagreed’ with the statement ‘the government understands the dental sector’.”

It is clear that the Government do not understand it. Moreover,

“36% of respondents said the pandemic had affected their oral health—with 50% of those who had seen a decline in their oral health, saying that they had had appointments delayed, or were unable to book any dental appointments with their dentists... According to our data, the pandemic also changed...attitudes towards dental treatment, with 29% saying that following issues during Covid-19, they now value their oral health more and are more likely to visit a dentist.”

That, at least, has been a plus factor. However, the briefing continues:

“Nonetheless, existing backlogs and an exodus of staff is preventing patients from accessing the dental care they need”.

Others have mentioned that.

I am very conscious of the timescale that is expected of me, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I want to make a very quick comment. On Tuesday morning, I saw a television programme—we probably all saw it—about a lady who, because she could not access a dentist, removed 12 of her teeth. That had all sorts of impacts, affecting her social engagement and causing her anxiety. A dental charity then stepped in and restored all her teeth. Today she is engaging with people again, and is back at work.

Sometimes people resort to doing things that they really should not do, and would not normally do. According to the briefing, some 41% of people in Britain said that they

“would be willing to undertake DIY dentistry”.

That worries me as well. Among younger people the figure was 48%, and among seniors it was some 28%.



[Jim Shannon]

Let me end by quoting Ciara Gallagher, chair of the Northern Ireland Dental Practice Committee. She has said this:

“In the meantime, practices need help, they need hope, and they need urgent action from the department to know that they have a future. They need support so that they are not being financially starved out of the NHS.”

I join all my colleagues who are present today, on both sides of the Chamber, in asking for better liaison with the dental industry, and increased funding to shore up NHS dental access throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3.57 pm

**Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate. Together they have acted like a veritable tag team, securing debate after debate, this being the third.

The problem we are discussing is obviously not getting better, and it is not going away. It is clear from what we have heard from Members today that it is becoming a bigger issue in our casework, and that is certainly my experience. I have taken some desperate phone calls from constituents, and have been shocked by what I have heard. It has led me to get on the phone straight away to beg dentists nearby to see some of those constituents. One, an elderly resident of Wilmslow, was losing his teeth and had abscesses. He needed to have his teeth removed and dentures fitted, but he could not find a dentist. When he rang the emergency dentist, there was a recording saying “No appointments”, and then the phone was just ringing out. He was pointed in the direction of a practice in Buxton, but found that it was no longer taking NHS patients, and one in Northwich which had a two-year waiting list. Other constituents who thought that they were fortunate enough to have an NHS dentist found that the Mobberley Road practice in Knutsford was no longer taking NHS patients either, and that they were no longer registered there.

Healthwatch, the independent statutory body, says that this is the No. 1 issue raised with it by NHS patients, and that four out of 10 people who contact it say that they are having difficulty accessing dental care, which is exactly what I am hearing from my constituents. The system is bad and decaying, and has been for some time. Lockdown made things significantly worse. With dentists shut down for the first few months of the pandemic, 50 million appointments were lost, and 3,000 dentists stopped providing NHS dentistry because the restrictions through lockdown made it financially unviable for practices, meaning NHS dentists are disappearing at a rate of knots. Some 90% of practices are closed to new patients, 80% will not even accept children, and in 37% of local authorities there are no practices accepting new adult NHS patients. Reform needs to be radical.

Tatton dentists have reached out to me and told me the current payment system of units of dental activity, introduced by a Labour Government back in 2006, has never worked and subsequent tinkering has not worked either. The Minister will probably know how it works, but others might not: a check-up with X-rays counts as one unit; adding a filling or several could count as

another two units; and providing a full set of dentures is seven. It does not pay: the formula does not work, which means that dentists lose money, particularly when treating the neediest patients—those who really need their care and attention. Those figures never have stacked up and tweaks will not make a difference. In a nutshell, the business case is broken and a new one needs to be brought forward.

NHS dentistry is not attractive; we need to make it appealing. Interestingly, the number of qualified dentists is at an all-time high, but the number doing NHS work has fallen significantly. Last year, a British Dental Association poll found that 45% of dentists in England were doing an average of 25% less NHS work since the start of the pandemic. The poll also shows that 75% of dentists are thinking of reducing their NHS commitment this year, with almost half considering either a change of career, early retirement or turning fully private.

Bupa, which provides both NHS and private services, recently reinforced these figures, stating that it intends to merge or sell 85 of its 450 practices across the UK because of rising running costs and lack of dentists willing to deliver NHS care. This means nearly half a million more patients could lose their dentist.

Making NHS dentistry appealing is, therefore, a matter of high importance. Some suggestions have been handed to me and I will put them forward—and I know the Minister will be coming forward with bold plans. One suggestion was getting rid of student debt for newly trained dentists; might we remove that if they move into NHS provision? Also, what extra funding will be given and how will we move away from units of dental activity? We all want this to work; it is vital that it works and I certainly do not want to be taking calls from desperate constituents who need urgent dental medical care.

4.2 pm

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): I, too, extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for this debate. A number of speakers have covered the general points around dentistry and the issues many of our constituencies are facing and have outlined many of the things that need to happen and need to be in the forthcoming action plan from the Government, so, rather than labour the point on those, I will focus on the matter facing my constituency.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) have mentioned the situation regarding Bupa and the 75 practices it is either closing or selling at present. One of them is in Bolsover town centre and the closure of this practice was announced with absolutely no consultation whatsoever. They were kind enough to give me 12 hours' notice, which they seemed to be very proud of when I met them, but that is a completely insubstantial amount of time for people to prepare, and although the practice is not due to close until 23 June the situation has been exacerbated.

I had already been to see the Secretary of State last year about dentistry and my concerns about provision in Bolsover; I have spoken to Ministers about this on a number of occasions, and indeed raised it at Health questions previously with the Minister, as I did this

week. The situation is now of great urgency, because Bolsover was already bottom of the regional league tables for dentistry provision, the worst in Derbyshire and one of the worst in the east midlands, and we will have no NHS practices accepting new adult patients once the Bupa practice is closed. The Minister is aware of that situation, because we have had a number of conversations this week, but I do not want Bolsover to be a dental desert.

I have already met the integrated care board for my region to start having conversations about what can be done for patients locally. The first port of call is to look at dispersal and see whether other practices can take patients on, perhaps using a different UDA figure and pricing structure for those patients. However, the BUPA practice is quite a large one and dispersal will be difficult, since a number of the other practices, as I have already alluded to, are not taking on patients. I have encouraged my ICB to look at all the options available to it and perhaps to be bold. My request to the Minister is that he commit to working with the ICB, with me, to ensure that we get some sort of solution quickly.

I will end with a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) alluded to earlier. Bolsover is very lucky to have new housing coming into the area, and it is helping the area, but the question mark for many who have lived there for a long time is this: what are the benefits of that new housing? What comes alongside it? We cannot have new housing without the appropriate infrastructure, whether that is roads—we have had plenty of questions about roads—school places, GP practices and additional GPs, or dentistry. One difficulty I have in justifying the development is that we are losing a dentist practice while gaining several thousand new homes. I strongly encourage the Government and my local authority to look at that situation in a more holistic way.

4.7 pm

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): I will try to keep my contribution short, as many points have been covered already by hon. Members on both sides. The simple problem is that the dentists do not feel that they can function on their current contract, so asking them to do 110% of their contract when they do not want to do the initial 100% of their contract is not a way forward.

We need to look at the UDA contract to make it more financially viable, because at the moment dentists are taking on private work to subsidise their NHS work. The UDA contract is a problem across the board. If there were one or two dentists across doing it, we could say, “Well, maybe that’s their business plan.”, but it is not. It is happening across the board, and we need to look at the contract.

We also have a problem with dentists coming through. We need more dental places. As colleagues have mentioned, we ought, maybe, to look at a bursary for dentists who commit to stay in the NHS for at least five or 10 years, so that we have the dentists within the system to cope with the demand that is out there.

I am not 100% certain about taking dentists in from abroad. I always think when we pull the lever of immigration it goes against the grain of a Conservative Brexit MP such as myself, but there is also the fact that we are taking skilled people from other countries. If that is what we need to do to cover the backlog, then fair

enough; I can understand a certain amount, but I always believe in training our own people and training them well, and I think that is what we should do.

Finally, I thank the dentists in my constituency. John Gatus is a fantastic chap and he has explained a lot about what we are dealing with now. I know the Minister is a good Minister. I know he has listened to everything that has been said in this debate and I know he wants to get this sorted out, but I ask him and everyone in this House to remember what it is like to have toothache.

We all need to remember that. Let us all cast our minds back to those 24 hours when we could get no sleep and we were in pain. It is dreadful, and an awful lot of my constituents are in that position now—or, what is worse, seeing their children go through it. We need to jump on this problem and we need to jump on it now. I am hopeful that the Minister will deal with this today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)**: As more people want to speak, and we have the wind-ups to come, it is sensible to continue with this debate. We will try to reposition the debate that should have followed.

4.9 pm

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Access to dentists in North Devon is an issue that I was aware of before I became an MP. When I moved there, it took me over 18 months to find a local NHS dentist. Since I was elected, the issue has topped the casework league in my inbox most weeks. I have constituents in dire need. A recent case concerns a lady who is recovering from bowel cancer and a full hysterectomy. She had chemotherapy that made her teeth rot. She managed to see a dentist, but unfortunately is unable to afford what was supposed to be the “affordable” private treatment, because due to her other treatment, she is unable to work.

Another constituent, having phoned almost all the dentists in North Devon, has been told that there is a seven-year wait list to even see an NHS dentist. Many surgeries state in their recorded message that they cannot help anyone who is looking for NHS assistance. My constituent found a dentist, only to be told that the work needed was close to £2,000. They say:

“I am entitled to free NHS dental treatment which means absolutely nothing if it is not available. I cannot express how distressing and painful this is for me.”

The changes to dentistry contracts to allow more flexibility in who performs certain procedures are important and welcome steps, but unfortunately, in North Devon, we just do not have enough dentists. I have spoken before about the need to facilitate more international dentists’ coming to the UK. Recent legislation allowing the General Dental Council to amend its registration processes for international dentists is a step in the right direction, but we need to look at why we have dental deserts—and at how the practice of naming them “dental deserts” exacerbates the problem; it is not worth dentists taking on work when it is clear that each patient is likely to have significant issues, as the remuneration structure then does not reflect the work involved.

One key reason why we struggle to recruit more dentists to North Devon is the lack of affordable housing; that affects recruitment across all our health services. As we work to bring more dentists to North Devon,

[Selaine Saxby]

I hope that the Department will look at more creative solutions, such as including accommodation in employment packages. Alternatively, the Department might consider expediting our hospital redevelopment—it is one of 40 hospital redevelopments—the next phase of which involves nurses' housing. Given that dental issues are the No. 1 reason why under-18s in North Devon end up in our hospital, it must be possible to join some of the dots together.

I am most concerned about the availability of dental care for our children. Good dental habits can set them up for a lifetime of healthy teeth. In the year up to June 2022, only 44% of children in Devon had seen a dentist in the last year. While the Department works to improve access to dental care in the long term, will the Minister look in the short term at the possibility of bringing dental buses or temporary dentists into areas such as North Devon, so that people can have their problems dealt with sooner, and the next generation can get their teeth checked before any issues cause them long-term harm?

My first constituency surgery appointment after being elected to this place was on dentistry. I want to get things done for North Devon. I have raised this matter with every dentistry Minister, every Health Secretary, my integrated care board and my council, yet nothing seems to change. Even the suggestion that charitable dentists be used is given a “Computer says no” response. There is immeasurable frustration at the fact that, three and a half years later, the situation with dentistry in my constituency is worse, not better. Please can an urgent solution be found that gets the excess dentists in some parts of the world to North Devon, and can some compassion be shown to those who desperately need dental treatment now?

4.13 pm

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): We have had a full debate today. This is the third Backbench Business debate on the subject, but not the third debate on dentistry; I have had an Adjournment debate on dentistry, for example. The subject is well rehearsed. The reason why so many people are keen to speak today is that the issue affects areas right across the country. We all know that there is a problem with NHS dentistry, that the Government are focusing on it, and that they are coming up with a dental plan. We anxiously look forward to its publication in the next two to three months. In the few minutes available to me, I will not focus on the national problem so much as recognise that within the national difficulties, there are regional crises. In rural areas such as North Devon, but also in the east of England and Norfolk in particular, we can see that what is already a challenging picture nationally is exacerbated. To identify the issue, we have only to follow the money. I will look at funding for the east of England, then I will talk about recruitment and retention.

I know that funding has been impacted by covid, and the ability to undertake units of dental activity was restricted because of the covid pandemic and the aerosol activity of much of dentistry. I also know that funding has subsequently been increased because of the catch-up bid, so the numbers for the year 2018-19 give a more accurate reflection of the level of investment by the Government in dentistry in the region. The national

average gross spending per mouth in England was £66 in that period. The best performing region was the midlands, which received £78 of expenditure per mouth. The figure for the east of England was £39 per mouth. That is exactly half the amount of money spent on dentistry per head of the population in the midlands. Now, there are many unconfirmed rumours about the number of fingers and toes that we have in Norfolk, but we do not have half as many teeth as those in the midlands—not yet, anyway.

My request to the Minister is to follow the numbers, to look at where the expenditure has been taking place and, more importantly, to look at the places where the expenditure has not taken place, and then to ask the question of his officials, “Why is that?” Why is it that even though in many parts of the east of England we have the worst dental health, the expenditure by the Government is fully half what it is in the midlands, and £20 less than the national average per person?

Looking to recruitment and retention, a potential answer to my first question is that there are physically not enough dentists in the east of England to carry out the work. The national average number of dentists per 100,000 of the population is 43. In the east of England, we have just 39. That compares to Devon, where there is a dental training school, which has 49. Why is it that people do not want to be dentists in Norfolk? The answer is because it is rural, and for those who grow up there, the nearest place they can train is Birmingham.

People cannot train to be a dental technician or a dentist anywhere in the east of England. It is the only region of the country, other than the south-east, which is next door to London, that has no dental school at all. People can go either to London or Birmingham. Is it surprising, then, that we do not have an indigenous population of would-be dentists growing up, training to be dentists in Norfolk and then staying there for their working life? We are reliant entirely on people relocating to the east, and to Norfolk in particular, to supply our dental needs.

When people qualify as a dentist in their mid-20s, the overwhelming majority do not wish to move to a rural location. Even though it is without question the best place in the country in which to live, to grow up, to learn and to bring up a family, it is not immediately attractive. A policy that relies on importing foreign-qualified dentists does not satisfy the need in rural locations either, because overwhelmingly the data tells us that when we import, say, South African or Australian dentists, they relocate to the cities. They set up their new life where there are already expat communities. They do not move to Fakenham, and the problem is very real in Fakenham. I persuaded the NHS to write a wholly new NHS dental contract for Fakenham. That contract went out, and not a single organisation bid for it. The money is there, but there is physically no supply of NHS dentists.

The issue goes further than that, because the lack of dentistry spreads out into the private sector as well. There are many examples right across the county of where private dental practices, whether in my constituency or in those of my hon. Friends the Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for North West Norfolk (James Wild), have been advertising for years—in one case I am familiar with, for a decade—and are yet to fill the place. While the short-term answer to the national issue may well be to improve access to international dentists, the medium and longer-term solution for the



east of England, and Norfolk in particular, surely is to establish dental training in the county. There are two ways to do that.

There are two ways to do that. In the short term—the very short term, I hope—there is a bid by the University of East Anglia to create a centre for dental development: a postgraduate training establishment that would help to draw in newly qualified dentists from other parts of the country. The hope is that if they do their postgraduate training in the east, a percentage of them will remain. There is also what I hope is not a competing but a complementary application from the University of Suffolk in Ipswich. Those bids should not be in competition; they should be working together to improve access in both Suffolk and Norfolk.

However, the real solution in the medium term is to unite with the University of East Anglia and its existing medical school to create a dental school at UEA, which already has the Quadram Institute—the world's leading centre for the study of the gut biome, which of course begins with the mouth. The Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital is right next door. We would then have the ability to bring people in and train them in the city of Norwich; as evidence from the medical school demonstrates, a percentage of them would remain thereafter to develop their careers.

The hybrid nature of the UEA bid would mean that even in the first year of the five-year training period, people would be spending at least a day a week working in practices, helping work through the dentistry backlog, and developing community relationships that will make them more sticky to the region once they qualify. All that will go towards the long-term solution to the dental desert in Norfolk.

I very much look forward to the publication of the dental plan in the next few months, but it would be the most monumental wasted opportunity if that plan did not include training for dentistry in Norfolk.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Last but not least from the Back Benches, I call Robbie Moore.

4.21 pm

**Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con):** I am pleased that this Backbench Business debate has been allowed time; I thank the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing it. I almost feel that I am about to sum up all the issues that have been discussed, but I want to pick out some of the challenges that I have faced as a constituency MP.

I am sure that all in the House agree that toothache and tooth-related issues can be extremely painful—for our constituents, unfortunately, getting to see an NHS dentist can itself feel like pulling teeth. I am pleased that one of the Government's immediate priorities is to deal with the backlog, but I cannot stress enough how important it is that we pick up the pace and go even faster. Like many in the House, I was pleased to welcome last year's announcement that the Government would provide £50 million for up to 350 additional dentist appointments in England. I am also pleased that they are continuing to have talks with the British Dental Association and other stakeholders to reform dental contracts, increase the incentives for dental practices to take on more NHS work, and help get on top of the backlog in dental treatment.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney and for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) identified, the contract originally established back in 2006 is the real nub of the issue that all our constituents are facing today: simply not enough NHS dental work is being carried out. That is a huge issue in my constituency.

Over the past year, there has been a significant increase in the number of constituents writing to me in frustration because they cannot secure an NHS dentist appointment. Only last week, one constituent had to make an appointment 50 miles away in Sheffield, as she could not get a local NHS appointment and could not afford a private one. Another constituent kindly contacted me, dismayed at the fact that they had been contacting local dentists listed on the NHS website as available and taking patients—it turned out that they were not. My constituent tried to contact another dentist, which was only accepting children. My constituent ended up having to pay up to £80 up front for them and their three-year-old to see a local dentist. That is not acceptable. I checked it out for myself. The NHS England website said that the dentist was accepting patients, but when I clicked on the link and followed it, it said that

“this dentist surgery has not given an update on whether they're still taking NHS patients. Please contact them directly to ask.”

That is simply not acceptable, because it instilled a false sense of hope in my constituent who has dental pain and needs to see a dentist as soon as possible.

As we all do, I recently held a surgery. A lady came and explained that she had been an NHS patient all her life with a particular practice in Keighley, as had her partner and her children, only to receive a letter to say that it would now only accept private appointments for her family. Again, that is not acceptable.

The Government are well aware of the issues and the scenarios that we have put forward today, but I urge them to look at some key points. Demand is there, but we are not recruiting enough dentists and we are not allowing those dentists enough space to support the demand. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) said, it is important to focus on early prevention work, particularly for younger people. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) said, recruitment, retention and training in the early years are incredibly important. I want to pick up on the point that all integrated care boards must have dentistry represented on them, to ensure on a geographical basis that contracts are awarded for NHS providers and can be delivered on the ground.

The big issue is the contract reform that must take place. As we have all identified, units of dental activity are not keeping up to speed with demand. That is my constituents' No. 1 priority. I hope that the Minister will ensure that appropriate action is taken to alleviate the pressures on NHS dentists and the dental pain that my constituents are suffering.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the shadow Minister.

4.27 pm

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** We have had a full and thorough debate this afternoon on NHS dentistry—something that really matters not just to us as Members of Parliament, irrespective of the party we

[Andrew Gwynne]

represent, but more importantly to our constituents. I, too, commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) for securing this debate along with the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). The way that they both put the case before the House has been compelling. It is incumbent on us all to try to find a way through the morass that is NHS dentistry. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for their contributions.

I also thank the hon. Members for Winchester (Steve Brine), for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer), for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) and for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) and the hon. Members for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) and for Keighley (Robbie Moore) for setting out their own perspectives and the issues that their constituents have raised about NHS dentistry, which are not that dissimilar from the issues that my constituents raise.

It is not a party political point to say that NHS dentistry has been in crisis for a very long time. As we have heard today, patients are being failed on an unprecedented scale. Many are having to suffer through unending pain and misery because they cannot access the care that they so desperately need.

In preparation for this debate, I spoke with people right across the country, and I will share some of the cases that highlight the sheer scale of the crisis. In Darlington, local people have been told that it will take two years for the current backlog in dental care to be cleared, and some are being forced to wait over three years to access treatments. Some residents are being forced into removing their own teeth, in what has been dubbed “DIY” tooth extraction. I shudder to think what state someone’s dentistry services are in when they have to extract their own teeth. Reports have exposed gums becoming infected and individuals becoming addicted to opiates, and unintentionally overdosing on pain relief.

We heard from the hon. Member for Bolsover, but somebody I spoke to raised the fact that local Bupa practices in Bolsover are closing due to a lack of NHS dentists, and patients are being told to glue crowns back on themselves with denture paste because there is no other way of accessing care. The same is true in Corby, where patients are being left stranded after the closure of the Oakley Vale Bupa dental care centre. I could go on. In Loughborough, one resident said that they have been unable to register with an NHS dentist since moving to that part of the country in 2019, and nationally tooth extraction is now the biggest single reason for hospital admissions of under-10s, with 73 children a day having to receive emergency care to remove rotting teeth. When parents try to get appointments for their children, they are turned away.

In Bassetlaw, one resident told local councillors that when she tried to sign her son up to a local NHS dentist she was informed that there was a waiting list of

2,000 people, and that they would have to go private—something that she cannot afford. Local people in Ilkeston have been told to sign up to dentists in Derby because no local surgeries are taking on new patients. The same is true in Darwen, where people are being told that the nearest dentist they can see is in Salford. In Swindon, one parent looking for a dentist for her two-year-old was directed to the only practice that she could find that was taking patients. The problem was that it was 90 miles away in Birmingham. Such stories are commonplace. We have heard them in contributions from Members on both sides of the House.

It would be wrong to pretend that there was a golden age of NHS dentistry in recent years. There was no utopia. There is a reason my teeth, and I hazard a guess those of many Members in the Chamber, are full of fillings. It is not because we failed to brush our teeth as well as our children brush theirs, or because we ate more sweets than our children; it is because the financial incentive in the past was to drill and fill, whether someone required that filling or not. The contract, which is a big part of the problem today, was brought in with the right intention: to move NHS dentistry more towards prevention. However, it did not work. As the right hon. Member for Tatton set out, the issue of funding through units meant that many dentists were just not incentivised to take on NHS care. Tinkering will not work either. It is incumbent on us all to work out a system that will both work and put the capacity back into NHS dentistry, so that patients get the care that they need and deserve, and dentists get the appropriate financial recompense.

I will pose a few questions to the Minister, because we know that a plan is coming. Will he set out, first and foremost, what steps the Government will take in that plan to immediately improve access to dental treatment in the so-called dental deserts? Additionally, given that a recent BDA member survey showed that more than nine in 10 owners of dental practices with a high NHS commitment found it difficult to recruit a dentist, what is he doing to fill the widespread vacancies across the sector? I assume this information exists in the NHS workforce plan, which is still sitting on the Secretary of State’s desk. Will the Minister update the House on why the plan is yet to be published and when we can expect the Government to release it?

We know that NHS dentistry has not worked for a very long time. Governments of all colours are responsible for where NHS dentistry is today. I am not bothered about the past. People with toothache or oral health issues want help today, so it is incumbent on all Members to make sure NHS dentistry is fit for the future, because the stories and statistics that Members on both sides of the House and I have communicated in this debate are simply not acceptable. The Opposition stand ready and willing to help the Government to build the NHS dental services this country needs and, when the time comes under the next Labour Government, to make those NHS dental services the best they can be.

4.35 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O’Brien):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) for securing this important and timely debate as we work

on our dental plan and the NHS workforce plan. We have had some excellent and useful contributions, and all the ideas that have been put forward are extremely timely.

The hon. Lady said it is time for real change, not patching, and I completely agree. The Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), made too many important points to list, but he made an important point about the need for greater transparency on data and delivery, and I completely agree.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) listed some of the problems that are firing our ambition to fundamentally change the system. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney made a series of important points, and I am grateful for his contribution not only today and in previous debates but outside the Chamber. He has many thoughtful observations to make about ringfencing, changing the UDA system, fluoridation and so on, and all those ideas are flowing into our work. The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) was the first in this debate, but not the last, to emphasise the importance of where dentists do their training and foundation training to getting more dentists into under-served places, which we are looking at.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer), like my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, talked about the perverse effect of the contract bands. That was brought home to me by the conversation she engineered for me with some of her local dentists. I found that conversation incredibly useful. Their passion for NHS work and dentistry shone forth, and it brought home the central role of local commissioners in making the choices of the kind she raised in this debate.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) talked about the importance of prevention, not just treatment, and we are thinking about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) raised the important issues for Sacha and Joan, and I am happy to meet him and his local ICB to talk about how we can address those cases.

The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) asked whether we have gone far enough. No, we have not, hence the need for a dental plan. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) emphasised the need for housing plans to take better account of the need for primary care facilities and dentists, which we have discussed outside the Chamber. Some places do it well, but that does not happen everywhere, including in his local authority.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), as always, made interesting comments about prevention among young people, which we are certainly looking at. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) was the first person to mention that the overseas registration exam is much too long-winded, and that it takes people much too long at the moment. The legislation to enable that to change came into force last month, and we now need the GDC to move quickly to address the backlog and those problems.

It is always a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) speak in a debate to bring a UK-wide perspective, and he asked a straight question about how we are engaging with the profession. We are generating these ideas by talking directly to dentists.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) said that dentists had told her that the 2006 contract had never worked, and I have certainly heard that from many dentists.

I am happy to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) and his ICB to discuss the recommissioning of services. He raised the issue of Bupa, and I agree that having a three-way meeting would be useful. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) got to the nub of the issue when he talked about basic incentives.

When I visited my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), I was once again reminded of the particular challenges of coastal communities, and that is especially true in dentistry. We have talked about this before and are thinking about how to get dentists to go places that are historically under-served.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) raised the same point, as well as a deep question about the historical allocation of funding in dentistry. We are certainly looking at that. I reassure him that we are also looking at the whole issue of centres for dental development, and the proposals emerging in his area are extremely interesting.

Last but not least, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) mentioned our new requirement for dentists to keep their records on the NHS website up to date. We are keen to drive that forward and to ensure that records are accurate for exactly the reasons that he mentioned.

Dentistry was hit much harder than most other health services because of its fundamental nature: dentists are looking down people's throats and creating a lot of aerosols, so of course during the covid pandemic the sector was particularly hard hit. We allocated £1.7 billion of funding to carry NHS dentists through the pandemic, which enabled many to survive, but dentistry was clearly hard hit, and it is a hugely important part of the NHS, as many Members have said.

The package of changes that we brought in last July were an important first step—only a first step—in addressing the challenges facing the sector. We have started to reform the contract, with the first significant changes since 2006, to make NHS dentistry more attractive. We have created more UDA bands to better reflect the fair cost of work and to incentivise NHS work. We introduced for the first time a minimum UDA value to help sustain practices where values are lower, and to address unfair and unjustified inequalities in UDA rates, which are now based on quite historical data. We have enabled and allowed dentists to deliver 110% of their UDAs for the first time to encourage more activity and to allow those who want to deliver more NHS dentistry to do so. We have also made it a requirement for the first time for dentists to keep their availability up to date on the NHS website.

We have also made it easier—a number of hon. Members have made this point today—for dentists to come to the UK. The legislation came into force last month to enable the GDC to increase the capacity of the overseas registration exam. As of 1 April, people will no longer have to pay the charges that they used to pay. The Chair of the Select Committee stressed how important it was for the GDC to respond to those increased flexibilities and to work at pace to get through



[Neil O'Brien]

the backlog, and we are actively in discussions with it about how best to do that. Plans are advancing for centres for dental development, as a couple of different hon. Members have mentioned, not just in Suffolk or Norfolk, but further afield, such as in Cumbria. We are watching those plans closely and working with local partners to see what is possible.

Hon. Members raised the matter of prevention. We have already started the process of expanding fluoridation across the entirety of the north-east, which would—subject to consultation—encompass about 1.6 million more people. We will be launching that consultation this year in order to provide the benefits of fluoridation to a large new area for the first time since the 1960s.

All these changes are starting to have some positive effects. In the year to March, about a fifth more patients were seen compared to a year earlier. In total there are about 6.5% more dentists doing NHS work now than in 2010, and UDA delivery is going up from that huge hit it took in the covid pandemic, but of course we must go further; I am the first person to say that. I can see that some of the reforms are working. The proportion of dentists making the new band 2b claims is increasing and it is great to see that practices are prioritising those with higher needs. But this is absolutely just the start and I know that we must go further.

**Rachael Maskell:** Will the Minister set out with great clarity the data that is required, so that we do not just measure how many people are working in NHS dentistry, but we understand the number of sessions they are providing, and we marry that up with need and demand in order to understand what gap is there?

**Neil O'Brien:** The hon. Lady is right; in dentistry, not only do we have headcount measures showing that six and a bit per cent. more dentists are doing NHS work, but we can see the amount they are delivering and we can see those UDA rates starting to go back up again. Of course, we want them to go up further, and I am keen to start publishing more data so that there is greater transparency about what is being delivered where.

There are further changes we must make. We are trying to drive activity back up to at least pre-pandemic levels and to address the fundamental shortfalls that were there even before the pandemic. When I speak to dentists, they have a keen sense of whether the payments they are offered under the 2006 contract make work profitable or unprofitable. Often, for some of those bands, they feel that they are not being fairly remunerated for the cost of the work they are doing. We need to make sure that they do feel fairly remunerated so that they are more attracted to doing NHS work. We could go further in addressing some of those historical, and potentially now unjustified, variations in UDA rates. In particular, the move to ICBs and away from regional commissioning provides an opportunity for not just more transparency, but much more accountability. Instead of a remote regional body, hon. Members will be able to talk to their local ICB about what it is doing to drive up delivery. When we arm Members of this House with greater transparency and greater data, they will be able to have those conversations about what we are doing collectively to drive up the levels of delivery.

**Mrs Hodgson:** I am listening intently to what the Minister is saying. When I go back to speak to my local dentists, what do I tell them about the “when”? He is saying all the things that we would like to do and the Government would like to do. We want to see all that happen, but when will this contract that has needed changing since 2010—[HON. MEMBERS: “2006!”] We had it in our manifesto to update it in 2010. We had said we would update it in 2010. The Government have had 13 years to fix this, so when is it going to happen?

**Neil O'Brien:** I have mentioned some things that are already changing—some of the first reforms to the contract since 2006 that we have started to bring in. We are working on the plan at pace. There is no date for its publication yet, but we are working on it at pace because we are conscious of the urgency.

I thank the hon. Member for Bradford South and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney for securing this important debate. I hope they have been assured that we have started to reform dentistry, that we are seized of the importance of the issue, and that we recognise that we can and must go further to further strengthen NHS dentistry.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** The last word goes to Judith Cummins.

4.47 pm

**Judith Cummins:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank all 19 Members for their contributions and interventions, for which both I and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) are immensely grateful. Although the contributions are too numerous to mention, I will highlight the one from the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the Chair of the Select Committee, which encapsulated many of the common themes. He spoke on a wide range of issues, including the lack of access to NHS dentistry and the problems, not only in his constituency, but right across the country, of the retention of NHS dentists and the lack of transparent data. He also talked about the need to have dentists represented on ICBs.

Many Members raised those common issues of access, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), who spoke of a lack of funding. He posed two crucial questions: does the Minister accept that there is a problem?; and, if so, what progress has he made in resolving it? My hon. Friend then concluded that the situation has worsened since last year. Clearly, the need for full-scale reform has been recognised right across the House today, as we all know that change is needed. The fact that 90% of NHS dentists are no longer accepting new adult patients reflects the severity of this crisis. We have reached the point where the patching of our services is no longer possible and many of our constituents are simply suffering with the inadequacies of the current system. We need fundamental NHS dental reform now, not a plan for a plan. Minister, the promise of reform and this plan must come with real action and a firm date of publication.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered progress on reforms to NHS dentistry.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We were going to come to the debate on reducing plastic pollution in the oceans. I said that it would be repositioned, but that is clearly not the right word, because it will still be here. “Rescheduled” is what I was grasping for, and I have now finally found the word. We hope that it will be rescheduled in the not-too-distant future, because it is a very important debate, and it was right not to truncate it in the way that was going to happen.

## Georgia

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

4.50 pm

**Adam Holloway** (Gravesham) (Con): While Russia’s war in Ukraine has rightly been the object of our attention for the last year and a half, Ukraine is not the only country in the region that is vulnerable to Russian aggression. The current governing party in Georgia, the Georgian Dream party, is a pro-Putin, pro-Russian group whose leadership risks Georgia becoming a Russian puppet in this critical area for global security.

The Georgian Dream party has, from its beginning, been an organisation sympathetic to and increasingly controlled by Russian authorities, all while claiming to be western and democratic. Its founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the former Prime Minister of Georgia, is an oligarch who reportedly made his money from Russian dealings. It is alleged that he has used his immense wealth to buy votes and place his loyalists throughout the Georgian Government. Though he currently holds no elected office, he exerts great control over Georgia’s institutions.

The rampant corruption in Georgia’s political system has begun to be brought into the light. Just recently, the United States placed personal sanctions on four judges appointed by the current Government. Meanwhile, Mr Ivanishvili’s one-time rival, Mikheil Saakashvili, is currently dying in hospital after being tried in absentia and jailed on what his supporters say are fabricated charges. He reports from his hospital bed that he has been regularly tortured throughout his imprisonment, and independent doctors have confirmed that traces of heavy metal poisoning have been found in his blood.

When Mr Saakashvili was President of Georgia in 2008, Vladimir Putin invaded Georgia, and Russian troops occupied large parts of the country. At the time, Mr Saakashvili warned that this was the first step in Putin’s quest to rebuild Russia’s sphere of influence and, ultimately, empire in eastern Europe and the Caucasus. He also warned that after Georgia, Putin would turn his eye towards Crimea. Those were then viewed by the international community as rather fringe opinions, but it is now apparent that he was absolutely right.

The 2008 invasion led to continued anti-Russian sentiment in Georgia, with many looking toward European integration and NATO membership. Under the Georgian Dream party, the country has changed direction. European and NATO integration remain popular objectives among the Georgian people, with opinion polls showing nearly universal support. Those objectives are also written into Georgia’s constitution, but the Georgian Dream Government, though purporting to be pro-European and western-friendly, intentionally sabotage the fulfilment of EU entry criteria. The party has also sabotaged support for the Ukrainian war effort, while Georgian citizens have signed up in huge numbers to fight against the Russian invasion.

Even as most European countries imposed sanctions on Russia in the wake of the Ukrainian invasion, the Georgian Government saw a business opportunity and expanded trade with Russia. In the first quarter of this year, Russian imports to Georgia increased by 79% compared with 2022. Georgia has in particular provided a market for Russian energy exports, which the west has avoided—as

[Adam Holloway]

all our constituents know, that has come at great personal cost. That increase in trade threatens to undermine the sanctions that we have imposed, and will only draw Tbilisi into closer ties with Moscow.

Most recently, in March of this year, Georgian Dream announced plans for a new foreign agent Act that would label society groups critical of the Government as “foreign agents”, risking censorship of anti-Government opinion.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I recognise that he is coming to a critical point. This is about the suppression not just of human rights, but of freedom of religious belief. They walk hand in hand: if someone’s human rights are taken away, so is their opportunity to worship their God in the way that they wish to. Does he agree that, when it comes to the Act that he refers to, human rights and the freedom of religious belief will be under immense pressure?

**Adam Holloway:** Actually, that had not occurred to me, and it is a valuable and relevant point.

That foreign agent law in Georgia almost exactly mimics the one that Putin’s Government brought in domestically at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, but it has now been shelved following massive demonstrations in the streets. The trend is none the less pretty troubling. I believe that the British Government must continue to act to support political freedoms for the people of Georgia, and to ensure that Georgia does not provide a way for Russia to circumvent the sanctions that the west has imposed. The Government should join the Americans in imposing sanctions not only on corrupt judges, but on Mr Ivanishvili and other oligarchs responsible. The Foreign Ministry of Ukraine and other European voices have already called for such sanctions.

Oligarchs must not be able to exert control over Georgia without holding any democratically elected office. By preventing those oligarchs from accessing their assets, we would be able to curtail their ability to buy influence and allies in Georgian institutions. It is also time for the UK to lead a diplomatic campaign for Georgia to return to democratic norms. We must decry the inhumane and extrajudicial treatment of former President Saakashvili and demand that his health be placed in the care of independent experts. We must also ensure that Georgia’s next elections are held on time in 2024 and monitored by impartial observers.

Those measures, along with other steps to safeguard the independence of political institutions and media from oligarchical influence, are essential to allow Georgia to proceed to EU membership—a move that as much as 80% of the Georgian population agree with. NATO members must also invite Georgia to enter, as the Georgian Dream Government claim they intend to do. If the west stalls on NATO integration for Georgia, it will only play into the long-term ambitions of Russia.

Indeed, we have seen the result of abandoning Georgia once before. Many people do not know that in 1920, at the beginning of the 20th century, the British Army was stationed in Georgia, guaranteeing its independence after Bolshevik invasion attempts. British troops left in 1920, and only six months later, Tbilisi fell to the 11th Russian army, and the Georgian Soviet Socialist

Republic was established. The Georgian people remember that abandonment, and we must not make the same mistakes today.

The Georgian people have also stood alongside us and spilled blood in support of our causes. Not only are they the largest source of foreign volunteers in Ukraine, but they were the third largest contributor to the NATO force in Iraq, and the largest contributor per capita in Afghanistan. The Georgian people are proud of that, and we should stand with them. As one mighty Georgian friend puts it:

“Britain’s support is very important for Georgia. There are patriotic people in the Georgian government and parliament, but the pro-Russian groups are getting stronger at their expense.”

With our support, those Georgian patriots can re-establish democracy and maintain peace in their country while furthering the cause of westernisation. Just as we know we cannot allow Ukraine to fall into Russian hands as a result of invasion, we cannot allow Georgia to become a Russian client state as a result of subtle political manipulation.

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Adam Holloway:** If duplicitous groups can covertly transform a westernising, democratising state into a Russian satellite without being challenged, then what will stop similar actors throughout that region from following their lead?

5 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) for securing the debate. I note his first-hand experience in Georgia and I am grateful for his characteristically eloquent speech, based on that first-hand knowledge. I am sure all colleagues would agree.

The United Kingdom and Georgia have a strong and enduring relationship, which was illustrated very ably by my hon. Friend. Diplomatic relations between our countries are the strongest they have been since they resumed some 30 years ago, as was demonstrated when the Foreign Secretary visited that country in March. As he highlighted during his meeting with Prime Minister Gharibashvili, the UK remains a steadfast supporter of Georgia’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Prior to that, in January this year, the Foreign Secretary and I were very pleased to host Georgian Foreign Minister Darchiashvili for the Wardrop strategic dialogue. At that dialogue, we agreed to increase co-operation, including to counter Putin’s aggression in Ukraine, and support Georgia’s aspirations for much closer ties with NATO. That was in the very changed context of last year, because Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has confirmed Georgia’s view that it will never be safe until it joins the EU and NATO.

For decades, Russia has tried to exert control over Georgia and the region, fuelling conflict and division. Following the 2008 war, which resulted in Russia’s recognition of the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia



and South Ossetia, Russian pressure on Georgia has been relentless. Today, roughly 20% of Georgia's territory is under Russian control, with Russian troops in South Ossetia just 30 minutes from Tbilisi.

Russia is applying economic and political pressure to try to break the will of the people of Georgia, including through restrictions on travel and trade. We should not forget that together with the UK, Georgia has sent more than 5,000 tonnes of vital humanitarian aid and 25 high-powered generators to Ukraine, while supporting Ukrainian refugees in Georgia, and has implemented international sanctions against Russia. That unity sends a strong signal to Putin. We will continue to deepen our partnership with Georgia to increase the pressure on Russia to end its outrageous and illegal war in Ukraine.

Let me briefly make a remark about the breakaway regions. We will continue to use our influential role within the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations to call on Russia to withdraw its troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Like the overwhelming majority of the international community, the UK does not recognise the so-called independence of those breakaway regions. We consistently call upon the Russian Federation to fulfil its clear obligations under the EU-mediated ceasefire agreement of 2008. It must withdraw its forces to pre-conflict positions and meet its other commitments to dialogue under the ceasefire agreement.

Turning to the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia, despite Russia's constant threat and interference, the people of Georgia have bravely chosen the path towards Euro-Atlantic integration, as my hon. Friend alluded to. Such membership is a sovereign choice for Georgia and the member states of those organisations, and no third country, including Russia should have a veto.

We believe that further integration with the EU and NATO for Georgia will deliver greater prosperity and security. The UK will continue to support Georgia in its implementation of the EU association agreement and its NATO commitments. We continue to lead calls in NATO to step up practical and political support to Georgia as a matter of urgency.

We have heard concerns during this debate that actions of the current Government of Georgia appear to align with Russian interests, and my hon. Friend was eloquent in laying those out. We fully recognise, however, the Georgian Government's steadfast commitment to NATO and the EU, which was reinforced during the Foreign Secretary's visit in meetings with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

As a long-standing friend, we have stressed the importance of matching words to actions. At this crucial moment, we must recognise that Georgia has consistently supported Ukraine multilaterally, has sent humanitarian supplies, including generators, and has supported Ukrainian refugees in Georgia. We continue to work with Georgia to build resilience against Russian aggression, including through the tailored support package announced at the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, in line with the will of the Georgian people.

We have also heard concerns about polarisation in Georgian politics, which would threaten its progress on democratic reforms and risks undermining its Euro-Atlantic

aspirations. We share some of those concerns, and we have made that clear to our Georgian allies. We continue to encourage the Georgian Government to accelerate genuine, far-reaching reforms, which will anchor Georgia's democracy against those who would seek to undermine it, and assist it to build its institutions. That includes meaningful parliamentary scrutiny of the Executive, an independent judiciary, free media and a system of fully functioning checks and balances.

As the Foreign Secretary outlined to the Georgian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister during his visit in March, recent actions in these areas have been detrimental to progress, and threaten to tarnish Georgia's hard-won international reputation. As mentioned, the proposed introduction of a Russian-style foreign agents law was a counterproductive step, particularly as it comes on the back of a marked increase in aggressive rhetoric against Georgian civil society organisations supporting media freedoms, human rights and democracy, which my hon. Friend referred to. We were very pleased to see that draft law withdrawn.

The ongoing incarceration of media owner Nika Gvaramia is another counterproductive step, coming on the back of Georgia's marked decline in the world press freedom rankings. We also continue to raise the detention of former President Saakashvili, including the need for due process and proper treatment in line with international norms, with the Government of Georgia. We will continue to monitor developments closely in that case and keep it under review. We are determined to work in partnership with Georgia to overcome those challenges and will continue to engage with the Georgian Government as a critical friend to support progress and the Georgian journey of reform.

I should briefly mention some of our projects. Through our embassy in Tbilisi, we are supporting Georgian reforms, as well as wider peace-building, administrative and judicial reform initiatives, through the conflict, stability and security fund and the good governance fund. A total of £4.5 million was allocated to that work in the last financial year. On top of that, last year we announced more than £5 million in additional funding to help Georgia to identify and repel threats to its cyber-security, something that is only becoming more relevant and important.

Let me conclude by reaffirming the UK's unwavering support for Georgia. With our international partners, we will continue to work to boost its security, strengthen its democratic institutions and increase its prosperity. That includes engaging through the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, while working to support domestic reforms in Georgia.

Together with Georgia we will continue to resist Russian aggression and support Ukraine, including through defence and security co-operation and sanctions enforcement, and we will work together in the spirit of collaboration that has defined our relationship for the last 30 years.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.8 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Thursday 27 April 2023

[DEREK TWIGG in the Chair]

## Imprisonment for Public Protection Sentences

1.30 pm

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Justice Committee, IPP Sentences, HC 266, and the Government response, HC 933.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee and the Backbench Business Committee for enabling us to have this debate. I am glad to see the Minister in his place. I know he will take seriously what are grave matters that need to be raised—both the issue itself, and the complete inadequacy of the Government's response to a considered report by a Select Committee. I welcome my fellow members of the Select Committee. This report had support across parties in the Committee and was based on detailed evidence. I regret that none of that evidence seems to have penetrated into the reasoning of the response.

Let me set out the situation. I regret that we have to have this debate. We spent a great deal of time considering this issue and, as I said, we had a detailed evidence base and a comprehensive report. I hope that with changes in the Department and a new Secretary of State, there will be more scope for the Minister, whose personal qualities I entirely recognise and respect, to revisit the position on this matter.

Sentences of imprisonment for public protection, or IPP sentences, are indeterminate—that is, they have no fixed end date. They were originally designed to ensure that dangerous, violent and sexual offenders stayed in custody for as long as they presented a risk to the public. IPP sentences were introduced in the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and came into effect in 2005. Following criticisms of the sentence and its operation, it was reformed in 2008 but, frankly, those reforms did not work satisfactorily either and the sentence was abolished by 2012.

The sentence was abolished largely because—this was accepted by the originators of the scheme, not least the noble Lord Blunkett and others, as I will come to later—the way the scheme was drafted and the number of offences that brought people within its scope, together with the lack of understanding and, at the time, judicial training on the matter, meant that far more people fell within the scope of the scheme than had been the political intention. Rightly, in 2012, the coalition Government, of which I had the honour to be a member, rectified that and abolished the sentence. However, they did not deal with those who were already serving sentences. In other words, the abolition did not have effect retrospectively for those who were already subject to the sentences.

In total, some 8,711 people received an IPP sentence. The sentence works in three parts. First, there is a mandatory period in prison known as the tariff. That is broadly based on the nature of the offence for which the individual is convicted and sentenced—that is, the tariff for that offence or the index offence, as it is sometimes referred to. Secondly, that is followed by indefinite detention until such time as the Parole Board determines that the person concerned has reduced their risk enough to be safely released. Thirdly, following that release, they are subject to a life licence in the community, from which they may be recalled if they breach their licence or reoffend. Ten years after their initial release, IPP prisoners can apply to the Parole Board to have that licence terminated. There is, of course, no guarantee that it will be.

Our inquiry was prompted by the serious concern, which has been ventilated in the media and both Chambers of this Parliament over a period of time, about the number of IPP prisoners who have never been released, despite the fact that the vast majority have served their tariff. Some 97.5% of IPP prisoners currently in prison have already served their tariff, and in many cases they have served well beyond their tariff. The last figures that we had showed that at the end of December 2022, there were 2,892 IPP prisoners, of whom 1,394 are serving their original sentence and have never been released.

Some 621 of those prisoners are at least 10 years over their tariff, and 222 of those had received a tariff of less than two years. To put that in stark terms, they have been in prison for something like five times longer than the index sentence that the court that sentenced them and the judge who heard the facts thought was the appropriate tariff for the offence for which they were convicted. The tariff was set at, say, two years or less—the going rate for that offence—and some have been inside for five times that. That is a stark and shocking figure.

Some 1,498 IPP prisoners in custody at the end of December 2022 have been released but subsequently recalled to custody. When we were doing our inquiry, it was suggested to us that, at the current rates of recall, the proportion will change so that a majority of the IPP population will have been released and recalled. That point has now been reached. More than half of IPP prisoners have been released and recalled for one reason or other, and I will come to that later. There are a number of problems with IPP sentences.

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): It is actually starker than my hon. Friend sets out. One IPP sentence was given with a tariff of 28 days, so hypothetically somebody who received a 28-day tariff could spend 50 years in prison. Even in the worst banana republic, that would sound extraordinary, but that is actually what this sentence is about. We are going to keep people locked up indefinitely, even though in any other circumstances they would be released. Will my hon. Friend touch on that? I do not have the words to describe it, but I agree wholeheartedly with him.

**Sir Robert Neill:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, he speaks with great experience as a long-standing solicitor specialising in criminal work. He and I have seen this in our professional experience. We have perhaps seen rather more of the prison system than many of those who pontificate in either House or the media about what it is like.



[*Sir Robert Neill*]

This is a scandal. That is why one of the great supporters of reform, the noble Lord Brown of Eaton-under-Heywood—one of the last Lord Justices of Appeal, one of the first members of the Supreme Court and one of the most distinguished lawyers of his generation—described it as a “stain” upon the reputation of the British legal system, and he is absolutely right. That is why, to his credit, the noble Lord Blunkett, when he gave evidence to us, said frankly, fairly and honestly, “This was not what we intended should happen with these sentences.” My hon. Friend is therefore entirely right to point out how stark that could be. We would be shocked if this were happening in some of the countries with which we do business, and we rightly criticise it elsewhere around the world.

One of the problems is that IPP prisoners face barriers to progression to prove they are no longer a risk within prison and, if they are released, within the community. The aim of our inquiry was to examine carefully and on the evidence the continued existence of IPP sentences and identify possible legislative and policy solutions to a situation that is, as my hon. Friend rightly says, really not acceptable.

The seriousness of those concerns and the strength of feeling about IPP sentences was reflected in the volume of evidence that the Justice Committee received. It was the largest number of submissions we have ever received for any inquiry that we have undertaken. Of course, I looked at all of them, and they included hundreds of handwritten letters, some going into considerable detail, from serving prisoners. They were moving, and articulate in many cases, but also frequently deeply distressing.

Beyond that, the Committee also proactively sought the perspective of all stakeholders affected by the sentence. That is why we took evidence from Lord Blunkett, who was the original architect of the scheme, and Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, the former Lord Chief Justice. We also held private meetings and roundtables with affected parties, including people serving IPP sentences in the community, family members, legal professionals who have supported IPP prisoners, Parole Board members, prison and probation staff—it should be said that it is not easy for prison and probation staff to deal with people in this situation, and I suspect that there is also an injustice to them—and victims of IPP prisoners. I do accept that the victim’s perspective also has to be considered, so we deliberately and specifically sought victims’ views.

I thank all who took the time and effort to engage with our inquiry and to provide the evidence that underpinned our recommendations and conclusions. In particular, I thank Donna Mooney and Shirley Debono, both of whom gave oral evidence to us on behalf of the United Group for Reform of IPP. I think that some of the group are in the Public Gallery.

Donna Mooney shared with us the experience of her brother Tommy Nicol, who took his own life in 2015 following a second refusal of parole by the Parole Board. His tariff was four years; by then, he had already served six. Donna told us of the difficulties her brother Tommy faced in enrolling on courses that he needed to complete to demonstrate progression, and in accessing mental health support. He often told her and his family that his sentence was “psychological torture”.

Shirley Debono, whose son is a released IPP prisoner, told us that even those who have been released and are serving an IPP sentence in the community are immensely fearful of being recalled to prison. She described the licence conditions as “draining” and difficult to cope with. She said that her son had been afraid of the telephone in case it was the probation service calling. That is not a happy situation to put probation officers in, never mind anything else, including the difficulty that it causes people who are genuinely trying to rehabilitate themselves.

The Committee’s report considers the difficulties faced by IPP prisoners in progressing through sentences, and the psychological harm that that causes. Our evidence focused on actions that the Government should take to address the problem, and we began by considering the prison-based barriers to progression.

The psychological harm caused to individuals serving an IPP sentence was evidenced by a number of contributors to the inquiry, including those serving the sentence, family members and professionals who have experience of working with people who are serving the sentence. It was demonstrated clearly that rates of self-harm among IPP prisoners are high. Although it is good to see that the rate of self-harm thankfully reduced between the end of 2017 and the end of 2021, it is still almost double that for prisoners serving a determinate sentence. The Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody told us that as of May 2021, of the 250 IPP prisoners who had died in custody since the sentence came into effect, 65 had taken their own lives.

The Committee recently took evidence from the former chair of that panel, Juliet Lyon CBE. She told us that nine people serving an IPP sentence died last year. She said:

“It is something one cannot afford to forget. The utter hopelessness of their position means it is very difficult for them to maintain any sense of future; it seems just utterly sad and hopeless.”

Juliet Lyon has served in post for a considerable time and has decades of experience in the criminal justice system. Her wise words ought to weigh heavily. Sadly, I was notified that only two days ago another young man serving an IPP prison sentence took his own life in His Majesty’s Prison Manchester. This is still happening all the time.

Given the psychological harm that ensues as a result of the sentence and the conditions attached, many have argued that assessing risk is more complicated than it is for other prisoners. We heard that mental health need and risk are sometimes conflated and that poor mental health may therefore become a barrier to release—although, ironically, it is the serving of the indeterminate sentence that has triggered that poor mental health, and we have a vicious circle.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is giving a very powerful account, and I am very glad that the Select Committee mounted the inquiry. Figures released last year showed that an increasing number of prisoners assessed as needing to be in secure mental health units because they had chronic personality disorders, psychotic illness and so on were not being transferred because the beds were not available. The figure was up 81% in the last five-year period, compared with the previous five years.

Does the hon. Gentleman think that this is also a factor in trying to get the right support for people on IPP sentences, so that they get treatment and can make

progress? The Government are now committing to a time limit of 28 days for transfer to hospitals for people who need it. Does he have confidence that that is going to happen?

**Sir Robert Neill:** I very much hope that it will, because it is certainly true that that was a problem. Delays in transfer to secure beds were demonstrated to us in the evidence. I hope the Government will move on that.

The other germane point is that because of the fear of the conflation of mental health need with risk, we found that many IPP prisoners were frightened to speak up about their poor mental health and get the help that they might need, because it might count against them in their risk assessment. Compounding that, even when there is mental health support, we found that IPP prisoners faced difficulty getting help, and that included transfer to secure hospitals.

We asked the Ministry of Justice and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to acknowledge the harm caused by the sentence and the challenges it presents to progression. We asked them further to set out how they intend to improve access to mental health support for IPP prisoners. The Government's response did not set out any plans to improve access to mental health support specifically for this cohort of prisoners. Instead, it told us that which we already knew, setting out the work that is being undertaken to improve mental health support for all prisoners. That is welcome in itself, of course, like the 28-day limit that we have just discussed, but it entirely misses the point of what we asked about. We asked the Government to look again at the specific needs of the IPP cohort, separate from the general pressure that already exists, and to see what improvements can be made.

As well as the problem with accessing mental health support, there are concerns about the adequacy of offender behaviour programs and the availability of courses. Offender behaviour programmes and interventions are central to the IPP sentence. They are the primary means by which an IPP prisoner can demonstrate rehabilitation and risk reduction. If they cannot get on the courses or the interventions, they are being set up to fail, and too often that is the case. We heard of one prisoner who had a parole hearing coming up very shortly. He was asked to complete a course, but the waiting list for the course was two years. A system in such a state of affairs is simply dysfunctional.

We asked the Government what they are doing to expand the availability of courses, to reduce waiting lists and to ensure that IPP prisoners are held in the appropriate category of prison. That was a problem we found, too. We also asked that the Government publish a report that they had commissioned on the offender personality disorder pathway, and that they set out more generally how they will ensure that programmes deliver adequate outcomes.

The Government only partially accepted those recommendations. Their response noted that places on programmes and other interventions were disrupted by the pandemic. Of course I accept that, and many of the submissions we received from prisoners expressed concern about that too. In our ongoing inquiry into the prison workforce, we have also heard concerns about staffing pressures affecting prisoners' access to courses. I hope the Minister will come back to us now that the pandemic

is out of the way and set out in more detail what work is under way to ensure that IPP prisoners' progression is not hindered by such circumstances—lack of access to courses and so on—which, in fairness, are beyond their control. And why, oh why, is it not possible for the Government to respond specifically to our request for the publication of the report on the offender personality disorder pathway? What is there to hide about it? Why can we not have it published?

We heard that, as well as the prison-based barriers to progression, people serving an IPP sentence also face barriers in the community on release. We have particular concerns about what we termed in our report the “recall merry-go-round”, which sees released IPP prisoners returned to prison following their release, in some cases time and time again. That is why we heard clear evidence that reducing the qualifying period to have the licence removed from 10 years to five years would go some way to restoring proportionality. If someone has been on an indeterminate sentence, persuaded the Parole Board that they can be safely released and been able to show, for five years, that they can stay out of trouble and move on, what is the magic in making them wait another five years, with these things hanging over their head, to reach 10 years?

The decision to recall an IPP prisoner is made by the probation service, and the reasons for recall vary. The Government's position seems to be that they do not accept that offenders serving the sentence in the community are being recalled unnecessarily. In November last year, the then Lord Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), told us in oral evidence that, in the 12 months to the end of 2021, 34% of IPP recalls were the result of new offences, rather than—in his words, not mine—

“tripping up over onerous licence conditions.”

Well, first, he did not deal very much with the 66% for us. Secondly, even in relation to that 34%, when we asked how many of those charges resulted in further prosecution or conviction—some might have been dropped because there was never evidence to justify them, which happens in the system—the answer was that the Government do not know:

“the required data is not routinely collated”.

How can the Government insist that every recall of someone serving an IPP is necessary for public protection if they do not know the basic data? There is an underlying problem with the collection and use of data in the justice system anyway, and that is a particularly egregious example, if you will forgive my saying so, Mr Twigg. Perhaps the Minister could explain why that is the case, and what can be done to correct it?

I am glad the Government have asked the chief inspector of probation to conduct an independent thematic inspection on whether IPP recalls are necessary and proportionate. Certainly, we heard evidence all too often that there was something of a tick-box exercise in relation to some of the recalls, which really are not based on risk. Of course, where there is genuine risk, any person on licence—whether it is IPP or not—should be considered for recall, but the risk must be genuine; these things should not happen, as is the case sometimes, purely because of a failure in communications, or because of a failure to bear in mind that many people find it really difficult to get their lives back on track straightaway after such sentences. It will not be a straight, linear

[Sir Robert Neill]

progression, and there does not seem to be enough recognition of that in the recall process. There are probably better ways in which we could keep a hold on people, technologically and otherwise, and track their movements and so on without the need for the nuclear option of recall, if I can put it that way.

That is why we particularly want to press the Government on why they have not taken on board our recommendation of going down to five years for the licence to be removed. It is worth saying that among those who said they would support a reduction from 10 years to five years was Martin Jones, the chief executive of the Parole Board. The people who deal with this themselves—the Government's own experts—see the force in that, but the Government will not listen to them.

We were disappointed to see that the Government rejected that entirely, opting instead to review the policy and practice of suspending just the supervisory element after five years of good behaviour. It is a small step, but it really does not do justice to the evidence presented on that point. I hope we can have a fuller explanation of what their reasoning was, because it just is not apparent from their response. Let us also have the opportunity to think again about that. We presented the evidence base. Where is the Government's?

Since June 2022, the Secretary of State has been required to automatically refer every eligible IPP prisoner to the Parole Board for licence termination at the 10-year point, and to do so in every subsequent year. I hope that that will help with the number of licences terminated, but I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on the number of referrals made since then and on how many licences have been terminated, because the intention may be good but we want to know whether it actually works in practice.

This is a long topic, and I want to make as much progress as I can to do it justice, so I will now turn to our main recommendation. When the IPP was abolished in 2012, that was because it was found to be unfair. In particular, it led to a lack of clarity and consistency in the way that two people who had committed the same crime might be sentenced, and to uncertainty for victims and families about when their assailants or family members might be released. In 2012, Parliament agreed that IPP sentences are fundamentally unjust, but there are still people serving them. Successive Governments acknowledged the problem, and there have been efforts by Members of both Houses to change the arrangements. Lord Blunkett was very frank with us when he expressed his profound regret at the setting up of the sentence. He said:

"I got it wrong. The Government now have the chance to get it right."

I just hope the Government will.

On our key recommendation, although we can make various improvements to the process inside and outside prison, the real issue is that we have to bite the bullet and get rid of this irredeemably flawed system by enacting primary legislation, so that we can have a resentencing exercise for all prisoners still serving an IPP sentence on licence. That was clear from the evidence we had, and the recommendation was overwhelmingly supported. Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, a former Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, called resentencing the only "inevitable" outcome. He said:

"It is the only fair and just thing to do."

That is why we made that call, and it was not made lightly. We recognise that there are concerns about resentencing, particularly for victims of crime, who have perfectly valid concerns about making sure that there is no risk to them or their families. It should be said that we never envisaged that a resentencing exercise for determinate sentences would automatically mean that every IPP prisoner would be released. We have to be honest with IPP prisoners and their families and say that there will be some for whom a determinate sentence would necessarily be a long one, and that they would not necessarily be released immediately or in a short time. But many probably would be, and all of them, however long their determinate sentence, would have finality, some certainty and the prospect of some hope. In other words, they would have the basic fairness that everybody else gets in the prison system.

To deal with this difficult issue, we suggested having a small, expert and time-limited panel to advise on the shape that the primary legislation and the scheme might take. We did not try to draft it ourselves. All we were saying is that we need to balance protection of the public with justice for the individual offender—that is a basic principle of sentencing anyway—the need to preserve the independence of the judiciary and the need to ensure that we do not, even inadvertently, retrospectively increase a sentence. None of those, we believed, were impossible, and with expert support and political will all those things can be done.

Many people had great hope raised by that recommendation, and we had moving letters from prisoners about it. I am afraid that some of those hopes have been dashed by the nature of the Government's report. They did not just reject our key recommendation on resentencing; they did so with such a scarcity of evidence to support their reasoning that, frankly, they demonstrated no engagement whatever with the evidence and reasoning behind our recommendation, and nor did they reflect on our efforts to explain the complexities of a resentencing exercise, including the risks to the public and how they could be overcome. The Government fell back on simplistic mantras, if I may say so. I am embarrassed to have to say that about a Government of my own party. It is not the way that I, as a Conservative, have normally treated these matters, and I do not believe that the Minister would either—he was not the person responsible for drafting the response. It is as shoddy a response as I have ever seen to a Select Committee report.

I am, however, pleased that the Government have followed through on their commitment to publish the IPP action plan, which came out two days ago. I welcome that, and I am grateful to the Minister for it. We look forward to engaging with him in taking it forward and seeing how it operates in practice.

I am sorry to have taken so much time to set out what I think is a compelling case. We are now in a position to move on. It is political will that is needed now. There is a new Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, who is someone who has considerable experience of the criminal justice system, so they know what prisons are like not just as a politician—there is nothing wrong with that—but as a lawyer who has been in practice for many years and who has dealt with the complexities of sentencing for many years. There is a chance for a fresh start and for the Government to say,



“We will think again about this. We need to revisit our response. We need to recognise that we did not do justice to all the evidence presented to us.”

I know that the Minister, who is a fair man in all our dealings—I genuinely mean that—and a humane man, as is the Secretary of State, will want to go by the evidence, and there is now no obstacle to prevent them from doing that. I hope we will hear answers from the Minister to the specific concerns we have raised and also a sense that the Government are prepared to revisit something. There is no shame in saying, “We got this wrong.” There is no shame in Lord Blunkett saying, “I got it wrong. It was for the best of reasons, but I got it wrong.” There is massive credit in that. There would be no shame in the Government saying, “The response we gave was not up to scratch. We will go back and look again.” I hope they will reconsider, reflect and do that following this debate, and I hope the Minister will be able to signal to us that they are open-minded on that.

**Derek Twigg (in the Chair):** If Members take no more than nine or 10 minutes for their speeches, I will not have to impose a time limit. I will call the Opposition spokesperson no later than 2.40 pm. Members should bob if they wish to speak. I call John McDonnell.

2.2 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I just want to raise three simple points. First, I congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), and the Select Committee overall on an immensely thorough report that deals with an issue that has hung over us for so long now that it is time to resolve it. I have the same optimism as him because of the change of personnel who will deal with this matter now. I think the Minister—I am about to flatter him, although he is not listening at the moment, so perhaps we can remind him of this later—will deal with this issue with an open mind, so there is a real opportunity here.

I also want to follow the Chair of the Select Committee in congratulating those who have campaigned over the years. Most of us can relate to this matter as a result of a constituent's experience. All such cases are absolute tragedies. Many of these people accept they have committed a crime, and they accept the judge's decision on the tariff as well, but they then get trapped in a Kafkaesque process of never knowing when they have met society's requirements in terms of redressing what they have done. The result—we have seen all the evidence now—is the loss of life, which has been tragic. What is particularly moving is the fact that there have been suicides since the Government's response. What this sentence has continuously done is create a sense of hopelessness among the individuals concerned, pushing many over the edge into mental health conditions, breakdowns and then suicide. The families serve the sentence as well, which has resulted in chronic tragedies among families too. It impacts on the parents, wives and children of those who have been sentenced in this way.

I have been in Parliament 25 years now, and I did not support the original indefinite sentencing proposals. I was on the Justice Committee a number of years ago, and in 2012, when it was agreed to abolish IPPs, I was elated. I actually thought justice would be served and that we would then rapidly find a mechanism for dealing with existing prisoners, because that was the spirit of

the decision to abolish. That has not happened, and I think we have a duty—I do not place the onus only on the Government but on Parliament overall—to resolve the matter once and for all and to do so rapidly. The Minister was busy when I was talking, but we have a fresh chance now, with a new administration, effectively in the Department. With a new Minister and a new Secretary of State, there is the opportunity to go back, look at the response to the Select Committee report and engage again, and to do it rapidly.

I am a member of the justice unions parliamentary group, which represents the Prison Officers Association and Napo. I am an honorary life member of the POA. There is no financial relationship between the POA and the Labour party—the only benefit would be an extra pillow if I ever get sentenced. We have discussed the issue with the unions involved—these are the people who are dealing with it hands on. What the POA says very clearly is that it does not usually comment on sentencing policy, but it has made an exception in this case. It feels it has been given a task, in dealing with these prisoners, that is impossible. It is impossible to deal with the hopelessness felt by these prisoners. In many instances, because of the overcrowding and the lack of access to the programmes that are required to support them, it is also almost impossible to keep them safe. That is why we have had so many self-harm injuries and suicides.

The POA supports the proposal put forward by the Select Committee. The same goes for Napo, which has also pointed out that the Parole Board cannot deal with this serious matter as promptly as it should because of understaffing. Every expert opinion that the Select Committee has sought, whether it is the lawyers, the prisons officers or the probation officers, says there has to be some form of shift. The proposal from the Select Committee Opposition on ensuring that there is at least an exploration of the resentencing exercise is therefore one that any Government should seize with both hands. A group of experts who can go through in detail the processes that could be undertaken is the light that any Government would want to see at the end of the tunnel in terms of resolving this matter.

Concern has been expressed that this will create a problem of mass release, but the Select Committee has addressed that. The expert committee can advise on the timing, the way this is dealt with and how the whole issue can be properly resourced and timetabled to maximum effect, to the benefit of not only the prisoners currently serving indefinite sentences but the victims and the wider community. This is a way forward, and I hope the new administration and the new Minister can seize the opportunity; otherwise, we could be here in another 10 or 15 years' time, and more prisoners will have lost their lives or suffered harm, and more families will have suffered.

On behalf of the constituents I have dealt with and all the professionals I link up with through the justice unions parliamentary group, I urge the Minister to see that now is the time to act. I believe that the Minister would have cross-party support in that; it would not be a political issue for banter or anything like that—it would fall into line with the cross-party approach that the Justice Committee has undertaken so successfully.

2.9 pm

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I must refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial

[James Daly]

Interests. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) said, I was a criminal defence solicitor for 17 years. I dealt with many IPP prisoners during that time, and I am a proud member of the Justice Committee. Rather than repeat his every word—I agree with every single word that he and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said about this—I will tell you about Thomas.

In 2012, Thomas received an IPP sentence for robbery of a mobile phone. He was ordered to serve a minimum tariff of two years, only a few months before IPPs were abolished. If Thomas had been sentenced four months later, he would not be in prison now. That in itself tells a tale.

Thomas is now aged 39. He has been in custody for more than 10 years. He should have been released after his tariff of two years, so why is he in prison 10 years later? It is because—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington said—his mental health has taken a huge blow during that period. He has suffered with psychosis and various other mental health traumas.

Where has that left Thomas's family? His 13-year-old son has been left without a father. He has been moved 16 times, and on many occasions, has not been given access to the appropriate recourses because of his mental health challenges. Certainly, on occasions, he has not been able to engage with what has been provided, but the provision has been sparse to say the least.

This man is in prison with mental health difficulties. He has served over a decade more than his tariff, yet he is viewed as somebody who cannot be released. How is that possible? That brings us to risk, which is what my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst talked about. I do not have enough time to discuss how the Parole Board deals with this, but how on earth is a man who committed an offence more than a decade ago, who clearly should be in a mental health facility, viewed as a risk? The reason why is that risk, incredibly, has become related to mental health—I talk from personal experience, and we also took evidence in camera from people who were involved, who wanted to speak candidly but felt that it was difficult. If somebody has a mental health issue, that is viewed to be a risk factor to causing harm. We cannot treat people like that. That is not risk.

The figures bear this out. When the Secretary of State appeared before the Justice Committee, 66% of the people who had been recalled had not committed a further offence. Why were 66% of them still in prison if they had not committed an offence? The reason is that for many of those individuals, the Probation Service and the Parole Board take an overcautious, scattergun approach. IPP prisoners are treated differently from other prisoners—I do not know what the reason is, but they are.

To justify that and to ensure that backs are covered, we put in place lots of conditions, most of which have no relation to risk. Risk is the risk of harm to other members of the public. If someone breaches a curfew, why are they getting sent back to prison? That is not evidence of a risk of harm. It is an indictment of the Government's response on this issue that there has been no evidence base to challenge any of the questions that were raised by experts, members of the Committee and others—none.

What could possibly be the reason for—as of 2022—2,892 people still being in prison on an IPP sentence? How can Parliament allow that, if Parliament views that sentencing exercise as unjust? More than 2,800 people are in prison serving a sentence that Members of this House think is unjust. Can somebody explain how we can look one another in the face and allow that situation to continue? It is quite extraordinary.

Looking at the Government response, this cuts to the heart of what the Government are saying:

“The risks to public protection from the immediate release of serving IPP prisoners continue to exist. Although the Government recognises the frustrations and concerns surrounding the IPP sentence, our view is that the IPP Action Plan remains the best way in which these offenders can progress towards safe release.”

Not a shred of evidence is provided to back up that statement—not one. There is nothing. We are left in the uneasy situation where what we are actually keeping people in for is a concern, and it may well be a non-existent concern, but people's lives are being blighted by politicians deciding that they do not want the risk of somebody coming out and doing something and then it being a headline in the newspaper. That is not the way to make policy. The justice system that I served for 20 years did not recognise that as justice. That is what this has come down to.

The response to the various things that my hon. Friend set out is just words on a piece of paper. We all know it, and there is that acceptance. I could read out numerous statements about the Government being committed to improving mental health support and rehabilitation support. I could have stood here and said that 10 years ago. If a Government are committed to trying to doing something, it means that they are not actually doing it. It is an acceptance that the proper support—the rehabilitative support and the courses—that is needed for somebody to be released from prison does not actually exist. Not only is this sentence unjust, but we are not providing pathways out for people with mental health difficulties.

The Minister—I like him very much—is an honourable man and an excellent Minister. How on earth have we got into this situation? As I said, Thomas is 39 years of age. He has been in custody for 11 years. Let us say that Thomas lives to the age of 70. If the basis for which somebody stays in custody is their mental health condition, which is deteriorating by the day, that would be another 31 years. He would be in prison for 40 years, having received a two-year sentence. People think that that is okay, seemingly, without any evidence of risk or anything.

That situation is repeated throughout this cohort of people. It is genuinely appalling. As my hon. Friend said, the Justice Committee's report is not some radical document saying, “Open the doors and off we go”. It is an expert-based resentencing exercise, where some people may not be released from custody immediately, but at least they would have a determinate sentence that they and their families could have some hope to work towards.

We talk about the effect of these sentences, and I hope the Minister will take that into account. I could read out many facts, but the rate of self-harm among IPP prisoners is twice that of those serving a life sentence. Do we think that that happens by accident? The causal link through all the evidence is clear: the sentence is creating this situation. The deterioration of people's mental health is a result of the sentence, and it is just appalling.

I am saddened to say this, because I believe that the Government are a force for good, but on this occasion, their response has left me exasperated. All of us who have been involved in the process have seen the personal stories of individuals and their family members. During my career in criminal law, one thing that I sometimes noticed was that we tended to treat people who were in a custodial environment as non-human beings. These are human beings with the same feelings, aspirations and desires for a house, for love and to have a positive and good life. We have created a situation where that has been cut off from them.

I will finish with this point, because I am going to keep to my 10 minutes, although I am tempted to go on for longer. With the change of personnel and with the new Lord Chancellor—a criminal barrister for many years—I think we all know that we should look at this afresh. We all know that we cannot have this situation going on in perpetuity, because we may as well book this room every five years and come back and say the same thing. What will happen is that more and more people will commit suicide and self-harm, and more lives and families will be destroyed, and for what? For a sentence that Parliament accepts is unjust. What other situation do we do that in?

Sometimes in Parliament, we talk about a lot of things and throw words around, but everyone accepts that this is unjust and yet we continue with it. I genuinely believe that this is a national scandal. It is a disgrace and a stain on the justice system in which I and my hon. Friend served. In the Justice Committee—with the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) as well—we have tried to come up with a responsible way of answering those concerns and of reflecting the personal and bespoke circumstances of each individual, and the views of victims, to ensure that public safety is part of the resentencing exercise that clearly needs to take place. Please, Minister, please, let us bring this farce to an end, accept the recommendations and give these people some hope.

2.20 pm

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), for securing the debate and for speaking so eloquently, setting the grounds for it. I also wish to put on the record my thanks to the Justice Committee staff for their important work for hon. Members, including me, in Committee.

I make no apology for repeating some of the things that have been stated already in this Chamber, because I think it is worth doing so. IPP sentences are a shameful mark on our criminal justice system, and successive Justice Secretaries have recognised that. In 2011, Lord Clarke expressed his concern that no prisoner can realistically prove to the Parole Board that they are not a danger to the public until after they are released. In 2016, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) recommended using executive clemency for hundreds of prisoners kept in jail for much longer than their sentence. As we heard, that was not done. In 2019, the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) acknowledged that it would be possible to resentence those serving IPP sentences, yet here we are today in 2023.

I hope that the new Justice Secretary, and the Minister present, will go further than identifying lists of ideas and statements, as stated in the action plan that came out recently. I hope that they will make a real change for reform, because that is what is needed.

The primary reform identified by the Justice Committee was legislation to enable a resentencing exercise to take place, but we have to be honest that that would not be a simple process. Resentencing is the Prison Reform Trust's preferred solution, but it noted that that would have significant resource implications and could place a strain on the judiciary. The Justice Committee, however, heard varying suggestions of how a resentencing exercise could be conducted, and 138 multidisciplinary criminal justice experts wrote to the Justice Secretary endorsing a carefully planned resentencing exercise. The Sentencing Academy suggested that the High Court be tasked with reconsidering the facts of each case. It could then apply the appropriate sentencing options.

Those varying approaches show that we must consider carefully how a resentencing programme would work. One solution would be to set up an expert committee to produce a report on the best way to run a resentencing exercise. That could include whether it is possible, and how it could be done in a way to protect public safety, to take the victim of the crime into account and to deal fairly with the offender. We should not forget why the need for reform matters so much—because we are discussing people's lives, and those should be valued.

Last year, nine people serving IPP sentences committed suicide. That is the highest number since the sentence was introduced. Overall, 81 people serving IPP sentences have taken their own lives. They have committed suicide and we have heard about the impact of that on their family members. That is 81 lives lost because of shameful failures in our criminal justice system. This situation does not need to persist; no further lives need to be lost, although we have heard of one life being lost recently. As I said, each person's life should be valued.

On face value, the Government have given up, locked the door and—it seems—thrown away the key for almost 3,000 prisoners currently serving IPP sentences. However, there is always time for change, and I hope that change will come. Of those 3,000 prisoners, almost half of them have been in prison for over 10 years following their original tariff. Is it any wonder that mental health problems, self-harm and suicide are so prevalent among those serving these sentences?

I remind the House, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst did, that IPP sentences were abolished in 2012. Napo states that its experience of people serving IPP sentences is that they generally

“tend to suffer from personality disorders, anxiety and depression and other mental health issues at a higher rate than other prisoners in the prison”

service. There is, therefore, a higher rate of self-harm and attempted suicide among these prisoners, which “impacts on” their

“ability to ‘behave’ in a way that is”

generally

“expected by the Parole Board and the Prison Service. As such they are denied release due to bad behaviour when in fact we should be looking at how imprisonment and the trauma this causes can escalate these behaviours. Many prisoners as a result are in a never-ending cycle.”



[Janet Daby]

That is really important to note. These prisoners are already likely to suffer from some type of mental disorder, so they are more likely to have received this type of sentence when they are indeed vulnerable in other ways. This is an appalling state of affairs, and the Government can and should take steps to end it now. I would like to hear what the Minister says about how they will achieve that.

In 2018, I was contacted by a constituent whose son had been imprisoned in 2007 and is now serving an IPP sentence. Her son's prison tariff was initially five years, but after 15 years he is still in prison. He has been repeatedly moved, or there have been threats that he will be moved, around prisons up and down our country. He is like a ghost in prison—he is moving from one prison to the next—and his mother repeatedly calls me to tell me where he is now. How demoralising and degrading this must feel to him. His situation has included him being moved away from his family, being denied contact with them and being denied emotional support. His parole hearing should have taken place on time, but, again, delay after delay has meant that his case is being deferred, because the necessary risk assessments and reports were not prepared in time. Indeed, sometimes no reason has been given for such delays. His mother is stricken with grief and often speaks to me on the phone, crying. I ask the Minister if he will review that case—in fact, all these cases need to be reviewed—and I know that that this man's family in particular would appreciate that.

This man, like so many others, deserves a chance at reform, but our crumbling justice system—on the Government's watch—is holding them back. Our prisons are overcrowded and the Minister has been forced to use police cells to hold prisoners. There are thousands of vacancies for prison officers across our country, but the Government do not publish full data on that, so we cannot properly understand the scale of the problem or how to tackle it. This means that many prisons are unable to offer a full and meaningful prison regime, with quality education and skills training, which are so crucial for those serving IPP sentences to show the Parole Board that they are safe to be released.

Almost the entire criminal justice system, from court to probation, is beset by backlogs, staff shortages and inexperienced staff. Even if a prisoner is released, probation officers are overstretched and cannot provide the support that they need. A litany of Government failures across the criminal justice system all indicate that the system is in crisis. Sadly, I fear that the Government are in denial about the scale of the challenge facing our justice service. Only if they own up to it and oversee the huge improvements that are needed will those serving IPP sentences get their chance at reform.

I hope that the Minister reflects strongly and responds to the issues that have been raised across this Chamber, and I look forward to his response.

2.29 pm

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg, and I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) for securing this incredibly important debate, on an issue that affects so many people, as we

have heard today. The hon. Member has worked hard to fight this injustice. To be honest, it has been an absolute privilege to stand here today and listen to the contributions from all Members. It has been a fantastic debate so far. I am going to reinforce and possibly repeat what has been said today. It is important that I do so on those of my constituents who are affected.

The hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) said that this is a national scandal. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on public accountability, and we have seen some scandals instigated by the state. Unfortunately, this is another such scandal, and it needs to be resolved.

I speak today on behalf of several families in my constituency of Liverpool, West Derby who have been affected by IPP sentences and who have been in touch with me. I recently wrote to the now, thankfully, former Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), regarding the many issues associated with these sentences, and requesting a response. I take this timely opportunity to restate those asks, in the hope that the newly appointed Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), will be able to take them up accordingly.

The principle of IPPs, together with the poor drafting of the legislation, has resulted in those who committed less serious offences that never previously carried a life sentence receiving sentences that were never intended for them, as has been mentioned throughout the debate. It was predicted that about 900 people would receive IPP sentences, but they were actually given to more than 8,000 people.

In addition, prisons did not and still do not have adequate rehabilitation services, so prisoners are not able to access the interventions they need to demonstrate that they are no longer a risk and can be released. Like many other elements in this wretched piece of legislation, that defies belief.

In 2012, the European Court of Human Rights held that the failure to make appropriate provision for rehabilitative services for three prisoners serving IPP sentences breached their rights under article 5 of the European convention on human rights. The cumulative impact of IPP sentences on individuals' welfare and their families is well documented and has been detailed today. Indeed, the then Government Minister described it in a 2010 session of Justice Questions as "not defensible". My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) voted against the legislation. He is always on the right side of history.

Even though the sentences were abolished in 2012, that provision does not apply retrospectively, as has been said, and so the impact continues for thousands of families. The mental health element is absolutely crucial. The mental health crisis among IPP prisoners is rife, with 81 suicides recorded among those serving IPP sentences since 2005, according to the United Group for Reform of IPP. Tragically, it has been reported that only yesterday a young man serving an IPP sentence took his own life at HMP Manchester.

Studies have shown that the family members of those given an IPP sentence suffer financial and emotional strain, hopelessness and a loss of faith in the justice system. Their children show separation anxiety, emotional distress and behavioural problems. I have witnessed that

at first hand in families I have spoken to in my constituency. In one case—I will not provide the full details, for legal reasons—the constituent had rebuilt his life following release. However, he has now suddenly been recalled. The positive progress that he had made over those five years has been put on hold—for how long, we do not know. His livelihood, children and family are now terribly impacted because they have absolutely no clarity on how long he will be imprisoned for.

In a surgery last month, the mother of that prisoner broke down in my arms, crying. She just could not see an end to it, with the destruction of the life that he had built, the impact on the children and the family, with everything ripped away from them. In her words:

“IPP sentences have been abolished since 2012 but so many people and their families are still suffering from the injustice and lives are being utterly destroyed. When will this nightmare end for all of us?”

That is a question for the Minister.

Along with MPs from across the House, I am a signatory to early-day motion 591, which calls on the Government to implement the findings of the Justice Committee’s report, which has been outlined fantastically today, in particular that the Government quickly legislates to enable a resentencing exercise for all IPP-sentenced individuals, except for those who have successfully had their licence terminated.

The Government’s response to the Justice Committee’s report rejected its primary recommendation on resentencing. Like everyone else, I ask the Minister to shed light on whether that will be looked at again by the new Secretary of State, following the dismay of families, campaigners, trade unions and the Justice Committee at the original response.

In a recent debate in Parliament on IPP sentences, we heard the former Home Secretary Lord Blunkett, who introduced the sentences, describe the current situation concerning IPP prisoners as unequal, unjust and immoral. It was good to hear him say those words. He acknowledged the mistake and the impact it has had on so many families. Former Supreme Court Justice Lord Brown has repeated his description of IPP sentences as the “greatest single stain on the justice system”,

as has been mentioned throughout this debate, and that “it is a deeper, growing stain because of the situation with the recalls.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 November 2021; Vol. 816, c. 33.]

The absurd and incredibly damaging situation with respect to the legacy of IPP sentences cannot continue. I plead with the Minister to rethink the Government’s response to the Justice Committee’s report. I ask him to impress on the new Secretary of State the need to meet families, victims and campaigners in the next few weeks to discuss how we can repair the clear defects in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 and, crucially, finally bring certainty to prisoners and their families about the nature of their detention and recall. We expect nothing else in this place. It is crucial that their words are listened to and adhered to.

2.36 pm

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) for bringing forward the debate and for the Justice Committee’s report. I was proud formerly

to serve on the Committee under his leadership, and I can personally attest to his dedication and the Committee’s rigorous approach to its work. The report is no exception.

We have heard powerful contributions. The hon. Member set out in great detail the Select Committee’s findings after many evidence sessions and highlighted the inadequacy of the Government’s response. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talked about a Kafkaesque process and the need for cross-party support, which I will talk more about. The hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) mentioned Thomas who, 10 years on, is still in prison serving a sentence that had a tariff of two years. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) talked about setting up an expert committee to look at how resentencing could work and raised some really important points. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) talked about a lack of intervention in prisons and spoke powerfully about his constituents’ experiences.

When IPP sentences were introduced, it was anticipated that they would be given to 900 people. In fact, between 2005 and 2013, they were given to more than 8,000 people. After concerns were raised that the sentences were being applied much more widely than originally intended, the use of IPPs was rightly abolished in 2012, but, as we know, that change did not apply retrospectively. As a result, at the end of 2022, there were still just short of 3,000 prisoners in custody under IPP sentences.

As has been outlined, countless testimonies and studies have shown the link between serving an IPP sentence and deteriorating mental health, self-harm and suicide. Eighty-one IPP prisoners have taken their own lives while in prison. In 2022 alone, there were nine suicides—the highest number of any year since IPPs were introduced. In 2021, IPP prisoners made up 11% of all self-harm incidents recorded, despite being only 3% of the entire prison population.

Those issues are compounded by the fact that, after a decade of cuts to the justice system, prisons are now understaffed, overcrowded and awash with violence and drugs. In too many cases, prisoners are spending up to 23 hours a day in their cells, with little to no purposeful activity. In a system under such strain, IPP prisoners have often been placed right at the back of the queue. Many have been unable to address their offending because they have been denied access to the courses necessary to demonstrate their rehabilitation. In some cases, the courses they need simply do not exist in the prisons they are in; in other cases, lifers have been given support ahead of IPP prisoners. A lack of mental health support and awareness of neurodiverse conditions has also made it easier to stigmatise an inmate as a problem rather than offer them the support they need to reform.

Given those conditions, it is no wonder that so many IPP inmates and their families have lost hope, and the problems do not stop there. Recalls are rising. As the chief inspector of probation outlined, most recalls to prisons are for non-compliance with licence conditions, rather than for new crimes. Non-compliance often results from homelessness, a relapse into substance misuse and a lack of continuity of care between pre and post-release service provision. In short, failing services are leading to unsuccessful licences, which means that we are setting up too many IPP releases to fail. They are put back into custody in a system that sets them goals it does not allow them to meet.

[Ellie Reeves]

Many IPP sentences were more a judgment on an individual's chaotic life than their risk, making it near impossible for them to prove their suitability for release. For example, Charlotte was a 30-year-old drug addict when she was sentenced to a minimum of 16 months in prison. She had been begging outside a corner shop, and when a woman refused to give her money, she pulled out a knife. She did not attempt to stab the woman, but she did terrify her. Nine years later, in July 2016, she died in prison. It was an awful crime, of course, but a disproportionate outcome given that for threats with a weapon, the mandatory minimum sentence is six months' custody and the maximum sentence is four years.

As we have heard today, there are some cases where the continued detention of individuals appears unduly harsh, given the nature of their original crime or the length of their original tariff. There have been resulting calls from those individuals' families and justice organisations for reform of the system. Equally, there are a large number of individuals serving IPP sentences whose continued detention has rightly been deemed necessary for public protection by successive Parole Boards. That includes many sex offenders and violent criminals. Any blanket amnesty for those individuals, who include the black cab rapist, John Worboys, would create a serious and unacceptable risk to public safety. Various proposals have been made, including by the Justice Committee, about ways to address the potential unfairness of outstanding IPP sentences without exposing the public to the risk that would arise from releasing all those currently serving them.

Whatever party is in power, I believe it is paramount that we approach any discussion of reform on a cross-party basis, just as the Justice Committee did, consulting victims' groups as well as justice organisations. We must avoid at all costs the future of those prisoners becoming a political football. On that basis, if the Government are willing to bring forward meaningful proposals on how to solve the situation, Labour will engage with them in a constructive, cross-party way. It is important that the Government understand that we are willing to work with them to move forward on this issue constructively. I am keen to hear the Minister's response to that.

We must also recognise that problems do not just lie with IPPs. Even if individuals on IPP sentences are eventually released on licence by a Parole Board, to keep us safe we are still reliant on a functioning probation system to ensure those individuals comply with their licence conditions and do not lapse back into the behaviours that originally made them a risk. The precursor of any reform must therefore be a probation system that works, yet after 13 years of the Tories, the probation service is buckling at the seams. Under Labour, probation was well regarded and fulfilled its aims of keeping the public safe and rehabilitating those it supervised, but after more than a decade of underfunding and chaotic organisational change, which has led to many experienced staff leaving, it is today failing. Inspection report after inspection report detail systemic failures, and it is the public who pay the price with their safety.

There have been an average of six serious further offence convictions every week since 2010, including for murder, kidnap and rape. The reality is that our criminal justice system has been pushed to the brink, and if the

Government were truly concerned about protecting public safety, they would urgently plug the gaps and rebuild the service they broke.

We all recognise the problems that IPP sentences have caused, but we must also recognise the numerous complexities surrounding them and the pressures on our stretched criminal justice system. I welcome the Department's new leadership, and I hope the Government will seriously look at this issue again. If they bring forward proposals, we will engage with them in a constructive, cross-party way with the priority of public safety at the centre of that approach.

2.44 pm

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds):** It is very good to see you in the Chair, as always, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) for his opening remarks and for securing this debate on behalf of the Justice Committee following the publication last year of its report on imprisonment for public protection sentences. I also thank all colleagues in the Chamber for what they have brought to this important debate and to our discussion of these incredibly serious matters.

The Government welcomed the report by my hon. Friend and his Committee as a real opportunity to take stock of the debate on the IPP sentence, which rightly continues to generate enormous interest, attention and challenge across both Houses of Parliament. Having discussed this matter with IPP campaign groups and colleagues of different parties last month, I am even more acutely aware of the depth and strength of the feeling evoked.

Today's debate is timely, because the updated IPP action plan from HM Prison and Probation Service was shared with my hon. Friend's Committee yesterday. One of the Committee's key recommendations was to refresh the agency's action plan, and this debate provides an opportunity to share some details of the refreshed plan with the House. I am confident that it will make a genuine difference to the way that IPP offenders are rehabilitated and supported through to safe release, consistent with public protection.

I will provide a brief overview of the IPP sentence, before turning to the Justice Committee's report and the Government response. As a number of colleagues have mentioned, the IPP sentence was introduced by the Criminal Justice Act 2003 for offences committed on or after 4 April 2005, and it was abolished from December 2012. As has been noted, abolition was not applied retrospectively, as the Government assessed that it would not be right to alter a sentence that had been lawfully imposed by a court prior to its abolition. This means that the Parole Board grants release to those serving an IPP sentence once they have demonstrated that they are safe to be released.

At the time of abolition, more than 6,000 offenders were serving an IPP sentence in prison. Since then a substantial number have been released on licence, so that at the end of March this year there were 2,916 offenders on an IPP sentence in custody. Although that is a significant decrease from the peak in 2012, I recognise that there is more to be done. I reaffirm the Government's commitment to support those serving an IPP sentence, both in prison and on licence in the community, to work towards a safe and sustainable future release. We will continue this work through the updated IPP action plan.



I thank all members of the Justice Committee for their thorough work in examining the issues surrounding IPP sentences. The Government gave careful consideration to all the report's findings and each of the Committee's recommendations. We carefully considered the recommendations to undertake a full resentencing exercise of all remaining offenders serving an IPP sentence and to establish a time-limited expert committee to advise on the practical implementation of such an exercise, as the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and others outlined. However, the Government's priority remains the protection of the public, and any resentencing exercise that aims to provide each IPP prisoner with a definite release date would inevitably result in the immediate release of a considerable number of offenders who committed serious sexual or violent offences and whom the Parole Board has previously deemed unsafe to be released.

**James Daly:** What evidence basis does the Minister have to make that statement?

**Damian Hinds:** I make it on the basis of the profile of the prison population and the fact that prisoners have had parole hearings where determinations have been made not to release. That is based on the release test, with which I know my hon. Friend is extremely familiar.

It is vital for public protection that those serving the IPP sentence in prison, whether not yet released or recalled following release, are released only following a thorough risk assessment that finds that their risk has now reduced to the point where they can be safely managed in the community. That is a judgment for the parole board. It is for that reason we rejected the Committee's recommendation of a full resentencing exercise for such offenders.

**John McDonnell:** I am not sure we all share the same understanding of the Committee's recommendation. My understanding was that the Committee recommended bringing together an expert panel that would advise on the process. That does not mean the expert panel would precipitously leap us forward into a mass release or anything like that. It is just an expert panel that could advise the Government on how the process might operate. The Government could refuse its recommendations. It is just another way of exploring—to the point made by the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly)—an evidence-based judgment rather than one based, frankly, on prejudice.

**Damian Hinds:** I assure the right hon. Gentleman that our decision is based on principles of public safety, consistent with wishing to help and support the prisoners on an IPP sentence through to the point where they can be released safely into the community. All of us want that ultimate goal.

The Committee also recommended a reduction in the qualifying period for licence termination from 10 years to five following first release from custody. As hon. Members know, the licence period following custody is an important tool not only for public protection, but to ensure that offenders are properly supported to manage risk when they are integrating back into the community. As I said earlier, offenders who originally received an IPP sentence did so because they committed a qualifying offence and were considered to pose a risk of serious harm to the public. It is extremely important to allow a proportionate licence period after release to ensure their safe management and reintegration into communities.

**Sir Robert Neill:** Will the Minister set out, either here or in the Library, what evidence he has that suggests the risk is significantly greater at five years as opposed to 10? What statistics lead to that decision?

**Damian Hinds:** We will continue to engage with my hon. Friend's Committee in the normal way. It is perfectly reasonable of him to challenge us. I was coming on to say something about the licence periods.

Although we will not be reducing the eligibility period for licence termination at this time, we have committed in the action plan to review the current policy and practice for suspending the supervisory elements of IPP licences to ensure that all cases are considered at the point when they are eligible, which, for the supervisory element, is after five continuous successful years on licence in the community. My hon. Friend will be aware of the changes that we made in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 in regard to making sure that eligible cases are brought forward.

Colleagues have expressed legitimate concern about the high number of IPP offenders recalled to custody, and asked about the proportionality of that. I assure colleagues that in 2020 His Majesty's inspectorate of probation did a thematic report on recall in terms of its proportionality, and it found that decisions to recall were proportionate. As part of our action plan, we will be internally reviewing our recall processes. We are also asking His Majesty's inspector of probation—the chief inspector—to undertake a thematic inspection of recalls specifically for IPP and for that to happen in this calendar year. He will also look at the weeks leading up to recall—I know that this is a significant point that matters to colleagues, and rightly so—and consider whether, had the support on offer been different, recall could have been avoided. I thank the chief inspector for stepping up to undertake that piece of work.

I will move on to the IPP action plan, but first may I ask what time I must finish by, Mr Twigg?

**Derek Twigg (in the Chair):** I would usually allow a minute for the Chair of the Select Committee.

**Damian Hinds:** Then I will turn to the IPP action plan, which sets out the range of work that His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service does to support the progress of IPP offenders towards a prospective safe and sustainable release.

The Committee's report criticised the then IPP action plan for lacking clear performance measures, an accountable owner and a timeframe for completion of workstream actions. We accept those points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and his colleagues. It had actually long been the intention of the Government to refresh the IPP action plan, once his Committee's report had been published.

Having taken that evidence into account, I am pleased to be able to share some of the details of the refreshed plan, building on the previous one. I am confident that it will deliver tangible change by safely reducing over time the IPP population in custody and in the community, while still prioritising public protection. Our key priority is managing the sentences of those serving an IPP to a consistently high quality, ensuring that the delivery of systems and processes in every prison and probation region facilitates risk reduction and the prospect of

[*Damian Hinds*]

progress towards a safe and sustainable release. That will include the delivery of specific interventions and services to enable sentence progression, rehabilitation and effective resettlement for those who continue to serve the IPP sentence. To respond to a point brought up by my hon. Friend, it is true that covid restricted access to some of those programmes. The plan has now set out—and itself includes—actions to ensure that IPP prisoners get access in a timely way to the programmes they need to be able to reduce their risk.

I will say a little about the governance of the plan—that comes to the accountable owner and ensuring that it has sufficient heft. There will be a new senior IPP progression board, chaired by the executive director with responsibility for public protection, who my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and some of the campaign groups met and heard from recently. The board will drive the completion of actions, reviewing the impact and progress of the action plan every six months. Each workstream will be formally owned by a senior leader in HMPPS and held accountable for delivery through the new board. We will also set up a new external reference group for open engagement with external stakeholders, which is very important. That will give them a chance to engage directly with and provide input to the action plan and its delivery.

I accept the points made by my hon. Friend about transparency and reporting, and we are committed to reporting more and in a timely way. The Government's

priority continues to be the protection of the public, but we remain fully committed to doing all we can to support the safe progression of those serving IPP sentences. I look forward to continued dialogue on this matter with the Committee, colleagues here and others beyond this debate. I repeat my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst for securing the debate and to all who contributed to it.

2.59 pm

**Sir Robert Neill:** I thank all Members who have spoken so powerfully in the debate. Of course, we look forward to engaging with the Minister and the Government on the action plan, but I must say that closed minds still seem to prevail in relation to the key issue of resentencing. If the Government will not move, Parliament must move for them. I have prepared a draft clause to enact the recommendations of the report for a resentencing exercise, and I shall not hesitate to move it when the Victims and Prisoners Bill returns to this House. I hope it will have support from across the Chamber.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Justice Committee, IPP Sentences, HC 266, and the Government response, HC 933.

3 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Thursday 27 April 2023

## TREASURY

### Tax Administration and Maintenance: Spring 2023

#### **The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):**

As announced at the spring budget the Government are setting out further technical tax policy proposals that support their ambition to simplify and modernise the tax system, tackle non-compliance, make the tax system fairer for taxpayers and to make the customs system work better for traders.

#### *Simplification and modernisation*

The Government want the tax system to be simple, fair and to support growth. In autumn 2022, the Government issued a clear mandate to put tax simplification at the heart of policy making.

The spring budget announced the first steps, with a range of improvements to make it easier for businesses to interact with the tax system. This included:

- a systematic review to improve HMRC guidance and key forms for small businesses
- a consultation to expand the “cash basis”, a simplified way for over four million sole traders to calculate and pay their income tax
- delivering the IT changes to enable agents to payroll benefits in kind on behalf of employers, and
- a package of measures to simplify customs import and export processes for traders, taking advantage of new freedoms following EU exit and promoting economic growth by making importing and exporting as easy as possible.

The Government are now taking the next steps to make tax as simple as possible for taxpayers.

First, the Government are committed to supporting saving and investment through simplification of the tax system. Announcements today include:

*Help to Save:* At spring budget 2023 the Government announced that they will extend the Help to Save (HtS) scheme in its current form by 18 months until April 2025 and set out the intention to launch a consultation. The Government are now publishing a consultation on the scheme design to determine how it could be simplified.

*Modernisation of the stamp taxes on shares framework:* The Government are publishing a consultation on proposals to modernise and digitise the framework for stamp taxes on shares. This consultation seeks views on proposals to ensure that any new framework will meet its objectives for a simple, clear and efficient tax system.

The Government are publishing two further documents as part of HMRC’s wider tax administration framework review (TAFR). These documents continue our work to ensure the UK’s tax administration framework keeps pace with the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, and supports a modern and effective tax system.

*Information and data:* Smarter use of information and data, including from third parties, has the potential to simplify tax administration for individuals and businesses, and improve HMRC’s compliance capabilities. This call

for evidence focuses on how legislation could be updated to standardise and simplify data provision, and make sure taxpayer information is appropriately protected.

*A legislative approach to piloting:* This discussion document seeks views on a new approach known as a “sandbox” that HMRC could use to pilot changes. The document will explore opportunities and challenges of possible sandbox testing models, and what safeguards might be necessary and proportionate.

Building on the customs announcements made at spring budget:

*Customs treatment of post and parcel exports:* The Government are publishing a consultation on proposals to improve the customs treatment of post and parcel exports. This is to ensure customs facilitations for low-value post and parcels are as beneficial as possible, while creating a level playing field for operators to export low-value goods with ease.

#### *Tackling the tax gap*

Since 2010 the Government have introduced over 200 new measures and invested over £2 billion extra in HMRC to tackle non-compliance in the tax system. In 2021-22, HMRC secured and protected £30.8 billion for public services that would otherwise have gone unpaid.

This action has ensured the tax gap has remained on a long-term downward trend and one of the lowest published worldwide. We remain committed to driving the tax gap down further.

The consultations announced today build on announcements at spring budget:

*Tackling non-compliance in the umbrella company market:* The Government will shortly publish a summary of responses to the 2021 call for evidence on the umbrella company market. Alongside this, the Government will publish a consultation on policy options to regulate umbrella companies and to tackle non-compliance in the umbrella company market.

*Tackling promoters of tax avoidance:* As announced at spring budget the Government are publishing a consultation on both the introduction of a new criminal offence for promoters of tax avoidance and expediting the disqualification of directors of companies involved in promoting tax avoidance.

*Repayment Agents:* As announced on 11 January 2023, the Government will require repayment agents to register with HMRC to protect vulnerable customers. Repayment agents will need to register (within a three-month window) starting on 2 May 2023.

#### *Further tax policy and administration announcements*

The Government are also making a number of other tax policy announcements to improve tax administration, increase transparency and address concerns that have been raised including:

*National Insurance credit changes:* The Government recognise concerns that some parents who have not claimed child benefit could miss out on their future entitlement to a full state pension. The Government will address this issue to enable affected parents to receive a national insurance credit retrospectively. Further detail on next steps will be available in due course.

*Plastic packaging tax:* The Government will consult on allowing a mass balance approach for calculating the proportion of recycled content in chemically recycled



plastics, for the purposes of the plastic packaging tax. The consultation will be launched later this year.

The full list of publications and announcements can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tax-administration-and-maintenance-summary-spring-2023>.

[HCWS749]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Statutory Medical Examiner System

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** I wish to inform the House of the Government's plan for introducing a statutory medical examiner system from April 2024. Medical examiners are senior medical doctors who provide independent scrutiny of the causes of non-coronial deaths. In scrutinising deaths, they:

- seek to confirm the proposed cause of death by the medical doctor and the overall accuracy of the medical certificate of cause of death;

- discuss the proposed cause of death with bereaved people and establish if they have questions or any concerns relating to the death;

- support appropriate referrals to senior coroners; and

- identify cases for further review under local mortality arrangements and contribute to other clinical governance processes.

The changes will put all of the medical examiner system's obligations, duties and responsibilities on to a statutory footing and ensure they are recognised by law. For example, it will be a legal requirement that medical examiners scrutinise all non-coronial deaths. This will help to deter criminal activity and poor practice, increase transparency and offer the bereaved an opportunity to raise concerns.

In preparation for this, the relevant provisions of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 and the Health and Care Act 2022 will be commenced by autumn 2023. We will also publish draft regulations by autumn 2023, and will lay the regulations when parliamentary time allows.

The introduction of medical examiners is part of a broader death certification, registration and coronial process. We are working closely across Government to ensure that from both a legislative and operational perspective we are supporting the professions involved so that they are prepared for the full introduction of the statutory system from April 2024.

[HCWS750]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Police-led Management of Registered Sex Offenders: Independent Review

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines):** The Home Office has today published a report outlining the findings and recommendations from the Independent Review of the Police's Management of Registered Sex Offenders ("the review") carried out by former chief constable of Derbyshire Constabulary, Mick Creedon.

Sexual offences are devastating crimes that can leave a long-lasting impact on victims. The UK already has one of the most robust systems in the world for managing registered sex offenders and individuals who pose a risk of sexual harm.

To ensure our system is as robust as it can be, we recently made a number of changes through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 to:

- enable the courts to impose positive obligations via sexual harm prevention orders (SHPO) or sexual risk orders (SRO) where appropriate, for example, requiring an individual to engage in a behaviour change programme;

- specify that the court should apply the lower civil standard of proof ("balance of probabilities") when determining whether the individual the application is made in respect of has done the act in question;

- remove the need for the police to seek a court order to place notification requirements on an individual convicted of an equivalent, relevant sexual offence in a foreign court. The requirement for a court order has been replaced with a power for the police to give a notice requiring the relevant offenders to notify when authorised by an officer of the rank inspector or above;

- confer a power on the Secretary of State to prepare (or direct a relevant person, such as the National Crime Agency (NCA), to prepare) a list of countries deemed to be at high risk of child sexual abuse by UK nationals or residents, which must be considered by applicants and the courts when applying for or making a SHPO or SRO for the purpose of protecting children outside the UK from sexual harm; and

- enable the enforceability across the UK of new SHPO and SROs.

The carrying out of the review was a commitment made in the Government's July 2021 tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy. On the 2 March 2022, the then Home Secretary announced that Mick Creedon would undertake the review. Its terms of reference stated that it would

"consider the consistency of the management of registered sex offenders across England and Wales and whether current capabilities to manage registered sex offenders are fit for purpose...and whether the regime protecting the public from them could be strengthened further".

The review considered evidence in relation to a number of factors, including:

- police resourcing;

- the consistency of offender management;

- information sharing;

- risk management tools and orders;

- risk assessment and prioritisation; and

- training.

Mr Creedon conducted extensive engagement throughout 2022 with a range of expert stakeholders representing the different functions of the police in respect of sexual offences and sex offender management. He also engaged with organisations responsible for setting and inspecting the police's standards, as well as representatives from other criminal justice agencies and civil society.

Mr Creedon is clear that in his view that the multi-agency approach to the assessment and management of the risks posed by registered sex offenders is the right approach. I echo the tribute that he pays to the dedication, commitment and professionalism of all those involved in the management of registered sex offenders: the police, other criminal justice agencies and those in the voluntary and charitable sector that work tirelessly with victims and survivors, as well as ex-offenders.

The version of the report being published today is an executive summary which does not include certain sensitive information. As the House will understand, it would not be appropriate to put information into the public domain that could potentially be of use to an offender seeking to circumvent the system designed to prevent their offending.

The full and unedited version of the report has been shared with relevant criminal justice agencies to which recommendations are addressed. I thank Mr Creedon for the energy and diligence that he has shown in his engagement and the analysis that underpins his recommendations.

Among Mr Creedon's most significant recommendations are those which propose changes to the notification requirements system. The notification requirements (often referred to as the "sex offenders register") have existed in some form since 1997 and require qualifying offenders to notify specific personal details to the police annually or whenever those details change. The notification requirements are a valuable tool in the risk management of registered sex offenders—any changes would require careful consideration to ensure that they contributed to making the sex offender management regime as strong as it can be.

I have met criminal justice agencies and other partners to have an initial discussion Mr Creedon's findings and recommendations. We will carefully consider the recommendations, ensuring that our focus continues to be that our system for managing sex offenders is robust as it can be.

A copy of the executive summary report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS747]

## NORTHERN IRELAND

### Northern Ireland Finances 2023-24

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** Despite the progress that has been made with the Windsor framework it is with considerable disappointment that I find it is necessary for me to once again step in and set a Budget for Northern Ireland for 2023-24. The challenging budget position means that Northern Ireland Departments need clarity on their budget allocations now to deliver a balanced budget. I will bring forward a Budget Bill in due course.

The context of setting the Northern Ireland Budget for 2023-24 has been very difficult.

With agreement from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, flexibility has been granted on the repayment of the £297 million overspend from the 2022-23 Budget. This will provide some protection to frontline public services in Northern Ireland from having to take the most severe reductions. However, difficult decisions remain in order to live within the funding available.

To support this, I am committing any future in-year Barnett consequential for 2023-24 to repaying the Reserve claim. Should this not amount to £297 million, I will work with HM Treasury to reallocate funding from previously announced Northern Ireland funding packages, with the residual to be repaid in 2024-25.

The UK Government have for many years recognised the unique challenges Northern Ireland faces. We have provided around £7 billion in additional funding to Northern Ireland since 2014, on top of the Barnett-based block grant. The Northern Ireland Budget per person is around 20% higher than equivalent UK Government spending in other parts of the UK. Yet the level of public services offered is still not affordable and outcomes are not improving. We need the Executive back so that they can progress much needed and long promised public service transformation.

#### *2023-24 Budget allocations*

I set out below the resource and capital allocations which I consider to be an appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland Departments.

In deciding these allocations I have engaged intensively with the Northern Ireland civil service. I am grateful to them for their engagement. I have also met with Sir Robert Chote, the chair of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, and I have received a range of representations from public groups and individuals.

#### *Non-ringfenced resource funding*

On the resource side, this Budget position delivers:

For health, this Budget provides £7.3 billion in funding. It also ringfences funding for abortion services, as ensuring availability of services is a statutory duty on me as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

For education, this Budget provides £2.6 billion in funding.

For justice, this Budget provides £1.2 billion in funding.

For economy, this Budget provides £772 million in funding, including £1.1 million for the public service obligation route from City of Derry Airport to London.

#### *Capital departmental expenditure limits*

For capital, this Budget provides continuing investment and enables key projects to progress. It also ensures sufficient funding to meet departmental capital commitments that can progress in the absence of an Executive.

#### *Revenue raising*

My Department has continued to work closely with the Northern Ireland Department of Finance on a sustainable and strategic approach to public finances, which includes options for revenue raising in line with the rest of the UK. The lower levels of revenue generation but higher public service provision in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK is unsustainable.

#### *Governance*

The Government must also ensure that Northern Ireland Departments can continue to operate. That is why the Government have today introduced the Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Bill to ensure ongoing governance in the short term, should Northern Ireland remain without Ministers beyond 5 June.

The Bill continues the powers already afforded to permanent secretaries in Northern Ireland Departments in the absence of an Executive. It also grants powers that will allow the UK Government to explore, with the Northern Ireland civil service, options for increasing budget sustainability including further revenue raising in Northern Ireland.

The right way for Northern Ireland to be governed is through locally accountable and elected Government. But we have a duty to the people of Northern Ireland and in managing public funds to ensure Northern Ireland's finances can be put on a sustainable path. That is why these powers are deliberately focused on official advice and public consultation. The final decisions for any

[HCWS745]

implementation are best taken by Northern Ireland's elected leaders. But we are taking these steps now to ensure that work progresses towards a more sustainable system in Northern Ireland that better reflects what is happening across the rest of the UK.

Attachments can be viewed online at:  
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-04-27/HCWS748/>

[HCWS748]

## PRIME MINISTER

### UK Covid-19 Inquiry

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** On 28 June 2022, the final terms of reference for the covid-19 inquiry were announced in this House. Baroness Hallett has emphasised that she is keen to start hearing evidence as quickly as possible and to make timely recommendations. To assist with this, and following careful consideration and consultation with Baroness Hallett, I have decided that the inquiry will be most efficient and swift if Baroness Hallett sits without a panel.

To help ensure that the inquiry has the expertise required for its broad scope, Baroness Hallett stated when she opened the inquiry that she would appoint scientific, economic and other experts to help her with her work, covering a range of different topics and views. The reports and advice Baroness Hallett receives from these experts will be entered into evidence and published by the inquiry.

Experts will play an important role in the inquiry but the pandemic has affected every one of us right across the United Kingdom. We have always been very clear that the inquiry must hear from those most affected by the pandemic, including those who have tragically lost their loved ones. The inquiry will be gathering views from the public in a number of different ways, including through a "listening exercise" which will enable individuals to contribute to the inquiry without the formality of giving evidence or attending a public hearing.

The Inquiries Act allows the independent inquiry chair to determine an inquiry's process and procedure. Baroness Hallett has considerable experience and expertise in leading complex investigations. She is putting in place mechanisms to enable the inquiry to gather the breadth of evidence and experiences needed to deliver its work effectively and efficiently, with the findings and recommendations published as soon as practicable.

I therefore believe that the inquiry will have access to a range of expertise which negates the need for a panel. For these reasons, and for those of pace, I have decided not to pursue a panel to sit alongside Baroness Hallett.

In weighing up these issues, I am conscious of the recent criticism over the length of time that the public inquiry may take to reach its conclusions. It is in the public interest that the inquiry is thorough, rigorous and comprehensive, but also delivers its report without excessive delay.

## TRANSPORT

### Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles: Driver Vetting

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden):** The Government recognise the important role that taxis and private hire vehicles play in the wider transport network. The Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Act 2022 applies in England and requires better information-sharing between taxi and private hire vehicle licensing authorities to ensure that unfit drivers cannot hide previous instances of misconduct.

The first part of the Act came into force on 31 May 2022 requiring licensing authorities to report safeguarding and road safety concerns about drivers licensed by other authorities to the licensing authority that issued the driver's licence. Licensing authorities that receive concerns about a driver it has licensed must then consider whether to suspend or revoke the driver's licence.

Since then, the Department has been working to put in place arrangements so that the rest of the Act could be brought into force. Licensing authorities will be required to use a database to record instances where taxi and private hire vehicle drivers have their licences removed, suspended or refused for misconduct. When deciding whether to grant or renew a driver licence, licensing authorities must search the database for any entry relating to the applicant.

I am pleased to announce that the Secretary of State has designated the National Anti-Fraud Network as the database provider under the Act. The National Anti-Fraud Network's voluntary database has been in use successfully for several years. Over 70% of licensing authorities in England are already using the database to vet their driver licence applicants.

From today, using the database is compulsory. The National Anti-Fraud Network will grant access to the database to all the relevant taxi and private hire vehicle licensing bodies in the UK. Government are covering the cost of administering this vital safeguarding database.

Requiring the use of the database across England will ensure that licensing authorities have more of the information they need to make the correct decisions, preventing drivers who could do harm getting a license elsewhere without being challenged. This change will help protect passengers, and the reputations of the vast majority of drivers, from those who are unfit to hold a licence.

This vital improvement to passenger safety builds on wider work this Government are doing to protect the public, with the commitment to prioritise prevention, support survivors, and strengthen the pursuit of those who abuse their position of trust. This includes the new grooming gangs taskforce that the Prime Minister announced to root out and put more perpetrators behind bars. We are also fundamentally transforming victims' experiences through the new Victims and Prisoners Bill, amplifying their voices and strengthening their care.

[HCWS746]



# Petition

*Thursday 27 April 2023*

## PRESENTED PETITION

*Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor*

### **Incorrect child maintenance assessments**

*The petition of Craig Bulman,*

Declares that many Non-Resident Parents (NRP's) Paying Parents (PP's) have been incorrectly assessed by the Child Support Agency (CSA)/Child Maintenance

Service (CMS); further that these incorrect assessments followed by wrongful enforcement has caused the NRP's/PP's loss harm and injury, financial loss and an impact on their mental health, further declares that there is no proper way to compensate the victims who have been affected.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urgently compensate those affected by incorrect child maintenance assessments.

[P002831]



# Ministerial Corrections

*Thursday 27 April 2023*

## SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

### Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill

*The following is an extract from Second Reading of the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill on 17 April 2023.*

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): ... May I take the Minister back to the subject of compliance costs? I understand that the projected simplification will result in a reduction in those costs, but does she acknowledge that a new regime, or changes to the current regime, will kick off an enormous retraining exercise for businesses, many of which have already been through that process recently and reached a settled state of understanding of how they should be managing data? Even a modest amount of tinkering instils a sense among British businesses, particularly small businesses, that they must put everyone back through the system, at enormous cost. Unless the Minister is very careful and very clear about the changes being made, she will create a whole new industry for the next two or three years, as every data controller in a small business—often doing this part time alongside their main job—has to be retrained.

**Julia Lopez:** We have been very cognisant of that risk in developing our proposals. As I said in my opening remarks, we do not wish to upset the apple cart and create a compliance headache for businesses, which would be entirely contrary to the aims of the Bill. A small business that is currently compliant with the GDPR will continue to be compliant under the new regime. However, we want to give businesses flexibility in regard to how they deliver that compliance, so that, for instance, they do not have to employ a data protection officer.

*[Official Report, 17 April 2023, Vol. 731, c. 70.]*

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure:*

An error has been identified in the speech I gave on Second Reading of the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill.

The correct statement should have been:

**Julia Lopez:** We have been very cognisant of that risk in developing our proposals. As I said in my opening remarks, we do not wish to upset the apple cart and create a compliance headache for businesses, which would be entirely contrary to the aims of the Bill. A small business that is currently compliant with the GDPR will continue to be compliant under the new regime, **except for a small number of minor new requirements, such as having a process for handling data protection complaints.** However, we want to give businesses flexibility in regard to how they deliver that compliance, so that, for instance, they do not have to employ a data protection officer.

## PRIME MINISTER

### Prime Minister's Questions

*The following is an extract from Prime Minister's questions on 26 April 2023:*

**Keir Starmer:** This is Mr 24 Tax Rises; I have never heard anything so out of touch as the answer that he has just given. It is not just about his refusal to take any responsibility for the damage the Conservatives have done through the crashed economy and the hit to living standards; it is also that he refuses to take the action that is needed. He could stop the handouts he is giving to oil and gas giants. He could scrap his beloved non-dom status. He could put that money back in the hands of working people and get the NHS back on its feet. That is what a Labour Government would do. Why doesn't he do it?

**The Prime Minister:** The record is clear. Look at it right now: record numbers of people in work, inequality lower, the number of people in poverty lower, and the lowest numbers on record for those in low pay.

*[Official Report, 26 April 2023, Vol. 731, c. 726.]*

*Letter of correction from the Prime Minister:*

An error has been identified in my response to the Leader of the Opposition.

The correct response should have been:

**The Prime Minister:** The record is clear. Look at it right now: **near record numbers** of people in work, inequality lower, the number of people in poverty lower, and the lowest numbers on record for those in low pay.





# ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 27 April 2023

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Thursday 27 April 2023

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**not later than  
Thursday 4 May 2023**

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Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.



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