

**Monday  
2 December 2024**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Monday 2 December 2024**

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# HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

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## OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE  
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND  
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF  
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 758

SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

### House of Commons

*Monday 2 December 2024*

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

#### PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

### Oral Answers to Questions

#### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

##### Social Housing Supply

1. **Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab):  
What steps her Department is taking to increase the  
supply of social housing. [901544]

2. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What  
steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of  
social housing. [901545]

6. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab):  
What steps her Department is taking to increase the  
supply of social housing. [901549]

16. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps  
her Department is taking to increase the supply of  
social housing. [901559]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** We will deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable housing in a generation. The last Government's affordable housing programme is expected to deliver only between 110,000 and 130,000 homes, although when it was published in 2020, the ambition was for 180,000. Labour is fixing that. The Chancellor announced in the Budget an immediate one-year cash injection of £500 million into the affordable homes programme to deliver 5,000 new social and affordable homes.

**Paulette Hamilton:** Many of my constituents in Birmingham Erdington are worried about the deteriorating quality of social housing. What work is being done to ensure that housing stock is maintained to the highest standards, so that tenants can live in the safe, high-quality housing that they deserve?

**Angela Rayner:** I know that housing quality has been a particular issue in my hon. Friend's constituency. All social housing tenants deserve to live in a safe, decent home. We will bring forward Awaab's law to the social rented sector, setting new time limits for social landlords to fix dangerous hazards. We will shortly consult on minimum energy efficiency standards and a new decent homes standard. We will direct the Regulator of Social Housing to introduce a new competence and conduct standard and an access to information requirement.

**Jessica Toale:** There are 2,151 families across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole on social housing waiting lists, many in unsuitable temporary accommodation. What steps is the Department taking to unlock development sites in densely packed constituencies like mine, so that the council can meet its housing targets, and families can get the safe and secure housing that they deserve?

**Angela Rayner:** We have consulted on changes to the national planning policy framework to maximise development on brownfield land, and we have invited views on proposals for a new brownfield passport, which will provide more explicit guidance on how the

potential of land in urban areas can be maximised. We intend to publish updates on the national planning policy framework by the end of this year.

**Douglas McAllister:** In Scotland, 242 people died while homeless last year. Those deaths are a travesty for our country and a damning symbol of Scottish Government failure. My local authority of West Dunbartonshire declared a housing emergency this year. Does the Secretary of State agree that as we head into winter, it is more urgent than ever that the Scottish National party Government finally take action, deliver a fair deal for councils, build more affordable social houses and offer every Scot a safe, secure home?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue; 242 people dying is absolutely horrendous. We face an acute housing crisis. While housing and homelessness are devolved, I urge our Scottish counterparts to grip this issue. I completely agree that he gives a damning example of the crisis in Scotland. Every single homeless death is a tragedy. That is why a sufficient supply of affordable housing and joined-up support services are essential, as we will make clear in our upcoming inter-ministerial meetings with our Scottish colleagues.

**Gregor Poynton:** I have another question on the SNP's failure on housing, because it is so bad. Scottish figures show that new build starts are falling in all sectors, and are at their lowest level since 2013. Private sector new builds are down 20% since 2022. For social housing, the figure is even worse: they are down by 30%. This is devastating the opportunity for families across my constituency to get a home of their own. The SNP has the largest funding settlement in devolution history. Will it use that to properly fund the social rented sector?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the housing crisis in Scotland, where too many families are waiting for too long for a safe and secure home. I completely back all the brilliant work that my friend the Scottish Labour leader is doing, and I know that the choice will be stark for people in Scotland in May 2026; it will be between a national Labour Government delivering for the working people of this country, and a clapped-out and failing SNP Government north of the border.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Given that the Secretary of State's avowed goal is to create more social housing, can she explain to the House why Labour-controlled Thanet district council is seeking to build a large housing estate on the outskirts of Birchington-on-Sea, on prime agricultural land? There is little demand for those houses, and little provision of social housing. Can she have a word with the leader of Thanet council?

**Angela Rayner:** In our new national planning policy framework, we have set out how we are protecting agricultural land, but we have also set out the fact that our country faces a housing crisis. I cannot believe that the right hon. Gentleman's constituency does not have a crisis, because it is everywhere.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): Over the last 10 years, under the previous Government, £500 million of taxpayers' money was handed out to second and holiday homeowners in Cornwall alone, while only half that amount was

spent on social housing for first-time need. Meanwhile, there is a massive backlog of shovel-ready social housing development that has planning permission and is ready to be delivered, but is caught by construction inflation. Surely the Government can add the dots to resolve the problem—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The houses could have been built by now.

**Angela Rayner:** I really hope so, Mr Speaker; that is the plan. We are taking steps through the new national planning policy framework, and we have new mandatory targets for local authorities. We have also allowed local authorities to keep their right to buy receipts. The Government are taking a number of measures to ensure that we get the homes that we so desperately need, and I am determined to get to that 1.5 million figure.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome the Secretary of State's warm words about improving affordable housing availability. Does she agree that the affordability of housing is closely related to the bills that people have to pay—energy bills in particular? Will she ensure that all new social housing from this stage forward is built to the highest possible standards of energy efficiency, to save people's bills?

**Angela Rayner:** Again, we have been looking at how we build safe, secure, energy-efficient homes that bring down people's energy bills. The previous Government saw energy bills go up really high. We are introducing Great British Energy so that we can bring bills down, and are building the homes that people desperately need.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): I am sure that the House agrees that affordable housing is important. However, my experience in Leicester South is that all too often it is provided in new developments, as homes for shared ownership or as similar housing products, which are out of reach for the poorest in my community. What my community really needs is more social rented houses. What is the Secretary of State doing to promote the construction of social rented homes, as opposed to other affordable housing products?

**Angela Rayner:** I agree with the hon. Member that we need more social homes. That is why we have been putting more into the affordable homes programme. We have made it absolutely clear that under section 106 notices, which he mentioned, homes need to be affordable; that is why we have put affordability tests in the NPPF. We want to ensure that people have those homes, and we want to build the next generation of council and social housing—and we will.

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

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): We can see that after just five months, the Government's target of 1.5 million new homes lies in tatters. The National Housing Federation says that the Government will miss their target by 475,000 without more grant—last week the Housing Minister said the same—and now Labour-run South Tyneside council says that the plans are “wholly unrealistic”, with other Labour councils agreeing. Is it not time for the Government to admit defeat, come back with a

deliverable plan and provide the sector with the certainty that it needs to deliver more social homes across the country?

**Angela Rayner:** The hon. Member has forgotten that his Government failed to meet their housing targets every single time. The Government are committed to building 1.5 million homes over this Parliament. Under the Tories, house building plummeted as they bowed to pressure from their Back Benchers to scrap local housing targets. We are bringing back mandatory housing targets. The Chancellor has put more money into the affordable homes programme, and we will build those homes. The hon. Member does not know my history and how I work.

### Planning Reform

3. **Louise Jones** (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on planning reform. [901546]

5. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What changes her Department is making to the national planning policy framework. [901548]

8. **Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on planning reform. [901551]

9. **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): What changes her Department is making to the national planning policy framework. [901552]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** As hon. Members will be aware, we consulted on proposed changes to the national planning policy framework and other changes to the planning system between 30 July and 24 September. My officials and I have been analysing the over 10,000 responses received, with a view to publishing a Government response before the end of the year. We also intend to bring forward the planning and infrastructure Bill, announced in the King's Speech, early next year.

**Louise Jones:** Many young families would love to live in my beautiful constituency of North East Derbyshire, but unfortunately we just do not have the housing for them. Could the Minister assure me that our planning reforms will enable us to get the right housing in the right places with the right amenities, to complement the beautiful constituency?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The Government are determined to increase rates of house building in order to address the housing crisis and boost economic growth, but we are equally committed to improving the quality and sustainability of the homes and neighbourhoods that are built during our period in office. In the aforementioned NPPF consultation, we proposed a series of changes to realise that ambition, including golden rules to ensure that development in the green belt is in the public interest, and a vision-led approach to transport planning.

**Mr Mohindra:** The dangerous proposed reforms to the NPPF are among the many things that the Labour Government have rushed through in the past five months.

How will those reforms ensure that villages such as Kings Langley, and South West Hertfordshire, retain their individual character and identity, and do not have their green spaces re-banded as grey belt, concreted over and absorbed into an ever-increasing Greater London?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We are not going to concrete over the green belt. The Government are committed to preserving the green belt, which has served England's towns and cities well over many decades, but we have to move away from the previous Government's approach to it, which was to allow land in it to regularly be released in a haphazard matter, often for speculative development that did not meet local housing need. This Government are committed to taking a smarter, more strategic approach to green-belt land designation and release, so that we can build more homes in the right places and secure additional public benefit through the operation of our golden rules.

**Josh MacAlister:** My constituency is fortunate enough to have a number of potential projects that are ripe for investment, including the Port of Workington and energy projects for new nuclear and other kinds of clean energy. They are essential projects for economic growth, but to get them going we need major planning reform, not just for housing but for infrastructure projects. Does the Minister agree on the urgent need for planning reform for infrastructure, and that any legislation that we bring forward must be comprehensive, so that we can remove all the obstacles that stand between us and getting building?

**Matthew Pennycook:** It will not surprise my hon. Friend to hear that I wholeheartedly agree. The delivery of critical national infrastructure is essential for economic growth, accelerating the UK's efforts towards clean power by 2030, and energy independence. The Bill in question will include old measures to streamline the delivery of infrastructure and new homes. Furthermore, our forthcoming 10-year infrastructure strategy will provide a strategic road map for how we plan for future needs and support our commitment by making timely decisions on national infrastructure.

**Dr Evans:** Under the housing targets, Hinckley and Bosworth will see a 59% increase in housing. North West Leicestershire will see it go up by 74%, but Leicester city, where there is brownfield and infrastructure, will see it fall by 31%. That is compounded by the fact that the Liberal Democrat-run borough council in Hinckley and Bosworth does not have an up-to-date local plan. Given that there is speculative development in Hinckley and Bosworth, will the Minister consider strengthening neighbourhood plans? We know that they deliver more housing, provide protections for people locally and have buy-in from communities, yet the council suffers without an up-to-date one.

**Matthew Pennycook:** The hon. Gentleman will know that we are leaving in place the protections on neighbourhood planning. He is mistaken if he is suggesting that we are skewing development towards rural areas. The proposed standard method, which we consulted on, significantly boosts expectations across city regions. Indeed, across mayoral combined authority areas, it would see targets grow by more than 30%. Local plans



are the best way for communities to control development in their areas. I am sure that he will agree that Hinckley and Bosworth borough council needs an up-to-date local plan in place. Perhaps he can work with me to ensure that that is the case.

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

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Ministers briefed the media over a week ago about plans for local government reorganisation and devolution. When do the Government plan to set them before the House, so that Members representing areas across the country can take a view?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I am not sure how that relates to planning reform, which is the subject of the question, but my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government will set out in due course how our plans for devolution will be taken forward.

**David Simmonds:** Apologies if there is confusion; I was expecting to come in on question 4. *[Interruption.]* I am glad to hear it.

Many areas of the country stand to lose millions of pounds from the scrapping of the rural services grant—one of many local government funding streams that are expected to change. When will our councils, and this House, know the full impact of the financial changes, so that any reorganisation, devolution, or changes to local plans and other council strategies can be delivered with full knowledge of the impact that the changes will have on councils' on the ability to lead locally?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Full details of the provisional settlement will be set out in the coming weeks.

#### **Devolution Agreements: Somerset**

4. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What discussions she has had with local government representatives on potential future devolution agreements in Somerset. [901547]

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** In July, the Deputy Prime Minister invited places without a devolution agreement, including Somerset, to come forward with proposals for their area, in order to gauge the approaches and forms being considered across the country. We welcome Somerset's support for this initiative, and look forward to hearing its views on the imminent White Paper on English devolution, which will be released shortly.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** My constituents have had to endure the Liberal Democrats presiding over the transition from two levels of council, which worked—they balanced their books—to a unitary council that is on the brink of bankruptcy. Can the Minister assure the House that no new council reforms will be forced on unwilling areas, and that local opinion will be at the forefront of his decision?

**Jim McMahon:** I think we have all had to endure Liberal Democrats, so I can reflect on that. We are in constant dialogue with local councils on our twin-pronged approach. One prong is devolution and making sure that we push power out of this place and into local communities. The other is reorganisation in cases where

councils recognise that it delivers more effective and efficient local government. The Department is keen to hear the conversations that local areas are having on that.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I hope that you will endure us, Mr Speaker. Dorset council, which covers half my constituency, has agreed to work with Somerset and Wiltshire—all unitary councils—on a devolution arrangement, but residents are already raising concerns that top-down reorganisation will take decisions further away from their homes and communities. They are worried about what a mayoral combined authority might do to them. What assurances can the Minister give that the town and parish councils, on which residents rely so heavily, will not be expected to keep unitary councils afloat, and that my residents will not see back-door council tax rises as a result of the changes?

**Jim McMahon:** Central Government have said to local government that we want to reset the relationship and work as partners in power, and it is not unreasonable to expect that councils will do the same at a local level and will work together in partnership. We see that across the country: local councils work in partnership with their parish and town councils in the interests of their community. Whether or not reorganisation takes place, we expect that to continue.

#### **Homelessness Reduction**

7. **Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support councils in reducing homelessness. [901550]

13. **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab) [R]: What progress her Department has made on ending rough sleeping. [901556]

21. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support councils in reducing homelessness. [901564]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** We are taking action to tackle the root causes of homelessness. Funding for homelessness services is increasing next year by £233 million, taking the total spend to almost £1 billion in 2025-26. We are also abolishing no-fault evictions and will deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation.

**Chris Webb:** Over the past two years, we have witnessed a staggering 50% increase in homelessness in Blackpool, underlining the urgent need for support in our communities. Blackpool's homelessness partnership, through which the council works with the third sector and local charities, has done outstanding work to prevent homelessness, but we need more support. What steps will the Minister take to support and strengthen local efforts to ensure immediate relief and long-term solutions for some of the most vulnerable in our society?

**Rushanara Ali:** This Government have already made £10 million of additional funding available to local authorities, including Blackpool, to tackle rough sleeping pressures this winter, and we are developing a long-term, cross-departmental strategy. The £547 million rough sleeping initiative will continue to support local authorities across England by funding tailored rough sleeping services, which includes funding of £313,000 for Blackpool borough council in 2024-25.

**Steve Race:** As a result of the Localism Act 2011, introduced by the Conservative party, the ringfence around homelessness funding was removed. Due to that, and despite the good work that the Government are doing on funding homelessness services, Tory-led Devon county council is consulting on cutting its entire homelessness support budget, which would have a devastating impact on people and on the city of Exeter. Does the Minister agree that councils should really invest that money in homelessness services and not squirrel it away in other pots across the council?

**Rushanara Ali:** We are absolutely focused on tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, and their root causes. The previous Government left local authorities in a dire condition. The autumn Budget announced £4 billion of additional funding for local authorities and services, and funding for homelessness services is increasing next year, but I will look into the points my hon. Friend raises. We are determined that wherever people live they are protected from the risk of homelessness and rough sleeping.

**Warinder Juss:** Although in my constituency we have the City of Wolverhampton council's homelessness prevention strategy, which has had some success in tackling homelessness, last week I was contacted by a constituent fleeing domestic violence and finding it difficult to get permanent social housing for herself and her daughter. Crisis, the national homelessness charity, reports a 15% increase in children living in temporary accommodation—the highest on record—and we know that issues such as substance misuse and lack of proper employment also cause homelessness. Will the Minister please confirm how her Department is helping councils to deal with the societal and economic issues that can cause homelessness?

**Rushanara Ali:** My hon. Friend raises really important issues about how multiple underlying causes can drive people into homelessness. We are determined to tackle the root causes, which is why the Deputy Prime Minister is chairing the inter-departmental taskforce on homelessness and rough sleeping. The previous Labour Government took action, and cut homelessness and rough sleeping. We are determined to ensure that we tackle the underlying issues, which means reforming the supported housing that victims of domestic violence need and ensuring that local government works with mayors and national Government to tackle these issues. We are absolutely committed to doing that.

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** Wokingham borough council is under intense financial pressure, making the crucial task of reducing homelessness a significant challenge. Initial estimates are that the Budget's new funding for local government will be more than swallowed up by cost increases in employers' national insurance contributions and the national minimum wage, let alone the ever-growing

demand for statutory services. Will the Minister meet me and the leader and chief executive of our council, so we can discuss the future of its finances and what we can do to reduce homelessness?

**Rushanara Ali:** I am aware that the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), has already met the hon. Gentleman, but I am happy to look at the specific issues he raises in relation to homelessness. To reassure him, we are working across Government on these very issues, looking at how different agendas can be brought together to tackle the deep-rooted issues affecting homelessness and rough sleeping, and how best we can support local areas. I look forward to engaging Members from across the House as we develop that very important cross-departmental strategy to tackle the deep-rooted causes of homelessness and rough sleeping.

**Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD):** Rural homelessness has risen by 40% in just the last five years. In our communities, that is massively fed by the fact that average house prices are about 12 times above local incomes, as well as insufficient local housing. Does the Minister agree that we need to give planning powers to local authorities and national parks, so that they can designate exclusively for social rented housing and developments that therefore cannot be used for expensive housing for which, frankly, there is no need?

**Rushanara Ali:** As I said, we have an ambitious plan for affordable and social housing, which fits within the Government's commitment to build 1.5 million homes. It is vital to make supply available. We are putting in funding, including £500 million for the affordable homes programme, which will build 5,000 properties. The hon. Gentleman is aware of the work we are doing to ensure that there is a proper and effective national planning framework to go hand in hand with local work with local authorities. I hope he can see that we are very much working in the spirit of ensuring that we increase supply, provide affordable and social housing, and tackle the root causes that need to be addressed.

**Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD):** Some 18,000 homes with planning permission across Somerset are waiting to be built, but nutrient neutrality issues, flood risk and the national shortage of planners are preventing or delaying the delivery of those much-needed homes. What discussions has the Minister had with Cabinet colleagues about fixing the issue and ensuring that appropriate homes are built to help reduce the strain caused by the lack of housing in Somerset?

**Rushanara Ali:** I can reassure the hon Lady that the Government are addressing those issues and will take appropriate action. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and other Ministers are very much engaged with this important agenda.

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

**Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con):** Sadly, homelessness is projected to rise by 27% this year. The Government's broken promise on national insurance rises has wreaked havoc across the charitable sector, with 110 national

homelessness charities warning the Chancellor that £50 million to £60 million will be lost in the sector and Homeless Link calling the increase

“the final nail in the coffin”

for the sector. Will the Minister listen to that warning, and what will she be doing to convey these concerns to the Chancellor and change this disastrous policy?

**Rushanara Ali:** I welcome the shadow Minister to his position. May I remind him of the record of his party in government? In those 14 years, 123,000 households, including 150,000 children, were living in temporary accommodation—not to mention the scandal of rough sleeping and the deaths caused by that Government’s neglect. We are investing to tackle those issues and the mess that the hon. Gentleman’s party left behind. We have already announced £233 million in the Budget; Conservative Members need to decide whether to back us on the investment we are making to clean up the mess that he and they have left behind.

### Departmental Office Closures

10. **Mary Glendon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): What consultation her Department has undertaken with staff on the decision to close six offices. [901553]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** My Department has set a workforce and location strategy that proposes to retain 16 of the existing 22 departmental offices. This will result in six offices closing over the next two years. Staff engagement on the announcement is ongoing, and consultation on implementing the strategy is beginning this month. My Department will continue to engage with the trade unions and consult with them before the office closure proposals are finalised and implemented. The Department will not make any compulsory redundancies and will continue to help the colleagues and staff affected to work effectively in their roles.

**Mary Glendon:** There has been a drive across Government Departments to increase the number of hours that civil servants spend working in the office, but the proposed closure in Newcastle means that staff working and living in the area who cannot work from home will face a 40-mile commute to the office in Darlington. Can the Secretary of State assure me that there will be an equality impact assessment before any decision is made, to ensure that the needs of those with protected characteristics and caring responsibilities are fully considered?

**Angela Rayner:** As my hon. Friend knows, I am a big advocate of flexible working and making sure that we support our colleagues. The Department prepared an initial equality impact assessment in advance of the announcement of the location strategy, which will be developed during the consultation with the staff and the trade unions to inform the mitigations that will support the staff who are affected.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Many of us fought very hard to ensure that the Department had a location in the city of Wolverhampton, and I think that all of us, on both

sides of the House, recognise how important it is to get civil servants out of London and right across the country. How is the Secretary of State looking at developing and growing the base in Wolverhampton as part of her wider strategy?

**Angela Rayner:** The strategy will create a more coherent office estate that enables stronger office communities and transparent career pathways for progression, and we will continue to be represented across each of the regions and nations of the United Kingdom.

### Leasehold Reform

11. **Damien Egan** (Bristol North East) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [901554]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** For far too many leaseholders, the reality of home ownership has fallen woefully short of the dream. Over the course of this Parliament, the Government are determined to honour the commitments made in our manifesto and to do what is necessary to finally bring the feudal leasehold system to an end. On 21 November, I made a written ministerial statement to update the House on the steps that the Government intend to take to implement the reforms to the leasehold system that are already in statue, and to progress the wider set of reforms that are necessary to end the system for good.

**Damien Egan:** I recently met people living on the redeveloped Blackberry Hill hospital site in Fishponds, and they told me about the excessive and unfair leasehold charges that they face from their property management company, FirstPort. What assurances can the Minister provide that this Government will, once and for all, free people from the leaseholder system and end the rip-off fees?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Government are acutely aware that far too many leaseholders across the country are routinely subject to unjustified permissions and administration fees, unreasonable or extortionate charges, and onerous conditions that are imposed with little or no consultation. That is not what home ownership should entail, and it is why we must bring the system to an end in this Parliament. As I set out in the written ministerial statement to which I referred earlier, the Government will act to protect leaseholders from abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents, such as the ones my hon. Friend mentioned, by strengthening regulation in this area.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): May I thank the Minister for the answers that he has given me in this Chamber, and in a written answer at the end of October, on the plight of leaseholders who have extra apartment levels grafted on above the blocks in which they live? I appreciate that he does not want to alter the planning presumption in favour of granting permission to build add-on extra levels, but will he at least consider outlawing any attempt by freeholders to pass on the cost of botched extensions to the poor old leaseholders, who have suffered enough by having such extensions built over their heads in the first place?



**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He will recognise—I know he does—that those types of developments are the result of the expansion of permitted development rights that was taken forward after 2013. There are issues with the quality of some of the works that have come through that stream. On the specific issue he raises, perhaps it might be a good idea if we sat down together. I will happily discuss with him how we can protect leaseholders from those types of variable service charge increases.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** Battersea is home to a large number of leaseholders, many of whom have had to face astronomically high service charges from what we all know are unscrupulous management agents. I am very pleased that this Government will protect leaseholders, given that the last Government failed to do so, but is the Minister willing to meet me and some of my leaseholders so that he can share Labour's plans to protect them?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I am more than happy to sit down with her, or to join a call or meeting with leaseholders in her constituency, in order to discuss the Government's plans to end the system in this Parliament. We fully appreciate the wish of leaseholders across the country for us to act with speed. As the ministerial statement sets out, we also have got to balance that with the need to get these reforms right. The serious and specific flaws that were left to us by the previous Government in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 are a warning about what happens when reform in this area is not done properly.

**Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con):** I welcome the Government's commitment to continue our work to address issues with the current leasehold system. However, where we are building new towns, such as Sherford in my constituency, residents, like others in new builds, face council tax and service charges, with no likelihood of that changing. What plans does the Minister have to address the impact of service charges in new towns as part of leasehold reform?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I think the hon. Lady is referring to the pressures placed on residential freeholders as a result of some of the management estate charges that come through that route. There are provisions in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act to provide residential freeholders with additional protections, and we need to bring those measures into force. We also then need to look more widely at how we reduce the prevalence of private and mixed-tenure housing estates, which are the fundamental root of the problem.

### Devolution: Local Communities

12. **Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps she is taking to further devolve powers to local communities. [901555]

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** The English devolution White Paper, due by the end of the year, sets out how we will transfer power from Westminster to people who know their areas best. The White Paper will also announce measures that will give local places and communities greater control over shaping their area.

**Emma Foody:** Libraries, pubs, football, community centres—these are the things that make up a community, but in so many places they have vanished over the last 14 years. I am delighted to hear plans of a community right to buy. What work are the Government doing to ensure that local authorities and community groups have the guidance and expertise needed to utilise this powerful new right once it is realised?

**Jim McMahon:** In there is the point about devolution and localism: structures matter and the framework matters, but in the end it is about getting the power out to the communities who have skin in the game. That is why we want to ensure that the community right to buy provides an effective means for communities across the country to take ownership of assets that are important to them. We are considering what further support and guidance we will provide to communities and local authorities to support them in this measure, and I know that the Minister for local growth, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), is fully engaged in this endeavour.

**Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD):** Many of my constituents would welcome further powers being devolved to their local communities. They are as keen as mustard to see the right homes in the right places, particularly social housing, but one of the things stopping social housing being delivered is the viability calculations that are undertaken by developers, who use them to say that only expensive houses can be built. Are the Government looking at reviewing the use of viability calculations?

**Jim McMahon:** That is some way from community ownership, but the devolution White Paper is one of a number of measures that we are taking and it will have a clear community strand. This does not sit in isolation, however; it is part of the wider reforms that are taking place to ensure that communities, local authorities and Government work in partnership.

### Community Ownership of Local Assets

14. **Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to support community ownership of local assets. [901557]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** The community ownership fund has empowered community groups across the UK to take long-term, sustainable ownership of assets that benefit their local community, and I know that colleagues across the House are eagerly awaiting further news on round 4 of the community ownership fund, which will be with them in due course. Beyond this, through the English Devolution Bill, we will introduce a strong new right to buy for valued community assets, which will help local people to acquire valued community spaces when they come up for sale, keeping them in the hands of the local community.

**Naushabah Khan:** I recently met the friends of the Flying Saucer pub, a community group in my constituency who are working to bring this asset of community value back into local hands. Will the Minister assure my constituents that the Government are committed to supporting the retention of community assets such as

this, and will he agree to meet me to discuss the Flying Saucer campaign and the broader challenges that communities face in reclaiming and retaining such assets?

**Alex Norris:** Now then, Mr Speaker, you know there is no greater enthusiast in this place for a local pub than me—[*Interruption.*] And indeed for flying saucers. These are exactly the types of assets of community value we are talking about, and exactly the sorts of assets that will be in the scope of the new community right to buy. Of course I would be keen to meet my hon. Friend and the campaigners on that issue.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): East Devon District Council has declared Seaton hospital an asset of community value and is awaiting news of round 4 of the community ownership fund to see whether we might get funding from that source. In the meantime, NHS Property Services might be seeking to remove part of that hospital. Can the Minister ask his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to prevent that?

**Alex Norris:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question, although I am sad to hear it. The asset of community value status really ought to give a degree of protection, but I am happy to talk about that further. As I have said, round 4 of the community ownership fund will be coming forward very shortly.

### Social Housing: Service Charges

15. **Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of service charges on residents in social housing. [901558]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** The Government recognise the considerable financial strain that rising service charges are placing on leaseholders, including those whose landlord is a social housing provider. As the hon. Gentleman will know, variable service charges must, by law, be reasonable. Their reasonableness can already be challenged at the appropriate tribunal and the housing ombudsman can investigate complaints about the fairness of service charges made by shared owners, as well as tenants of social housing landlords, but the Government are exploring what more can be done to give leaseholders the protection that they need from unaffordable service charge increases.

**Mr Kohler:** Many leaseholders in my constituency live in properties where Clarion housing association is the freeholder. This year's service charge is on average almost 50% higher than the original estimate and for some on the High Path estate it is over £1,000 more. Does the Minister agree that leaseholders deserve transparency, not shock bills? What more can be done to give the housing ombudsman the power to demand compensation payments?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that supplementary question and assure him that I share his deep concern about the pressure on the household budgets of shared owners in his constituency, and others across the country, as a result of rising variable service charges. In addition to the routes to redress I have just set out, I draw his and the House's attention to the

measures in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 that are designed to drive up the transparency of service charges to make them more easily challengeable if leaseholders consider them unreasonable. Further detail about our plan to bring those and other provisions in the Act into force can be found in the written ministerial statement made on 21 November.

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): As the Minister will know, social housing providers and councils operate within a regulated service charge regime that does not allow them to make a profit, and the Housing Ombudsman Service is there for any complaints. Will the Minister consider bringing in a similar regime for the private sector?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I have set out the routes to redress that are already available and our intention to switch on the measures in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act, but I am more than happy to sit down and have a conversation with my hon. Friend about what more protection leaseholders in this space require.

### Local Growth Funding Allocation

17. **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to allocate local growth funding according to need. [901560]

18. **Gill German** (Clwyd North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to allocate local growth funding according to need. [901561]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** We are intent on moving towards allocated, multi-year funding settlements targeted at need. We will set out this refreshed vision for local growth funding in the multi-year spending review, working with local leaders to drive growth in the areas that need it most, and ending the plethora of competitive pots.

**Rachel Taylor:** I am very pleased to hear the Minister's reply. The last Government wasted local authorities' time and money by making them bid for handouts from central Government. In North Warwickshire, so much time was spent preparing numerous bids for the new swimming pool and leisure centre that our community desperately needed, only for vital funds to go to places without such high levels of need. Under this Labour Government, will the Minister ensure that local authorities receive the fair funding they require to deliver the local services they know their communities need?

**Alex Norris:** My hon. Friend makes an important point about the harm done by that "beauty parade" funding model, which was inefficient and created so much disappointment. What follows will be much better.

**Gill German:** Seaside towns such as Rhyl and Colwyn Bay in my constituency have much in common with our north-west neighbours. The 2019 "Future of Seaside Towns" report highlights the need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, while recognising common issues. How do the Government plan to use national funding streams while ensuring local delivery to deliver long-term growth in our seaside towns?



**Alex Norris:** That is another important argument for why we need longer-term, allocative settlements. It is my hon. Friend, her local authority, her local residents and her community who know Rhyl. They are the experts, and they should have the flexibility to break the one-size-fits-all model to make things work for themselves.

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I declare an interest as a Stratford-on-Avon district councillor. Does the Minister agree that, in two-tier local government areas, district and borough councils are best placed as the most local form of government to allocate funds from the UK shared prosperity fund, given their proximity to communities and their deep understanding of local needs?

**Alex Norris:** The hon. Lady tempts me to discuss the shared prosperity funding, which communities will receive shortly. I have to say that my enthusiasm is for all tiers of government in local areas—whether that is metro mayors, upper-tier authorities, boroughs and districts or indeed parish and town councils—to come together in shared interest to improve their communities.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers; it is always good to hear some positivity. We in Northern Ireland are still waiting on shared prosperity funding. There would be some benefits for my constituency; Strangford has coastal issues such as seaside improvement and coastal erosion. Has the Minister had an opportunity to talk to the relevant department in Northern Ireland to see how central Government could help us back home?

**Alex Norris:** I am always careful not to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, given that at the High Street Heroes awards for Retail NI last year, I awarded the winning high street to Ballymena rather than Newtownards, and I am not sure he is ever going to forgive me. I assure him that I am having conversations with ministerial counterparts in the Northern Ireland Executive. We are also talking to local authorities and some of the groups that have been delivering projects, such as Go Succeed. Those conversations are ongoing as we speak, and the full answer about the allocations will be coming shortly.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901569] **Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** Today I published our remediation acceleration plan, a step change in our response to the building safety crisis. Without decisive action, the risks and the hardship of unsafe cladding could be with us until 2040. That cannot go on. The plan sets out how we will fix buildings faster, identify remaining buildings that are still at risk and ensure residents are supported through the remediation process.

**Mr Charters:** I recently heard from a constituent with three young children who has applied for over 80 properties, but is still waiting for social housing. What steps will my right hon. Friend take to speed up the planning process specifically for social housing?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the need for more social housing. We have committed to delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, and I have proposed changes to the national planning policy framework to support that. We have also announced additional funding for the affordable homes programme.

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

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): At whose request did the Secretary of State call in the planning application for the Chinese super-embassy?

**Angela Rayner:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. Despite him being on the Opposition Benches, we seem to have a lot in common: we both came to Parliament in the 2015 intake, represent constituencies in the north and think the Tories deserved to lose the last general election. We take planning decisions in the normal way.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I used to have ginger hair as well! May I give the right hon. Lady the answer to my question? It was the Foreign Secretary. In opposition, the now Home Secretary warned that the Chinese Government are “attempting to influence Parliament”, and trying “to interfere in our democracy and undermine our security.”—[*Official Report*, 11 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 667.]

Those risks are all heightened by this development. Are this Government so desperate to counteract the disastrous Budget and their own growth-wrecking trade union Bill that they are now willing to override national security, national interests and the sensible concerns of their Home Secretary by kowtowing to the Chinese Government?

**Angela Rayner:** We have got record investment into the UK through our international business summit. I am proud of our Employment Rights Bill, which is pro-worker and pro-employer. It will reward good employers and put money back into the high street. This Government take national security very seriously and will continue to do so.

T2. [901570] **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Given that the mayoral council and leaders' councils are being contemplated as part of the English devolution Bill, what steps is the Deputy Prime Minister taking to ensure that Cornwall's voice is heard in Westminster, after being subsumed for far too long?

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** It was a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues to talk about devolution in Cornwall. He will know that we have agreed to a non-mayoral devolution deal for Cornwall as a first step. We recognise the distinct culture, history and identity of the Cornish people. This important step will allow us to unlock deeper devolution in Cornwall and, in time, we hope it will allow Cornwall to take its seat at the Council of the Nations and Regions.

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

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent, Dom, purchased a high-rise building that, it now transpires, does not meet building regulations on combustible materials used in the early 2000s. His building

is being remediated, but the materials are being allowed to remain, locking in the risk for the long term and sending insurance premiums sky high. Why are the Government not investigating historic non-compliance? What is being done to protect homeowners from unfair losses and sky-high insurance premiums?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** We are clear that dangerous buildings need to be remediated. That is why the best thing that any building owner can do is get into a scheme today to unlock the funding and meet those duties they have as building owners. When they do that and when they are approved for the grant, they would have an inspection at that point, so I am surprised to hear that dangerous defects would be locked in, as the hon. Lady says, but I am interested in having a conversation with her to understand that further.

T3. [901571] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): A block of 50 flats in my constituency was built by the public sector 60 years ago and has now been found to have a major structural fault that will cost over £1 million to fix. The flat owners are also shared freeholders of the block and cannot afford the cost of the repair or to sell their flats. As it is an unusual situation, will the Minister meet me and the resident owners to consider a way forward before the situation gets critical?

**Alex Norris:** Yes, of course. The issue of cladding defects is exceptionally important and, indeed, the subject of a debate later today, but so are non-cladding defects and protecting leaseholders from their impacts.

T5. [901573] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Given that the Government are already doing another relaunch, would the Secretary of State reconsider the fairness of housing targets, whereby poor delivery by Labour in London is awarded with lower targets to the detriment of areas such as South West Hertfordshire?

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not hear my previous response. The proposed new standard method, which we consulted on, significantly boosts expectations across our city regions. In mayoral combined authority areas, it would see targets grow by more than 30%, matching the ambition of our local leaders.

T4. [901572] **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): The Government are consulting on the future of pan-regional partnerships such as our own Great South-West, which covers Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset. Businesses I speak to value the ability of our regions to speak with one voice on economic issues to Government and to investors, which are important for our region. Would the Minister meet me and businesses to discuss the future of PRPs?

**Jim McMahon:** I thank my hon. Friend for taking the time to meet me to talk about devolution and growth in that region. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that growth is felt in every part of the country, and that requires partnership from central Government, local government and the business community. I would be more than happy to meet him to talk about how we can do that going forward.

T8. [901576] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): In July, overseas voters—British nationals—were able to vote for Members of Parliament in this House, but in the absence of overseas constituencies, too many are being told that the MP of their last address cannot represent them because of the rules about Members representing only constituents. Can we get a letter out to all MPs providing clarity on the issue?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** The hon. Member will be aware that the Electoral Commission has published a report on the general election, and we will consider its findings and will come back in due course on this matter and others.

T6. [901574] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The overheated housing market in York is being fuelled by the 2,193 short-term holiday lets in the city. I have a private Member's Bill on the subject, so will the Minister work with me as I co-produce the Bill to address this problem in York?

**Matthew Pennycook:** My hon. Friend and I have discussed this matter many times. She is well aware of the Government's approach to tackling excessive concentrations of short-term lets and second homes. I am of course more than happy to discuss the issue with her again in the future.

**Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Most parties in this House, representing a collective total of 500 MPs, agree that first past the post is damaging trust in politics, and 64% of the public would like to see change. Does the Secretary of State agree that a national commission for electoral reform could address that, as recommended by the all-party parliamentary group?

**Angela Rayner:** No.

T7. [901575] **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): After 14 years of cuts to local government, we see the consequences across council areas, including to my council of Medway, which suffered a 91% cut in direct support grants, coupled with a financial inheritance that according to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy was "grave". Will the Minister agree to meet me and Medway council colleagues and finance officers to discuss the support available after 14 years of austerity cuts by the Conservatives?

**Jim McMahon:** We are working constructively with Medway council as part of our framework to support councils in the most difficulty. This Government are clear that the process will be collaborative and supportive and, on that basis, we are more than happy to meet to discuss it further.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): Councils up and down the land, but particularly in the south-east of England, are frustrated by the high levels of undeveloped consents. It is perfectly possible that the Secretary of State will find that, come the next election, her target has been consented but is nowhere near built. Will she consider allowing councils to have a 10-year housing

supply number that includes undeveloped consents, so that when the number is reached, developers have no choice but to build?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We took steps, in the proposed reforms to the consultation on the national planning policy framework, to encourage build-out—not least through encouraging mixed-use development. However, we are reflecting on what more can be done to encourage that and to ensure that sites are built out in a timely manner.

T9. [901578] **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I have a constituent—a young, pregnant woman—who was recently released from hospital and housed in a local hotel that was contracted to house the homeless. She was petrified from the first night. She slept badly because men were banging on her door all night, and she was surrounded by drug use. She felt safer sleeping rough on the second night. Too many of my vulnerable constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South are being housed in accommodation that does not cater to their complex needs. Will the Minister update the House on his work to end the practice of shifting homeless constituents from one area to another to be housed in totally inappropriate—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry, but I have to get everybody in. It is not just about your question.

**Rushanara Ali:** I am very sorry to hear about the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent. I refer to my previous comments; I am very happy to meet and engage with her on her work to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): If Wiltshire embraces the opportunity to join Dorset and Somerset in an elected mayoral authority, will there be local elections all-out in Wiltshire next spring?

**Jim McMahon:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question on devolution. We are absolutely ready to talk to any areas that are keen to take on devolution, particularly a mayoral combined authority. Any decisions on whether elections do or do not take place will be part of future consideration.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of the deadlines. However, the National Audit Office report published last month shows that the majority of buildings affected by cladding have not been identified. Will the Secretary of State go further by delivering a more joined-up approach, so that we can identify and remediate those properties as soon as possible?

**Alex Norris:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for that question. It will probably not surprise her to hear that the first question I asked when I became Minister with responsibility for building safety was, "How many buildings need remediating?" I do not think that it will surprise her or colleagues to hear how astonished I was to find out that between 4,000 and 7,000 buildings were

unidentified after seven years—which shows the previous Government's intent. We are going to identify them, work out what their risks are and get them remediated.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitments, in response to my written parliamentary questions, to a consultation on ending fleecehold. However, my constituents in Markhams Close and across Basildon and Billericay just want to know when that will take place.

**Matthew Pennycook:** As I set out in response to a previous question, we will consult on how to end the prevalence of new fleecehold estates, and we will, in the short term, ensure that residents on existing estates have the protections they need against unfair management charges.

**Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I am delighted that the Government's Mayoral Council is handing back powers to local communities. We are already seeing the impact of that. Claire Ward, the Mayor of the east midlands, attended the first meeting in October. She is leading the way: the east midlands is one of the youth trailblazer regions granted £5 million of Government funding to help young people into work or training. What work are Ministers doing to give those who contribute to our country a say in how it is governed?

**Jim McMahon:** The forthcoming English devolution White Paper will set out clearly our top-to-bottom redistribution of power, and how we include and engage people at a local level to ensure that they can actively participate in the development of their areas.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): There is growing concern among constituents that planning decisions are being swept aside because of the Government's new planning reforms. What assurance can the Minister give that there will be meaningful engagement between constituents and their local planning authority, and that decisions will be respected?

**Matthew Pennycook:** As I have said, the best way to shape development in any given area is to have an up-to-date local plan in place. Where such plans are not in place, local authorities leave themselves open to the presumption in favour of sustainable development, and to development via appeal, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to ensure that his local authority has an up-to-date plan in place. That is the best way for residents to have control. We want more resident engagement upstream in those local plans.

**Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): In five years, the cost of West Sussex county council's Oracle upgrade has risen from £2.6 million to £28 million. Is that the kind of contract mismanagement that the Office for Local Government can look into?

**Jim McMahon:** We are currently in the process of reviewing oversight, accountability, and checks and balances to make sure that they are in place and fit for purpose, and that the early warning system works. More detail on that will follow in the English devolution White Paper before Christmas.



**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Labour's housing targets desperately need reform to take into account land availability around protected landscapes. The Government have said that the answer is the costly planning appeals system. Does the Minister think that is a good use of taxpayers' money?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Local plans have to go through examination for a determination of whether they are sound. Hard constraints, such as the type that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, will be taken into account when those plans are tested, even under the new framework.

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): The Government's commitment to build more affordable homes is both welcome and urgent. However, we also need to ensure that registered providers are willing and able to take on section 106 affordable homes when they are built. In recent years, a combination of factors has meant that too many homes stand empty. Will my hon. Friend say what steps can be taken to tackle the section 106 standing stock scandal?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We recognise that this is a growing problem across the country that is having a severe impact on affordable housing supply. My hon. Friend will not have to wait long to find out what the Government propose to do to bear down on this problem.

**Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): The proposed planning reforms mean that towns such as Tring will see up to 40% more housing built on the green belt. What assurances can the Minister give that sacrificing that countryside will not have a negative impact on the community, and that we will have infrastructure before the occupation of homes and truly affordable homes for people in the local community?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We want to put in place a planning system that is geared towards meeting housing need in full. That is a clear difference between us and the Conservative party. In bringing forward its local plan and looking at development, every local area should look first at densification—that is, what it can do on brownfield land. It should only have to review green-belt land if it cannot meet the needs in that way or via cross-boundary strategic planning.

**Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Last week, my local council announced the proposed closure of the much-loved Prince of Wales theatre in Cannock. Despite the council's financial pressures, local people do not want that theatre to become collateral damage. Will the Minister meet me to see what could be done to explore community ownership and give our theatre the bright future that thousands of my constituents want to see?

**Alex Norris:** As my hon. Friend knows, I am very keen on community ownership, and I am sad to hear about the situation in his community. I would definitely

steer him towards the “asset of community value” process in the immediate term, and of course, I would be very happy to meet him and campaigners on this issue.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Non-qualifying leaseholder status gets slapped on a property in perpetuity long after the required safety works are completed. That status means that it is almost impossible to acquire a mortgage—solicitors advise very strongly that purchasers steer clear of such properties, which are very often flats—and the status is inherited by successive owners in perpetuity. Has the Minister considered what this status does for the housing crisis?

**Alex Norris:** I completely understand the challenge. Drawing a line between qualifying and non-qualifying leaseholders—between people who own a property and therefore suffer from things that have been beyond their control, and landlords that are businesses and therefore have multiple assets—will always be a difficult job. At the edge, where the boundary between qualifying and non-qualifying becomes blurred, there are some difficult cases. As a new Government, we are committed to working with people to understand better how we can go forward on that. As for the substantive point on where the liability should lie, it is about finding the right balance between those who built the building and those who live in it.<sup>1</sup>

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Will the Minister commit to working with local authorities to use new powers to run high street rental auctions, so that we can end the affront of empty shops this Christmas?

**Alex Norris:** Yes. High street rental auctions, which were launched at the weekend, are a brilliant way—*[Interruption.]* Indeed; they were part of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which I am sad to say the previous Government did not commence—as part of the war on woke, I believe. Nevertheless, we have commenced those auctions. They are a tool in the hands of local communities; if there are vacant properties, let us get them brought back into use.

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I represent Tunbridge Wells, and just over the boundary in Wealden district, a large housing development is proposed. Wealden will get the houses, but the infrastructure burden will fall particularly on my constituents who live in Tunbridge Wells. Will the Secretary of State update me on the reforms to the NPPF? What is being done about this problem of cross-boundary infrastructure?

**Matthew Pennycook:** In the NPPF, we set out the clear direction of travel towards the universal coverage of strategic planning across the whole of England. We had an Adjournment debate on that just last week. We are determined to put in place the mechanisms that will allow effective cross-boundary co-operation to ensure that the right infrastructure and housing growth takes place.

1. *[Official Report, 4 December 2024; Vol. 758, 3WC.]* Correction

## Chagos Islands: UK-US Defence Relationship

3.39 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the impact of the Government's Chagos negotiations on the UK-US defence relationship.

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard)**: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this urgent question. The Secretary of State has asked me to respond on behalf of the Department.

On 3 October, the UK and Mauritius reached an historic agreement to secure the important UK-US military base on Diego Garcia, which plays a crucial role in regional and international security. The agreement secures the effective operation of the joint facility on Diego Garcia well into the next century. The agreement is strongly supported by our closest friends and allies, including the United States. It has been supported by all relevant US Departments and agencies, following a rigorous scrutiny process.

This base is a key part of UK-US defence relationships, as it enables the United Kingdom and the United States to support operations that demonstrate our shared commitments to regional stability, provide a rapid response to crises and counter some of the most challenging security threats we face. The President of the United States applauded the agreement. To quote him directly:

"It is a clear demonstration that through diplomacy and partnership, countries can overcome long-standing historical challenges to reach peaceful and mutually beneficial outcomes."

Several other countries and organisations, including India, the African Union, the UN Secretary-General and others, have welcomed and applauded this historic political agreement.

Our primary goal throughout these negotiations, which started over two years ago under the previous Government, was to protect the joint UK-US military base on Diego Garcia. There will be clear commitments in the treaty to robust security arrangements, including arrangements preventing the presence of foreign security forces on the outer islands, so that the base can continue to operate securely and effectively. The operation of the base will continue unchanged, with strong protections from malign influence.

For the first time in 50 years, the base will be undisputed and legally secure. Continued uncertainty would be a gift to our adversaries. That is why the agreement has been welcomed by all parts of the US system, and other critical regional security partners. Agreeing the deal now, on our terms, meant that we were able to secure strong protections that will allow the base to operate as it has done. We look forward to engaging with the upcoming US Administration on this and many other aspects of the UK-US special relationship.

Finally, hon. Members can be reassured that the long-term protection of the base on Diego Garcia has been the shared UK and US priority throughout, and this agreement secures its future. We would not have signed off on an agreement that compromised any of our security interests, or those of the US and our allies and partners.

**James Cartlidge**: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

At a time when we face the most challenging military threats for years, surely our top priority should be to preserve the strongest possible US-UK relations, given that this is so vital to our national security, yet it appears that the Government are seeking to agree a deal surrendering the sovereignty of the Chagos islands before President Trump is formally in post. We know that the new US Administration are concerned about the Government's deal because presumptive nominee US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that the deal "poses a serious threat to our national security interests".

He has also suggested that

"it would provide an opportunity for communist China to gain valuable intelligence on our naval support facility".

Let us be clear: our military base on Diego Garcia is a vital strategic asset for the UK in the Indian ocean, and it is critical to our presence and posture in the Indo-Pacific region. In particular, it is an especially important base for the United States, and we believe that anything that damages its defence posture, particularly in relation to China, also undermines our national security. We understand that the new Mauritius Government have now launched a review of the deal.

Will the Minister therefore confirm that the Government's policy really is to try to rush through their Chagos deal before President Trump's inauguration? Does he not see how that would be hugely disrespectful to the new Administration and President Trump's democratic mandate? Given that we now know it is common for the MOD to state the cost of overseas bases, will he be transparent and finally tell the House how much we will have to pay to rent back the vital military base that we currently own?

Finally, although we would prefer the Government to cancel the whole deal, at the very least will the Minister pause any further ratification until the new US Administration are in place and the Mauritius Government have concluded their review?

**Luke Pollard**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions and his strong focus on this matter. I think he has a bit of amnesia from when the Government he was a part of started these negotiations. They held 11 rounds of negotiations, and it took a Labour Government to conclude them. We have done so in the best interests of our national security, and the national security concerns of our closest allies. It would not have been possible to secure a deal and the support of the United States if all parts of the US security apparatus were not in support of it, and as a former Defence Minister, the hon. Gentleman will know that to be true, regardless of the politics he must play today.

The hon. Gentleman asked two quick questions. We intend to continue our dialogue with the new Mauritian Government and our friends in the United States. He will be aware, of course, that it is illegal under US law for us to engage directly with the new Administration until they come into place, but we will continue to have dialogue with our US and Mauritian friends.

I am surprised that as a former Defence Minister, the hon. Gentleman is asking about costs. He will know that it is usual for us to declare the operating and running costs of overseas bases, but it would compromise our operational security and long-term relationships if

[*Luke Pollard*]

we were to declare the Government-to-Government payment for overseas bases. We have declared the operational running costs of our overseas bases, and we will continue to do so in response to parliamentary questions. Detailing the security payments for Government-to-Government interactions is not something that this Government do, and was not something that his Government did either.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): The UK-US base on Diego Garcia is of great significance for defence and has strategic international significance. Steps must be taken to ensure that its legal status is secure in the future, and of course the voice of the Chagossians must be central in any future arrangement. It has been reported that President-elect Trump has reservations about the proposed treaty, and newly elected Prime Minister Ramgoolam of Mauritius has ordered a review into the treaty. What further representations have been made to both our partners to ensure that we have the support of our international partners?

**Luke Pollard:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The continuing operation of Diego Garcia is in the interests of UK and US national security, and this deal secures that operation. I congratulate Dr Ramgoolam on his election. In a letter to the Prime Minister on 15 November, he noted his commitment to completing the negotiations, and Jonathan Powell was in Mauritius this week to start that process.

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

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): We, and all those who care about the resolution of this issue, are deeply disappointed about the way we have been led to this point, with 11 rounds of negotiations under the Conservatives, and more under the new Government. Just four weeks ago, the Foreign Secretary presented his deal to the House. Now the new President-elect and the new Prime Minister of Mauritius are expressing doubts. Is it not striking and shocking that it has unravelled so quickly? Does the Minister agree that whatever happens next, it is vital that the voices of the Chagossians are finally injected into the process, and that they are able to fulfil their rights of self-determination?

Whatever lies ahead in these talks, the Liberal Democrats have strongly argued that all treaties should come before the House before signing, and I believe that members of the Government, including two who are on the Front Bench today, supported that in the past. Will the Minister commit to allowing meaningful opportunities for parliamentarians to examine the detailed proposals, including the necessary assurances on elements of the deal relating to our national security, before anything is signed?

**Luke Pollard:** We will follow the normal process for treaty ratification, which is that after signature, the treaty will come before this House, with details given to colleagues and with the ability for full parliamentary scrutiny, as would be expected as part of the normal process. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the Chagossians. My ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for

Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who is sat next to me, has been meeting Chagossian communities in the UK. He will continue to meet those communities. This Government deeply regret how they were treated and removed from the islands originally. It is one reason why we have made the relationship with the Chagossians such an important part of the future of the islands, as the Foreign Secretary has previously outlined to the House.

**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the operations of the vital UK-US base on Diego Garcia will continue, completely unaffected by the terms of this deal? Separately, will he confirm that our commitment to the Falkland Islands, to Gibraltar and to the rights of the people there to self-determine remain completely unaffected by this deal?

**Luke Pollard:** As the first Minister from the new Government to visit the Falklands, I was able to say clearly that the Falkland Islands are British for as long as they would like to be. The message I gave to the Gibraltarians was that Gibraltar is British for as long as the people of Gibraltar want it to be. I confirm to my hon. Friend that this deal secures the future of the UK-US base on Diego Garcia. That is something that our US allies have supported.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Which is more important for Britain's vital security: to have the approval of the outgoing American President, or the approval of the incoming one? What is there to prevent China, with Mauritius's agreement, putting listening outposts on other islands that could compromise the security of Diego Garcia?

**Luke Pollard:** There are specific arrangements in the treaty that prevent any foreign power from putting security apparatus or security forces on any of the outgoing islands. The right hon. Gentleman will be able to see that when the treaty comes before the House. In relation to the support of the United States, we would not have signed an agreement if it was not supported by our US friends. This deal secures the operation of the UK-US base on Diego Garcia well into the next century. I expect that when everyone looks at the detail of the deal, they will back it too.

**Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): Chagos belongs to the Chagossians. A quarter of the global population of Chagos lives within my constituency. I am aware of statements made by Ministers that they have met representatives of the Chagossian community; I do not know who those representatives are, but I know of representatives in my constituency who have not yet been consulted. Does the Minister agree that before any further dialogue takes place, the Government should engage fully with the community representatives in my constituency?

**Luke Pollard:** The Foreign Office Minister beside me, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, has met a range of representatives from the Chagossian community and will continue to do so as this process continues. I know that he would welcome a conversation with my hon. Friend to make sure that that dialogue is as complete as it can be.



**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): First, may I ask, what is the rush? Why is the Minister in such a hurry to get this done? May I suggest that it would be to the Government's advantage, if their case is so strong, to allow this House to debate the agreed text in public before it is signed? May I also suggest that it stretches incredulity for him to tell the House that there have been no discussions at all with the incoming American Administration? Can he at least tell the House what informal dialogue there is with the incoming Administration about what their view really is? Can he report that to the House, please?

**Luke Pollard:** As a long-standing Member of this House, the hon. Gentleman will be familiar with how treaties are debated and agreed by this House. After signature, they come forward for ratification. This process was started a number of years ago by the Government that he supported. Eleven rounds of negotiation have taken place. We have secured a deal that is in support of the UK and US base on Diego Garcia, which will continue to operate well into the next century. When he and others see the detail of the deal, I am sure they will back it.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It is hard to imagine anything said from that Dispatch Box over the past five months that has survived contact with reality, and this is no different. In the tripartite relationship between the United States, the United Kingdom and Mauritius, two of those partners now have doubts about this arrangement, so what is the unseemly rush about? In the tension between national security and the human rights of the Chagossians, this Government, as usual, have managed to reconcile neither.

**Luke Pollard:** I am not certain whether the SNP's record on national security really gives the hon. Member the platform that he is pretending to have on this one. I recognise, however, that he is trying to make a serious point about the deal. When the deal is signed, it will come before the House in the usual way. That will allow parliamentarians of all parties to look at the detail of the deal and take a judgment, and the House will vote in the usual way, as it will do on other treaties.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What is it in particular that the new regime in Mauritius have doubts about? It is that they want more money, isn't it?

**Luke Pollard:** I think it is quite normal for any new Government to look again at a deal signed by their immediate predecessor—[*Interruption.*] The reason I say that is that when they look at the deal, they will see that the detail is convincing; just as it will be for our US friends, because it is a deal backed by the entirety of the US security apparatus that secures the future operation of the UK-US base well into the future and deals with the uncertainty around the base that existed until the deal was made. Hopefully, the right hon. Member will back the deal when the details come before the House—let us see.

**Nigel Farage** (Clacton) (Reform): The presentation of what the American Administration believe is a fantasy. Joe Biden is going—in fact, many think that he has gone already. I have been contacted by very senior

officials and advisers from the incoming Republican Administration, and every single one of them is appalled at this deal. They know that the leasehold agreement will not survive, just as the deal with China over Hong Kong did not survive. Has not the time come for the Government to admit that this is a rotten deal for the UK, a rotten deal for America and an even worse deal for the Chagossians? If the Minister cares so much about the sovereignty of the Falklands being in the hands of the Falkland Islanders, why not have a referendum of the Chagossians and ask them to settle who should have sovereignty over those islands?

**Luke Pollard:** As someone who has been in the Falklands recently, let me say that whipping up uncertainty about their future is not helpful for the security of the Falkland Islanders. Let us be absolutely clear: the Falklands are British for as long as the people of the Falkland Islands want to be British.

When it comes to this deal, I am certain that when its detail has been put before this House and before our US friends and other allies, they will see that it not only secures the future of the UK-US base—something that is not the case until the deal is signed—but secures it well into the next century, when the hon. Gentleman and I will no longer be in this place but the UK-US base on Diego Garcia will still be operating, securing our national interests.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): We in this House all know how the People's Republic of China has been able to use commercial vessels, including fishing vessels, to impinge on how we operate. Will the Minister set out how large an exclusion zone there will be around Diego Garcia to ensure that our interests and US interests are properly protected?

**Luke Pollard:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his serious question and the way in which he presented it. It is important that we have certainty about the security of the future relationship. That is why the treaty sets out clearly security arrangements for the outer islands that will prevent foreign nations from putting security forces or security apparatus on those islands. The full details will be in the treaty. It is important to note that Mauritius was one of only two African countries that did not join the Chinese belt and road initiative, and maintaining a strong relationship with it—especially in more contested times—is vital. That is what the deal helps to deliver.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister says that the outgoing Biden Administration in the US are keen on the deal, which may or may not be the case, but the British public plainly are not—for good reason—and they see the payment of a dowry to Mauritius as rubbing salt into the wound. If he is not prepared to comment on the quantum that he has in mind, will he at least explain the structure of the costings he is applying to come to the figure that he wishes to give Mauritius for taking on these islands?

**Luke Pollard:** I thank the former Minister for his question. As he served in the Department that I now serve in, he will know that it is normal to reveal the operating costs for overseas bases, but that we do not—he did not and we do not—reveal the Government-to-Government payments. That was standard procedure for his Government

[Luke Pollard]

and every Government before, and it remains the policy of this Government. This deal secures the future of the UK-US base, and I am hopeful that when the details come out, he will be able to understand why it secures that for so long, and hopefully he will be able to back it.

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): The Minister has said that he is not willing to give details of the financial arrangement, although he will be aware that the Mauritian Prime Minister has described the deal as a sell-out. Can he at least give an assurance that the Government will not commit to giving yet more money to get the deal through before the new US Administration arrives in January?

**Luke Pollard:** We think that this is a good deal. When the details come out, others will be able to make their judgment, but I think they will conclude that it is a good deal. It secures the future of the UK-US base on Diego Garcia, which was the overriding objective when the right hon. Gentleman's party was in power. The Conservatives set that objective, and we are glad that this deal secures the future of the base well into the next century. That is an important step for UK and US national security.

**Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Will the Minister set out how he intends to implement safeguards against China establishing military capabilities and surveillance capacity in the British Indian ocean territories?

**Luke Pollard:** That is an important question, and one that I responded to a few answers ago. Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman that safeguards in the treaty will detail that no foreign security forces will be able to set up on the outer islands, providing that security perimeter around Diego Garcia that we and our US allies have sought. This is a good deal because it secures not only the future operation of the base but the future security around the base. I am hopeful that when the details come out, he will be able to see that for himself.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): I return to a question asked but not answered this afternoon. If as a result of the review the Mauritian Government demand more money, will the Government pay up in order to save face?

**Luke Pollard:** I am confident that this is a good deal. The Mauritian Government will look at the deal that has been signed and see that it is a good one. Our US friends know that it is a good deal, and anyone looking at it in future will see that it is a good deal because it achieves our No. 1 objective of securing the UK-US base on Diego Garcia well into the next century.

**Charlie Dewhurst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), alluded to the presumptive nominee Marco Rubio's comments that the deal represents a serious threat to US national security. Does the Minister agree?

**Luke Pollard:** All the representatives of the US security apparatus who have seen the detail of the deal back it. It secures the future of the base and it allays US fears around the future of the base. There has been some barking from the Opposition Front Bench about this, so it is important to say that the base on Diego Garcia is not currently secure for the long term. There are questions over its long-term sovereignty, and people are building support against our sovereignty claim. This deal secures the long-term operation of that base well into the next century.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Having been one of many in this House to have vehemently opposed the ceding of the Chagos Islands without consulting the residents, and having stood in solidarity with those who opposed it, I am anxious to ensure that the Americans take control. In turn, we must offer them support and allow those residents who consider themselves British to be a part of the equation. What steps has the FCDO taken to ensure that the US is aware of the strength of opposition to this decision from those from the Chagos Islands?

**Luke Pollard:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his serious question. This deal not only settles some of the outer islands for the Chagossian communities but allows visits to Diego Garcia for the Chagossian communities who were removed in a way that this Government so deeply regret. The detail of the deal is good to secure our national security and US national security, and it takes important steps to recognise and remedy the pain suffered by Chagossian communities.



## Bangladesh: Attacks on Hindu Community

4.4 pm

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Bangladesh and recent attacks on the Hindu community there.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West)**: The UK has a long-standing commitment to the protection of human rights. The UK champions freedom of religion or belief for all; no one should live in fear because of what they do or do not believe in. We are working to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief through our position at the UN, G7 and at other multilateral fora, and in our important bilateral work.

Just last month, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) is aware, I visited Bangladesh, where, as part of our programme, I met Chief Adviser Professor Yunus and Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain. At the meeting with Chief Adviser Yunus, I discussed the full range of bilateral issues, including the importance of protecting religious minorities in Bangladesh. The UK Government support freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression in Bangladesh through both our political advocacy and development programme funding, providing up to £27 million from March 2023 to February 2028 under the Bangladesh collaborative, accountable and peaceful politics programme for protecting civic and political space.

On the Hindu community in Bangladesh specifically, I was given assurances by the interim Government in Bangladesh that support was available for minority communities in Bangladesh in the lead up to Durga Puja—a national festival. We were pleased to see the establishment of a special policing unit, which was active in protecting mandaps—the Hindu worship sites—as I am sure my hon. Friend is aware.

The UK Government will continue to monitor the situation, including making representations from this House, and will engage with the interim Government in Bangladesh on the importance of freedom of religion or belief specifically as it affects the Hindu community.

**Barry Gardiner**: Thank you for allowing this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Since the fall of the previous Government in August, Bangladesh has seen more than 2,000 incidents of violence, most of which have been targeted against the minority Hindu community. Hindus make up less than 10% of the population of Bangladesh. As my hon. Friend will be aware, anti-Hindu violence has been a recurrent event in Bangladesh. Indeed, earlier this year, the Jamaat-e-Islami party was banned after riots in which 200 people were killed.

While Bangladesh no longer has the secular constitution of 1971 and became an Islamic state in 1988, there are none the less supposed to be protections for minority religions under the constitution, including articles 28 and 39. However, these appear not to be being enforced. There are reports of police and army standing by, as more than 20 places of minority Hindu and Sufi worship were vandalised and their worshippers attacked. This came

to a head on Friday, when extremist groups from the Jamaat-e-Islami party attacked two Hindu temples in Chittagong and conducted a campaign of orchestrated violence against the Hindu population.

A leading Hindu monk, Chinmoy Krishna Das, a former leader of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness has been arrested. ISKCON is a worldwide branch of modern Hinduism with its UK headquarters at Bhaktivedanta Manor in Bushey, many of whose worshippers live in my constituency of Brent West and the surrounding areas of north-west London. People are concerned that while he was engaged in exclusively peaceful protest, he has been denied due process, charged with sedition and refused bail, yet none of the individuals who attacked the temples has been apprehended or charged. On Saturday, senior Bangladeshi journalist Munni Saha was taken into police custody following an attack on her car by a large mob in Dhaka, and released only under the provisions of the criminal code.

The situation is clearly on a knife edge. With such large diaspora populations in the UK and large Hindu communities with strong links to the community in Bangladesh, I ask my hon. Friend what more she can do to have discussions with the Bangladeshi Government and other partners in the region to ensure that tensions are lowered, the rule of law put into effect, and calm and order restored.

**Catherine West**: My hon. Friend is right to raise these concerns. Our high commission, based in Dhaka, is in detailed discussions with the interim Government of Bangladesh on how to verify and record the number of incidents or attacks against communities, and indeed small businesses, where there have been reports of such attacks, as well as taking remedial action and indeed working on prevention.

That is why, in the week we visited, we were pleased to hear that the special policing unit had been set up. We stand ready to offer advice on law and order, but know that that is part of the road map towards a more stable Bangladesh. We are aware of the statement of concern from the Indian Government following the arrest of Chinmoy Krishna Das, a well-known Hindu leader, on sedition charges. The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office desk is closely monitoring those developments.

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

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): First of all, I thank the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for his urgent question on this important subject. He also raised the arrest of the ISKCON leader, and I too am familiar with the place of worship near the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

There are deep and long-standing ties between our two countries. The Minister visited Bangladesh recently. She is right to point out that, as the hon. Member for Brent West said, the degree of escalation in the violence is deeply, deeply concerning. What we are witnessing now is uncontrolled violence in many quarters. We are watching with horror and shock as further violence spreads in Bangladesh. The thoughts of all of us in the House are with the diaspora community here and those affected in Bangladesh. These are deeply disturbing reports. The Minister also mentioned the deadly attacks and the violence that took place during what is an auspicious period, the Durga Puja festival, in 2021.

[Priti Patel]

Given the current instability in Bangladesh and the departure of the former Prime Minister in August, this is a moment of deep concern. Many Governments are condemning the violence and calling for peace, and law and order to be restored. I welcome the Minister's comments, but I emphasise that all efforts must now be taken. A religious leader has been arrested and we need to know what is being done, due process in particular, to secure his release.

Will the Minister give details of the Government's engagement with the Bangladesh Government on that particular matter? What discussions have taken place? Have we been robust in pursuing: the right to protect life; the prevention of violence and persecution; and, importantly, tolerance for religious belief? What efforts have the Government undertaken to build on the previous Government's work to promote freedom of religion and belief in Bangladesh? Can the Minister say what discussions are taking place with other international partners to help restore the stability we desperately need to see in Bangladesh?

**Catherine West:** The protests following the student-led events in June, July and August were deeply troubling and led to the fall of the Government of Bangladesh. The Opposition spokesperson is quite correct to emphasise the nature of these worrying protests. Our constituents are concerned, which is why my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West brought this important question here today. They include reported cases of retaliatory attacks against allies of the former regime, including the Hindu minority. Some of the attacks are allegedly politically motivated and are of concern. That is why I had it at the top of my agenda when I met Professor Dr Yunus and why the effort was made to set up the policing unit. Our high commission is active—more than any other that I could see when I was there—in guiding, helping and supporting a peaceful transition to a new Government, elections eventually and a harmonious future. Anywhere in the world where freedom of religion or belief is at risk, there we will be standing up for the rights of minority groups.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): Many constituents in Aylesbury have raised concerns about the safety of Hindus in Bangladesh. They have shown me extremely concerning social media content containing threats to Hindus to leave the country or face extermination. Does the Minister agree that that is unacceptable? Will she outline what representations she has made to the Government of Bangladesh to ensure that those who incite and perpetrate violence are held to account?

**Catherine West:** My hon. Friend is doing excellent work representing her constituents who are concerned about these acts of violence. I impress on her that the UK was one of the first with ministerial support to arrive in Dhaka, speak with the chief adviser Professor Yunus and be vocal in support of minorities.

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

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): We share the concerns of Members on both sides of the House about these attacks. I note that the Minister has spoken to her Bangladeshi counterparts, and urge her to continue to do so.

The most recent Foreign Office human rights and democracy report lists Bangladesh as a “human rights priority” country and highlights

“reports of harassment...particularly towards...Hindu minorities, often incited online.”

The report recognises that

“UK funding through civil society organisations supported freedom of religion or belief and community mediation processes”.

Can the Minister update us on the progress being made, using UK funding, in combating religious discrimination in Bangladesh? Is that funding at risk of being another casualty of the latest round of cuts in overseas development assistance? Will the Government support our call for an ambassador-level champion of freedom of religion or belief, so that the UK can do more to ensure that the rights of Hindus and all religious minorities are protected and upheld?

**Catherine West:** I thank the hon. Lady for her suggestions for the Government. I can confirm that, on 20 November, the Deputy Prime Minister said in Parliament that the envoy appointments were under ministerial consideration and would be decided on in course, so the hon. Lady will hear presently about the freedom of religion representative. Regardless of any ministerial visit, the treatment of minorities will always be uppermost on our agenda with the Government we are visiting. As for her question about funding, we are providing up to £27 million between March 2023 and February 2028 under the “Bangladesh—Collaborative, Accountable and Peaceful Politics” programme for protecting civic and political space, fostering collaboration, reducing corruption, and mitigating tensions that lead to violence. That is the sort of programme that we have when a country is a “human rights concern” country.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am grateful to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), for raising these important issues. We must be vigilant against all attacks on minorities, be they Buddhists, Christians or the Hindus in Bangladesh. Does the Minister agree that, sadly, at times, since the country's formation in 1971, there have been communal tensions of this kind? They are not new. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have sent me a list of flashpoint events. Between 1974 and 2001, the Hindu population in Bangladesh decreased from 13.5% to 8.5%, so this is not a new phenomenon. May I also caution the Minister? Following the collapse of the regime after the murder of 800 students in the summer, some people may seek to exploit these tensions, and we need to stamp on that hard. Can the Minister assure us that we are doing all that we can to enable the country to make the transition to democracy, and to what people are calling Bangladesh 2.0?

**Catherine West:** The hon. Lady is a champion of human rights in the House, and I thank her for her particular interest in Bangladesh.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), and thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question. It is sad that the Minister has to come here to answer an urgent question, having been asked last Thursday for a statement

on the Floor of the House. Hindus are suffering with their houses being burned and their businesses ransacked. Priests have been arrested, and I understand that two more were arrested over the weekend, and 63 monks have been denied access to the country. The clear issue is an attempt at the ethnic cleansing of Hindus from Bangladesh. Will the Minister come out and condemn outright this violence against Hindus? We want to hear not just words of piety, but absolute condemnation of what is going on. Religious minorities are being deliberately persecuted because of their religion.

**Catherine West:** The hon. Gentleman must rest assured that this was at the top of my agenda when I met Dr Yunus, the leader of the interim Government. It was very much at the forefront of our discussion. As with similar nations, we were there first—ours was the first ministerial visit—and it was absolutely at the top of the list. There can be nothing like a face-to-face encounter with the person in charge to underline the importance of freedom of religion or belief, and in this instance, of stopping attacks against the minority Hindu community.

**Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) on securing this important urgent question. I represent a diverse community. Both Muslims and Hindus in Liverpool have made representations to me about the growing sectarian violence, the slide to extremism, and particularly the persecution of the Hindu minority. The violence faced by minorities on religious and political grounds must stop. What representations are the UK Government making at the United Nations on this matter, and are we confident that the interim Government in Dhaka can get a grip on this?

**Catherine West:** I commend my hon. Friend for her commitment to the communities in her constituency. I want to emphasise that in my visit last month, freedom of religion or belief, the protection of minorities, and general law and order were right at the top of the agenda. The UK is at hand to support Bangladesh at this difficult time, when law and order, and stability, are at risk.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Clearly, it would have been expedient to have had a special envoy for religious freedom in place; it is all very well for the Minister to say that such an appointment is under ministerial consideration. What is the problem? Do the Government not have anyone committed enough or talented enough to do it?

**Catherine West:** I am a big believer in mainstreaming all these important responsibilities, because having a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief sometimes lets the Minister off the hook. As the representative of the UK in Dhaka, I see it as my responsibility, and mine alone, to make the case for the Hindu community or any other persecuted minority. I am not going to wash my hands of that and let somebody else do it. The responsibility is being mainstreamed across every single ministerial brief as we speak.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Residents in Portsmouth North have loved ones and family members in Bangladesh and, like this House, are concerned about

their safety and security. Does the Minister agree that we need to see a peaceful pathway to an inclusive and democratic future for Bangladesh, and can she give us and Portsmouth North constituents information on how that is being advanced?

**Catherine West:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. First, we had a face-to-face meeting with the leadership of the country and, secondly, we are providing ongoing support. The high commission in Dhaka is involved in keeping law and order, in advising on anything that leads towards the safe holding of elections at some time in 2025 and, indeed, in listening to the voices of those who have been affected by the violence over July and August, and of the Hindu minority community.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): A number of members of the Hindu community in Mid Buckinghamshire have contacted me to say that they are deeply concerned about the situation in Bangladesh, and I urge the Minister to take every diplomatic step possible to protect Hindus in that country. Does she believe that Bangladesh's constitution, which guarantees equal status to religions, and equal rights in the practice of religion, provides a reliable legal basis on which to domestically prosecute cases of religiously motivated violence?

**Catherine West:** We stand ready to assist Bangladesh as it goes forward with its difficult road map towards eventually holding elections. Today's urgent question is so important, because law and order is crucial at this fragile time. We are there to be friends, to be supportive and to provide any legal assistance that we can offer the country going forward.

**Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): Can the Minister reassure the House about the importance of religion and belief in Bangladesh and all nations across the world, particularly for minorities? She will appreciate the long-standing, deep ties between the Hindu community in the UK and Hindus in Bangladesh. Can she please detail what engagement she has had with the UK's Hindu and Bangladeshi communities on this issue, and does she believe that such engagement is important? Those communities are appalled at what is going on.

**Catherine West:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. When I was in Bangladesh, I was able to speak specifically about law and order, and about concerns raised in this House at our cross-party engagement event. I commit to doing another one of those, to explain the exact content of my discussions in Bangladesh. Let me respond on how I have been learning in my role. I was delighted to go to the London borough of Brent to visit the Neasden temple and learn about Diwali; I had an exceptional visit with the British Asian Trust and learned so much. That was a prelude to Diwali. After going to Bangladesh, I went to India. I am on a wonderful journey—I am falling in love.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her commitment to addressing issues of religious freedom and human rights. Over 16 days, 2,010 people reported incidents, including attacks on 69 Hindu temples. The homes of 157 families were attacked, looted, vandalised or set on fire, and nine Hindus lost their life. What steps



[Jim Shannon]

can the UK take to work with the Bangladeshi Government and international partners to promote the rights of religious minorities in Bangladesh, to ensure accountability for these heinous crimes, and to promote the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief for all? Will the Government consider raising these issues at the UN, or through direct diplomatic engagement, to ensure a swift and decisive response?

**Catherine West:** There can be no greater champion of freedom of religion or belief than the hon. Gentleman, who worked closely on the issue with the former Member for Congleton in the last Parliament. He rightly monitors every single event and details them here. I undertake to write back to him on the instances that he mentions, and will leave a copy in the Library for other Members to look at.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Some of my constituents from the growing Indian community in Winchburgh are increasingly concerned about the accounts of horrific acts of violence towards the Hindu community in Bangladesh. Does the Minister agree that violence against Hindus, or any other religious minorities, is entirely unacceptable? What reassurance can she provide to my constituents that the UK Government are supporting all efforts to protect the freedom of religion and belief?

**Catherine West:** I commend my hon. Friend, a new Member, for calling for freedom of religion or belief, including the freedom not to have a belief; it is so important to our work on this issue. I can reassure her not only that the matter was at the top of my agenda when I visited Bangladesh, but that we continue to monitor any instances of violence and lack of law and order, and continue to offer support where we can to the interim Government of Bangladesh.

**Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) on securing this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for her response. She will be aware that a significant number of members of the Bangladeshi Hindu diaspora in the UK, including in my constituency, have expressed concern about the attacks on the Hindu community in Bangladesh. She may be aware that several Bangladeshi Hindu community organisations in the UK have recently written to the Foreign Secretary requesting a meeting. What efforts are she and the Foreign Secretary making

to engage with the community, and are they willing to attend a meeting to discuss their concerns and the action that the Government are taking?

**Catherine West:** I am very happy to attend a meeting, as I am sure the Foreign Secretary will be. As part of learning about this brief, I intend to visit a number of places of worship to emphasise the importance of minority faith groups, and to reassure them that in our work abroad, not just at home, we talk about the importance of freedom of religion or belief, or no belief.

**Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Several of my constituents have been in touch who are incredibly concerned about family members in Bangladesh. Those family members have been living in extreme fear for some time, but particularly since August, and reports of increasing violence against the Hindu community are disturbing. How do the Government intend to support human rights in Bangladesh, and to support the Bangladeshi community in my constituency as they go through this difficult time?

**Catherine West:** I thank the youngest Member of the House for his concern about Bangladesh and the minority communities there. His constituents can be informed through the meeting that I will hold as the Minister responsible for this brief; I will invite all Members to it. If anybody would like to bring specific examples, we will have a desk there, and we will be able to answer any questions that are forthcoming.

**Mr Speaker:** That completes the urgent question. I will now suspend the House for 10 minutes so that we can all read the statement, which we unfortunately did not have. It has rightly been previously acknowledged by the Home Secretary that it is totally unfair to bounce the Chamber into a discussion. In future, we must get statements on time.

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** Let me apologise, Mr Speaker. I did check that it had been sent at a quarter to, to make sure it was here with 45 minutes to go. If it did not reach you, I apologise, but that was the information I was given.

**Mr Speaker:** Not only was the information wrong, but we did not get the statement until four minutes to 4, and the Opposition did not get it until almost 4 o'clock. That is totally unfair, and Ministers need to get their act together. This should not happen. I am suspending the House for 10 minutes.

4.29 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Migration and Border Security

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** For the record, I draw the attention of those on the Treasury Bench, and all Members, to paragraph 9.5 of the latest addition of the “Ministerial Code”, which states that a copy of the text of an oral statement should be made available to the Opposition and to the Speaker’s Office at least 45 minutes before the statement is to be made. It is clearly highly regrettable that that did not happen today. I note the Home Secretary’s previous apology made shortly before the sitting was suspended. I call the Home Secretary to make her statement.

4.40 pm

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on net migration, asylum and border security, and on the collapse in controls that took place over the last five years, the damage done as a result, and the action we are now taking to turn that around.

Last Thursday’s official statistics show how over the last five years controls in the immigration and asylum systems crumbled, legal and illegal migration both substantially increased, the backlog in the asylum system soared, and enforcement of basic rules fell apart. Net migration more than quadrupled in just four years to a record high of nearly 1 million people, and it is still more than three times higher than in 2019. Dangerous small boat crossings rose from 300 people in 2018 to an average of over 36,000 a year in the last three years—a hundred-and-twentyfold increase. In just a few short years, an entire criminal smuggler industry built around boat crossings has been allowed to take hold along the UK border.

The cost of the asylum system also quadrupled to £4 billion last year. In 2019, there were no asylum hotels; five years on, there are more than 200. Returns of those with no right to be here are 30% lower than in 2010, and asylum-related returns are down by 20% compared with 14 years ago. That is the legacy we inherited from the previous Government, one that former Ministers have themselves admitted was shameful.

We should be clear that this country has always supported people coming here from abroad to work, to study or to be protected from persecution. That has made us the country we are—from the Windrush generation to the Kindertransport; from international medics working in our NHS to the families we have supported from Ukraine. But that is exactly why the immigration and asylum systems have to be properly controlled and managed, so that they support our economy and promote community cohesion, with rules properly respected and enforced, and so that our borders are kept strong and secure. None of those things have been happening for the last five years. The scale of the failure and the loss of control have badly undermined trust in the entire system, and it will take time to turn things around.

Let me turn to the changes that are needed in three areas. First, on legal migration, recent years have seen what the Office for National Statistics calls

“large increases in both work-related and study-related immigration following the end of travel restrictions and the introduction of the new immigration system after the UK left the EU.”

Conservative Government reforms in 2021 made it much easier to recruit from abroad, including a 20% wage discount for overseas workers. At the same time, training here in the UK was cut, with 55,000 fewer apprenticeship starts than five years ago, and the number of UK residents not working or studying hit a record high of over 8 million. This was an experiment gone badly wrong, built on a careless free market approach that literally incentivised employers to recruit from abroad rather than to train or to tackle workforce problems here at home.

This Government are clear that net migration must come down. We are continuing with the visa controls belatedly introduced by the previous Government, including the higher salary threshold, the 20% discount and the restrictions on dependant visas for students and care workers, but we must go further to restore order and credibility to the system.

Since the election, we have set out new plans to ban rogue employers who breach employment laws from sponsoring overseas workers; we have reversed the previous Conservative Government’s decision to remove visa requirements for a number of countries from which large numbers of people arriving as visitors were entering the UK asylum system instead; and we are reviewing visas further to prevent misuse.

However, we also need to overhaul the dysfunctional UK labour market that we inherited, including by bringing together the work of the Migration Advisory Committee, Skills England, the Department for Work and Pensions and the new Industrial Strategy Council to identify areas where the economy has become over-reliant on overseas recruitment, and where new action will be needed to boost training and support. That work will be at the heart of our new White Paper, showing how net migration must and will come down, as we set out new ways to link the points-based system with new requirements for training here in Britain.

Let me turn to the asylum system. Last week’s figures showed how the previous Government crashed the asylum system in the run-up to the election. In their last six months in office, asylum decisions dropped by 75% and asylum interviews dropped by over 80%, so only a few hundred decisions were being taken every week instead of thousands. Caseworkers were deployed elsewhere and the backlog shot up. We have had to spend the summer repairing that damage, getting caseworkers back in place, restoring interviews and decisions, and substantially boosting returns. It will take time to deal with the added backlog and pressure on asylum accommodation that that collapse in decision making caused, but the swift action we took over the summer has prevented thousands more people from being placed in asylum hotels, saving hundreds of millions of pounds.

Today I am also publishing the full spending breakdown of the previous Government’s failed Rwanda partnership. In the two years that the partnership was in place, just four volunteers were sent to Rwanda, at a cost of £700 million. That included £290 million paid to the Government in Kigali, and almost £300 million for staff, IT and legal costs. The result of that massive commitment of time and money was that 84,000 people crossed the channel from the day the deal was signed to the day it was scrapped. That so-called deterrent did not

[Yvette Cooper]

result in a single deportation or stop a single boat from crossing the channel. For the British taxpayer, it was a grotesque waste of money.

Since the election, we have swiftly redeployed many of the people who were working on fantasy planning for the Rwanda scheme to working instead on actual flights to return those who have no right to stay in the UK. That has helped to deliver nearly 10,000 returns since the election. Enforced returns are up by 19%, voluntary returns are up by 14%, illegal working visits are up by approximately 34%, and arrests from those visits are up by approximately 25%. I can tell the House that this new programme to tackle exploitation and ensure that the rules are enforced will continue and accelerate next year.

Let me turn to border security. Six years ago, fewer than 300 people arrived on dangerous small boats. Since then, an entire criminal industry has taken hold and grown, with routes stretching through France, Germany and beyond, from the Kurdistan region of Iraq to the money markets of Kabul. The criminals profit from undermining border security and putting lives at risk, and it is a disgrace that they have got away with it for so long.

Since the election, we have established the new Border Security Command, announced £150 million over the next 18 months for new technology, intelligence, and hundreds of specialist investigators working; struck new anti-smuggling action plan agreements with the G7, and bilateral agreements with Italy, Germany, Serbia and Balkan states; and increased UK operations with Europol and the Calais group. In recent weeks, international collaboration has led to high-profile arrests and shown the smuggling gangs that we will not sanction any hiding place from law enforcement.

I can tell the House today that we have gone further, with a major new international collaboration. The Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government share our concerns about the people traffickers operating through their country who have helped to transport thousands of people across Europe and across the channel, but joint action to tackle those problems has previously been far too weak. That is why last week I visited Baghdad and Erbil to sign new co-operation agreements on border security, migration and organised crime. As part of those agreements, we will invest half a million pounds in helping the Kurdistan region to enhance its capabilities on biometrics and security, and in training Iraqi border staff to tackle organised immigration crime. We have also made new commitments on joint operations, information sharing, pursuing prosecutions and disruptions, and with further work on returns. Those landmark agreements are the first in the world for an Iraqi Government focused on playing their part in the world.

Most people in Britain want to see strong border security and a properly controlled and managed migration and asylum system where the rules are respected and enforced; one where we do our bit alongside other countries to help those who have fled persecution, but where those with no right to be here are swiftly returned; and where it is Governments, not gangs, who decide who can enter our country. For five years, none of those things has happened, and people have understandably lost faith in the entire system. We now have the chance to turn that around: to fix the chaos, bring net migration

down, tackle the criminal gangs and prevent dangerous boat crossings; to restore order, control, and fair rules that are properly enforced—not through gimmicks, but through hard graft and serious international partnerships. I commend this statement to the House.

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

4.50 pm

**Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con):** I thank Mr Speaker and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for ensuring that we had the proper time to consider the statement.

The Home Secretary seems to have a great deal to say about the last Government and rather less to say about her own record since the election, but fortuitously there was a large release of data last week that gives us an insight into her first five months in office. Having looked at that data, I can see why she is so silent on her own record. Let me start with small boats. Yesterday marked 150 days since 4 July, and in that time a staggering 20,110 people have made the dangerous, illegal and unnecessary crossing—over 20,000 since this Government were elected. That is an 18% increase on the same 150 days last year, and a staggering 64% increase on the 150 days immediately prior to the election.

Why have those numbers gone up so much? Let us turn to what the National Crime Agency said last year. It said that no amount of funding or action against people smugglers would end crossings on its own, and went on to say—and I quote—that “you need an effective removals deterrence.” After the Labour Government were elected, they cancelled that deterrent—the Rwanda deterrent—before it had even started. The first flight was due to take off on 24 July this year, but they cancelled it. Had that flight taken off as planned, we would not have seen the 64% increase in crossings that we have seen since the election, exactly as the National Crime Agency foresaw. It is not just me and the National Crime Agency; even Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, has called for European member states to implement an offshore processing scheme, a proposal that 18 member states are said to support. As such, my first question is whether the Home Secretary will agree with the National Crime Agency and do what Ursula von der Leyen has urged, and re-establish that scheme.

As a consequence of the Home Secretary’s failure to reduce small boat numbers, the use of asylum hotels—which Labour promised to end—has gone up by 6,066 in the three months following the election. The asylum backlog, which the Home Secretary had a great deal to say about, has gone up by 11,000 in the three months following the general election, something that she did not find time to mention. She did talk a bit about her deal in Iraq, which spends £500,000 with the Iraqi Government. That is not a great deal of money—it is what would probably be spent on a road surfacing scheme in any of our constituencies. I am afraid that the idea that spending £500,000 is going to stop people smuggling from Iraq is naive and fanciful. What might have helped smash the gangs is life sentences for people smuggling, so perhaps the Home Secretary could explain why in the last Parliament she voted against a Bill that contained life sentences for the people-smuggling gangs she says she wants to smash.



On the question of legal migration, I agree with the Home Secretary that the numbers have been far too high for many decades under successive Governments. It is welcome that the numbers for the most recent year have come down by 20%, but that is not far enough—we need to go further. I welcome the fact that the Government are going to maintain most of the measures introduced by the last Government that led to that 20% reduction. We have also seen the number of visas go down, which of course are a leading indicator of net migration. Work visas are down by 28% year on year, student dependant visas are down by 84%, student visas are down by 19% and care visas are down by 84%, all thanks to measures introduced by the last Government.

However, I would like to know why this Government have decided to suspend the planned increase in the dependant visa salary threshold up to £38,700 which was due to take effect next April. If they are serious about reducing net migration, as the Home Secretary says, why have they suspended the measure announced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly) last December? If they are really serious about reducing net migration, as we are, what we really need is a hard cap on the numbers, as proposed by the Leader of the Opposition and me last week. Will the Government follow our suggestion and introduce that hard cap?

Behind all the bluster and all the chat about previous Governments, we see the Home Secretary's record and her Government's record: a 64% increase in small boat crossings since the same period before the election, 6,000 extra people in hotels and the asylum backlog up by 11,000—all since 4 July. We see the Rwanda deterrent, which the National Crime Agency and even Ursula von der Leyen say is necessary, cancelled by this Government before it even started. I call on the Home Secretary to think again on those issues, to introduce in April the measures that the previous Government announced and to introduce a hard cap. If she is serious about combating illegal migration and getting the net legal migration figures down, she will adopt those measures.

**Yvette Cooper:** If anyone had believed that flights were going to go off to Rwanda this summer, the Conservatives would not have called the general election when they did. They would have hung on hoping that it might happen. However, we saw just the same thing time and again: they kept promising and kept saying it was going to happen, and everybody can now see that it was a total failure. The policy ran for over two years, and they kept promising that the flights were going to go off, but they never did. They just spent £700 million instead. So much do they know that this was a total failure that their newly elected leader will not even promise to reinstate it, because she knows the whole thing was a con.

Let me remind the shadow Home Secretary that in the first half of this year—the last six months of his Government—crossings hit a record high for that season. If that trend of a record high had carried on and the increase for the first half of the year had carried on through the summer, we would have been dealing with thousands more crossings. Instead, because we had an increase in the number of people arriving from Vietnam, this Government introduced a major charter flight—a return flight—to Vietnam, and we have been working

with the Vietnamese Government to make sure that the number from Vietnam comes down. We also had to deal with the total collapse in asylum decision making that the Conservatives left us with, which meant that we have had to get caseworkers who they had deployed elsewhere back in place. The Conservatives also let the backlog soar.

The shadow Home Secretary wriggles a little around the net migration figures, which have gone up to a record high of 900,000 because of the rules that the Conservatives—his Government—introduced in 2021. Who was the Immigration Minister who brought in those rules? It was the shadow Home Secretary.

**Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab):** At a time of hugely stretched resources across the Government, thanks to the mess left in the public finances by the Conservative party, I welcome the additional money announced for investment in the Border Security Command, and in strengthening our wider intelligence and enforcement capabilities against the smuggling gangs. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is a far better use of taxpayers' money than paying people to go to Rwanda?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. If we go back just six years, there were barely any boat crossings. This criminal infrastructure was not in place along our borders, but we have seen it take hold, and be allowed to take hold, for several years and to build and grow. Those gangs are getting away with undermining our border security and putting lives at risk, and we should not be allowing them to get away with it. That is why the co-operation in place, led by the Border Security Command, going after the gangs and pursuing prosecutions and disruption, is so vital to saving lives and strengthening our borders.

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

**Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD):** The Conservatives trashed our immigration system, and now it is time to pick up the pieces—[*Interruption.*] A period of quiet reflection on some Benches might be appropriate for the next couple of minutes. Their chaotic approach of making and breaking targets shattered public trust and left the system in a right shambles. The words “Rwanda,” “small boats,” and “asylum hotels” took on new shameful meanings under the previous Conservative Government. Net migration figures hit record highs on their watch, skyrocketing, particularly after they took the UK out of the EU. Yet still the Conservatives' arbitrary rules make it nearly impossible for some sectors, such as hospitality, to recruit the workers they need.

Change is desperately needed. We need to rebuild an immigration system that works for our country and our economy—a fair, effective system that welcomes the workers we need. I am thinking about the senior surgeon who undertook the kidney transplant that my dad had and that kept him alive. That surgeon came here as an immigrant. We also need a system that clearly and properly enforces the rules, and that sees our university sector as a jewel in the crown, welcoming students from overseas, and as a way of using the UK's soft power for good. It is right that the Government are taking steps to make it easier to recruit British workers to fill vacancies, and a thorough workforce strategy is sorely needed. Will the Government consider implementing Liberal

[Lisa Smart]

Democrat calls for a carer's minimum wage to help address the well documented needs of the social care sector?

I am pleased that the Home Secretary talked about how we will have to work closely with our international partners to stop the dangerous channel crossings—something the previous Conservative Government made it harder for us to do time and again. International co-operation is crucial, but our response to the criminal gangs, who are profiting from some of the most vulnerable people, must go further. We must crack down on modern slavery here in the UK, as that is how those gangs make a big chunk of their money. I hope the Government will cut off the power of the gangs at its source, by providing safe and legal routes for genuine refugees. The Government have a mammoth task ahead, rebuilding not only an immigration system that works, but importantly rebuilding the public's trust in the process.

**Yvette Cooper:** I welcome many of the points that the hon. Member has made. She is right to point to the lack of trust and confidence in the system as a result of the chaos of the last few years, as well as to the loss of controls and practical measures in place. She raised migration for work, which quadrupled in the space of four or five years, at the same time as we had drops in the number of adults in training and apprenticeship starts. That is a system that is broken. I agree that we should support fair pay agreements in social care and a proper workforce strategy around that, to ensure that we can better recruit and support care workers who are UK resident. I have also asked the Migration Advisory Committee to look particularly at the engineering and IT sectors. We have had persistently high levels of recruitment from abroad in those sectors, and frankly we should have had far better and longer standing training here in the UK.

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary agree that the public are right to be angry about the state of public services, and that the blame lies squarely with 14 years of cuts and mismanagement by Conservative Governments, not with migrants who contribute to their new home? Will she stand up to attempts by Conservative Members to distract from their own failures and divide the country by scapegoating people who just want a better life for themselves and their families, as we all do?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right to say that in 14 years the previous Government did deep damage not just to our public services but to our economy, and they have to take responsibility for that. We have a history going back through generations of people who have come to the UK to work, study, and get protection from persecution, but it is because those systems are an important part of who we are that they also need to be controlled and managed. That is why alongside the damage that the previous Government did to our economy and public services, we have also seen damage to the relationship between the migration system and the labour market, which has ended up with a loss of control.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

**Dame Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The estimated spend on the agreement with Iraq is around £800,000, which compares with, I think, the £476 million being spent on our agreement with France. Has the Home Secretary made an estimate of how much she expects that money will contribute to reducing the numbers crossing the channel?

**Yvette Cooper:** What we have found in our discussions with both the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan regional authority is that they want to tackle organised immigration crime in their country. They are concerned about not just people trafficking and people smuggling, but drug trafficking, to which the same gangs are sometimes linked, and money laundering. We found a strong willingness to work with us; the most important thing will be to get the co-ordination, co-operation, information sharing, standards and intelligence in place. That will be the start. This is the beginning of a partnership, and the funding that we have set out will be for the first step in that partnership, to get better biometrics, better training capabilities and better border security in place. We see it as an important partnership that needs to grow.

**Linsey Farnsworth** (Amber Valley) (Lab): As an international liaison prosecutor, my job was to facilitate international co-operation, working with the NCA and overseas authorities. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is the key to smashing the criminal people smuggling gangs, not gimmicks such as the Rwanda scheme?

**Yvette Cooper:** I completely agree. Spending £700 million just to send back four volunteers was the most astonishing, shocking waste of money. My hon. Friend is right. The criminal gangs operate across borders, but law enforcement across borders is far too weak. It has been far too much a case of each country looking inwards rather than getting co-operation in place, so the gangs are able to run rings around law enforcement in far too many places across the world. We have to strengthen the co-operation across borders in order to tackle the gangs.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I agree with the Home Secretary that the failure of the last Government to control immigration was unconscionable, and our new leader has rightly apologised for our failure. Some of us on the Back Benches warned the Government at the time, but there we are—that is the past. Looking to the future, I agree that we all want to return illegal migrants to where they came from, but will the Home Secretary list the countries that human rights lawyers say are so unsafe that people cannot be returned to them? What is the deterrent for people from those countries if we do not have an offshoring policy?

**Yvette Cooper:** Obviously, each individual case needs to be decided on a case-by-case basis. It has been agreed through the courts that, for example, some people could be safely returned to Iraq, but the process, or the bureaucracy, is extremely slow. Many people are currently in the immigration enforcement system. The previous system was just not following up and taking action, which is why we have been able to increase the returns substantially in a short period. Of course, each case has



to be looked at on its merits, but we can do substantially more to ensure that the rules are properly respected and enforced.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and I ask my question in the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I also thank her for talking about the UK's strong history of welcoming people who are trying to escape persecution. We should not forget that at the heart of the organised people smuggling into this country are people being exploited and dying. The last Government were reduced in their final days to sloganising about people coming on boats, and about the Rwanda scheme, which brought shame on our country. I was appalled to hear the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) try to defend the scheme, and shocked to hear him describe the drop in the number of students coming to the UK as something to be celebrated.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Give way.

**Dr Arthur:** Sorry.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I call the Home Secretary.

**Yvette Cooper:** Clearly the Rwanda scheme failed, and the Leader of the Opposition knows that it failed. That is why she does not want to reinstate it, contrary to the views of the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who seems to want to spend another £700 million over another two years to send another four volunteers to Rwanda. The criminals who organise the boats are incredibly dangerous. We have seen children crushed to death and people drown as a result of these flimsy and dangerous boats, and the gangs are making profits of hundreds of millions of pounds. We should not be letting them get away with it. That is why we need to work across borders to go after them.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Migration plays a significant part in our economy. In the Lake district, 66% of hospitality and tourism businesses report that they are failing to meet demand because of a lack of workforce capacity. Migration is part of the answer. Will the Home Secretary listen to leaders of the Cumbria hospitality and tourism economy and meet them to discuss options such as a youth mobility visa scheme? It would enable us to shore up our workforce, which is brilliant, but far too small.

**Yvette Cooper:** All I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that there are some deep and fundamental problems in the UK labour market that we have inherited. He is talking about workforce shortages when net migration has quadrupled and when overseas recruitment for work has quadrupled. I think that shows that there is a much bigger challenge in the workforce, where we have a huge drop in training and where we do not have proper strategic approaches to the workforce. That is what we should be putting in place instead. We have to look at the issues around training, pay and conditions and at the key sectors to make sure they get support, rather than continually looking to increase migration instead.

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): The former Conservative Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), has said that the country is "right to be furious" about his party's record on immigration, and that the Conservatives need to own their failures and change. What is there, in the Conservatives' obsession with their failed and costly Rwanda programme, to show that they have heeded his warning and changed their approach?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. The former Immigration Minister and now shadow Justice Secretary also said that the net migration figures were "a day of shame for the Conservative Party."

They might need a little bit more shame on the Opposition Front Benches.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Can the Home Secretary set out how many hotels have been moved into housing asylum seekers since 4 July? Will she commit to updating the House regularly as to which hotels have been repurposed for that use?

**Yvette Cooper:** I know that the Immigration Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), has already answered some of the questions that the right hon. Gentleman has raised. He is right to express concern about asylum hotels. There are now 220 asylum hotels in use. He will know that his Government opened 400 asylum hotels. We have had to deal with the collapse in asylum decision making. In the last few months before the general election, the Conservatives went down to just a few hundred decisions being taken a week, rather than thousands of decisions each week. That was deeply damaging, and we have had to deal with it, so that we can turn things around by clearing the asylum backlog and ending hotel use.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): It is clear that my right hon. Friend inherited a chaotic immigration situation from the last Government, and I commend her on the work she is doing. She rightly focused on international co-operation, but principally on removals. Does she accept that, in a world as interconnected as ours, migration can no longer adequately be managed by treaties that are now more than 70 years out of date? We need to co-operate with our international partners, to create a new structure and a new settlement for managing global migration.

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend makes important points, because countries do need to work together and to look far more at some of the causes of migration. That is why we set out at the European Political Community summit an additional £80 million fund to look at earlier prevention work and how we address some of the causes of migration in the first place, as well as the law enforcement response that we need to go after the criminal gangs.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The absurd and chaotic Brexit—fully supported by those on the Government Front Bench—was supposed to finally satisfy this obsession, but ending free movement has only increased the numbers of people coming here. What is the point of their Brexit, and why has it so spectacularly failed to manage to get a hold on immigration to the UK?

**Yvette Cooper:** The previous Conservative Government made a decision in 2021 to launch what was in effect a free market approach to immigration. They made it much easier to recruit from abroad and they incentivised employers to recruit from abroad by introducing a 20% wage discount at the same time that they were cutting training and support. The consequence is that, since 2021, we have indeed seen a massive increase in overseas recruitment. As the same time, we have seen a drop in people getting training and support to work in the UK.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the frankness that the Government have brought to their assessment of the situation and the setting out of clear measures. As we have heard, criminal gangs are causing untold misery to people all around the world. Will the Home Secretary expand on the measures that we are taking with European neighbours in particular to crack down on these criminal gangs once and for all?

**Yvette Cooper:** We have been working with other European countries. We have a new agreement in place with Italy to go after the illicit finance that underpins many of the criminal gangs. The work that Prime Minister Meloni has done already has helped to significantly reduce Mediterranean crossings. We are working with Italy, and we think that work is important.

We are also working with Germany on supply chains and with Bulgaria on supply chains, including on how boats and engines are being moved across Europe. We are of course working with France on tackling the organised gangs, including some of the Iraqi-Kurdish gangs operating in northern France, so that we can pursue those gang networks to prevent dangerous crossings.

**Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): The asylum hotel in Cheshunt in my constituency is already putting pressure on strained public services, including local GP surgeries. The Government's manifesto committed to closing asylum hotels. Can I ask the Secretary of State when she will honour that promise, or will the list of broken promises to the British people get longer?

**Yvette Cooper:** We are determined to clear the backlog so that we can end asylum hotels. In 2019, there were no asylum hotels, so it was the previous Government who increased and opened about 400 of them. There are still around 220 asylum hotels in place.

We have had to deal with the shocking crashing of the asylum system. Just before the election, the previous Government effectively stopped a whole load of caseworkers from making decisions on asylum cases and pushed the backlog up—we also had to clear that over the summer. That means that we can make progress on bringing the backlog down, so that we can start to clear hotels and ensure that we save money for the taxpayer. We have already saved the taxpayer hundreds of millions of pounds this year.

**Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Was the Home Secretary as surprised as me to hear that, as part of the £700 million spent by the previous Government on the failed Rwanda scheme, the package of support that the four volunteers who went to Kigali received included five years of free housing, free food, free private healthcare, free university education

and free vocational training, all at a cost of £150,000 per person? Does she agree that Rwanda was in no way a deterrent but a colossal waste of money?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. It was a total, shocking waste of money to send just four volunteers—and the Government had 1,000 people working on the Rwanda scheme. That was 1,000 people who could have been working on enforcement, returns or clearing the backlog, or taking action to pursue the criminal gangs. Instead, they were working on a scheme that ran for two years and sent just four volunteers.

**Nigel Farage** (Clacton) (Reform): I agree with the Home Secretary, who was right to highlight that 2023 was a year of shame for a Government who had repeatedly promised net migration of tens of thousands a year, not nearly a million; perhaps they will never be forgiven for it. But I also see that in 2023 asylum claims were made by 84,000 people. Everyone talks about the small boats and yet 69% of those 84,000 did not come across the English channel in boats. Will she tell me, please: where did they come from? Were they overstayers? Were they on student visas? Who were the 69%?

**Yvette Cooper:** We are clear that net migration needs to come down after the huge increase. We also need to restore order to the asylum system. Part of that is going after the criminal gangs who are undermining border security and putting lives at risk, and tackling the small boat crossings. There is also an issue about the increase of in-country asylum applications. We have instigated a review into that, to get to the bottom of what is happening and why. We found that the previous Government's decision to remove visa requirements for visitors led to a significant increase in asylum applications from people coming as visitors. We have reversed those changes made by the previous Conservative Government and reintroduced visitor visa requirements for those countries.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq, I welcome my right hon. Friend's recent visit and the agreements that flowed from that. Does she agree that support from the UK and allies for the Kurdistan region in Iraq across all spheres, plus the efforts of our own Government and allies to strengthen relationships between Baghdad and Erbil, fosters greater prosperity and stability, helps to reduce corruption and thereby helps to alleviate some of the push factors that cause migration to this country in the first place?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I thank the Kurdish Regional Government for their hospitality and welcome, and the Iraqi Government for their welcome and support for my visit last week. We had important and serious discussions with both the regional authorities and the Iraqi Government on a range of issues such as tackling organised immigration crime, but also the positive work that both the Iraqi Government and the Kurdish Regional Government want to do to support economic prosperity. They repeatedly made the point that security is the foundation of economic growth. That is why they are so keen to tackle organised immigration crime and other forms of organised crime that can end up undermining their security and economic opportunities.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Given the promises made at the general election, the opening of more asylum hotels is deeply regrettable. As the Home Secretary seeks alternative accommodation to be able to close down those hotels, will she assure the House that she will not overdo her requests of other Government Departments, in particular the Ministry of Defence, which historically has been very helpful in finding surplus accommodation to house migrants? I hope that she agrees that enough is enough, and that she will not disadvantage service families in their accommodation needs.

**Yvette Cooper:** I agree about the importance of supporting our armed forces, including housing for armed forces families. That will always be important. The number of asylum decisions had dropped by 70% in the space of just six months—a massive drop. That crashing of asylum decisions increased the backlog over the summer. We have now managed to get asylum decisions back up to where they were, and the asylum caseworkers back in place and taking those decisions rapidly. That puts us in a position to be able to get the backlog down so that we can take action on asylum hotels, and we are already saving hundreds of millions of pounds this year compared with the previous Government.

**Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): In the run-up to the summer general election, my constituents were hugely concerned about the number of small boats crossing the channel; and little wonder, because the Conservative party left office in the middle of the worst year ever for small boat arrivals—18% higher than in 2023, 5% higher than in 2022 and more than double the level in 2021. The Labour Government came into office just under five months ago, and the number of arrivals is now lower than in 2021, more than a third lower than in 2022, and only 15% higher than 2023, rather than the 19% that we inherited. Does the Home Secretary agree that that all sounds like pretty decent progress?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. The first six months of the year saw a record high for that season; of course, we know that crossings are seasonal, but it was a record high for the first half of the year. If we had carried on at that record high level—higher than 2023, 2022 and 2021—we would have thousands more people in the asylum system right now, and we would have had to deal with thousands more dangerous boat crossings. When we took office in the middle of the year, some independent projections said that there could have been as many as 50,000 crossings this year, and that has not happened. That is no real consolation, though, because so many lives are still being lost, and so many gangs are still making huge profits, which is why we have to take action on the gangs. We have to strengthen border security and prevent so many lives being put at risk.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): Effective technology is at the centre of an excellent asylum and immigration system. I was at the Minister's drop-in on e-visas, which I am sure many of us welcome, where there were assurances that those who are transitioning from a paper visa but have not yet had their e-visa would not be disadvantaged. However, we have seen reports today suggesting otherwise, which is of particular

concern to the Afghan community, and particularly to those who have come to the UK since the rise of the Taliban. Can the Secretary of State give the assurance that people will not be disadvantaged if their e-visas are not processed by the end of January?

**Yvette Cooper:** The hon. Lady will know that the Minister with responsibility for e-visas is working immensely hard to ensure that any concerns are dealt with. We are clear that no one should be disadvantaged by the transfer to the new electronic system, which will strengthen security and the information that people rightly have. We need to ensure that the transfer happens as smoothly as possible. I urge the hon. Lady to continue to keep in touch with the Minister so that we can ensure that every issue within the system and with the transfer to e-visas is properly addressed.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): When the truly shocking net migration figures were published last week, the shadow Justice Secretary and former Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), said on Twitter—now known as X—that it was a

“day of shame for the Conservative Party”

because it had

“let the country down badly”

and caused immense, lasting harm with immigration policies that have left Britain poorer. Does the Home Secretary agree that it is better to train our own people in this country than to repeat the failed Tory policies that left us all poorer?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. We need a complete overhaul of the way that training and support for work takes place to get UK residents back into work and give them the training they need, and to ensure that we do not have this chaos in the net migration system. I think the former Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), also said that the Conservatives will only rebuild trust once they own up to their failures—perhaps a little more owning up is what we need to hear today.

**Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): In the previous Parliament, Labour consistently voted down stricter border laws and signed bleeding-heart letters trying to prevent the deportation of criminals from this country. In government, they have cancelled restrictions on family routes and removed the offshore processing options. I therefore confess that I am deeply sceptical that Labour will be successful in controlling immigration. The Iraq deal sounds promising as a headline but, truly, what difference will £500,000 to the Iraqi Government make to the volume of channel crossings?

**Yvette Cooper:** I say to the hon. Lady that we are establishing new co-operation and networks not just across Europe, but beyond. We know that significant Iraqi-Kurdish gang networks operate in northern France, which the Kurdistan regional authorities and Iraqi Government are particularly concerned about. They are concerned about the routes back into northern Iraq, and about both the impact such activity is having on their country and the impact that we are concerned about—that it is happening in the channel. That is why getting law enforcement working in partnership together



[Yvette Cooper]

is at the heart of this agreement, and that is what we can now build on. This agreement is the first that Iraq has made with any country to tackle organised immigration, crime and border security. I welcome Iraq's support for this agreement, and its determination and commitment to it. We need to work in partnership with Iraq on it.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Residents in Portsmouth North are concerned about the rising cost of housing asylum seekers. Although it is not what we would have wanted as a Government, it is good that we have been open and apologetic about having to house, on a temporary basis, these people because of the inactivity of the previous Government. Does the Home Secretary agree that this is in stark contrast to the previous Government, who never explained and never apologised, even when there were more than 400 hotels, costing £9 million a day? Can she say when we expect the cost of housing asylum seekers to reduce?

**Yvette Cooper:** We are already saving hundreds of millions of pounds this year from the asylum accommodation budget as a result of the decisions we have taken to restart asylum decision making and get the system working again so that we can start clearing the backlog. Had we not done so, and had we carried on with the previous Government's policies, those costs would have soared further. That is unfair on the British taxpayer, as well as being the sign of a broken asylum system. We will continue to do that work. We expect to make hundreds of millions of pounds more in savings next year. In total, the assessment is that over the next few years, we will save £4 billion from the previous Government's failed schemes.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What deterrent will the Home Secretary implement for those asylum claimants who have destroyed their papers and purport to come from regimes to which they cannot possibly be returned?

**Yvette Cooper:** One of the reasons we are talking to the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan regional authorities about biometrics and supporting biometric roll-outs is that they make it easier to prevent people delaying either asylum claims being resolved or returns being agreed by not having papers. Where there are biometrics in place, it makes things much faster. That is why we should be working to extend them and why we are working to establish stronger returns arrangements with other countries. That is what we have been doing throughout the summer and why we have seen such a substantial increase in returns this summer, as a result of our putting in the additional resources that were failing to achieve anything when they were put into the Rwanda scheme. We are now putting them into doing practical things as part of returns and enforcement.

**Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): In his response, the shadow Home Secretary said that £500,000 was not a lot of money. That is probably because he thought that for £100,000 more you could give free education, housing, university education and vocational training to just four volunteers going to Rwanda. What an absolute waste of money! Does the

Home Secretary agree that it is a far better deterrent to actually process people and send them abroad, or should we continue with the fallacy that as a nation we should be bribing people to send them over to Rwanda?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is certainly right that the £700 million for four people is absolutely not good value for money at all. We will always make sure that we are looking for good value for money, as well as getting results.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): The previous Administration cannot, Pontius Pilate-like, wash their hands of this immigration mess that has placed intolerable burdens on mostly disadvantaged working-class communities, but the Government now have responsibility for this matter. They cannot pass it back again: they have responsibility. What I would like to hear from the Home Secretary today—despite what has happened since July, with 20,000 more immigrants coming into the United Kingdom, hotel places up and foreign criminals still waltzing through the courts claiming human rights to stop themselves being removed—is what she intends to do to remove the pull factor that encourages people to see Britain as an easy touch.

**Yvette Cooper:** One of the things we are doing is cracking down on illegal working and the exploitation by employers of people coming to the UK who are often not here lawfully and as a result are being exploited by employers. That has been too easy for employers to do for far too long. That is why we saw an increase of more than 30% in illegal working visits over the summer, a significant increase in the number of arrests as a result of those visits, and a consequent significant increase in penalties for employers. We will continue to take much stronger action, such as removing the ability to sponsor workers from any employer who is breaching important employment laws. We need to ensure that every bit of the system is being tackled and addressed, so that we can have a system that is fair and has public support.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Home Secretary ended her statement by saying that she wanted "serious international partnerships", but when pressed on that by the shadow Home Secretary, she seemed reluctant to say whether she would explore removal or processing agreements with third countries, as advocated by the President of the European Commission. Who is actually serious on this question: this Government or Ursula von der Leyen?

**Yvette Cooper:** We have been very clear about the importance of working with other countries, both on tackling gangs and on addressing some of the wider issues that we face. We have always said that we will look at anything that works, and we will look at practical measures. We have recognised that different approaches are being taken by different countries. The Italy-Albania agreement, for example, provides for a fast-track returns arrangement, enabling those from predominantly safe countries to be moved to Albania. We think it is possible to introduce similar fast-track arrangements that have not been properly in place in this country for a long time, and we should be considering those as well.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): More than 210,000 Ukrainians have been hosted in the UK since Russia's full-scale invasion, which is a testament to the generosity of British hosts, but the millions of

Ukrainians who have left Ukraine for Europe are just a fraction of the number who might flee across Europe if Russia were successful in breaking through and occupying all of Ukraine. Does the Secretary of State consider it to be in the UK's own national interest that we confiscate all Russia's frozen assets, offer the proceeds to the defence of Ukraine and prevent further displacement?

**Yvette Cooper:** As the hon. Member will know, we strongly support Ukraine, given what it has had to endure and go through. We continue to condemn the Putin Government for the things that they have done and the impact that they are having on Ukraine, and we will continue to support Ukraine in every way possible.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): A constituent wrote to me recently asking if I could get a hurry-up on his application under the EU settlement scheme. It turns out that he is subject to a deportation order, and that we actually did deport him in 2018, but he managed to get back into the country somehow and to make his application under the EUSS. The Home Office told me last week that it could not deport him until his EUSS application had been played out, including all the appeals. He made the application in 2020, and it is now nearly the end of 2024. In a spirit of bipartisanship, may I suggest that the Home Secretary should change the rules with a stroke of her pen, and that anyone who is subject to a deportation order should simply be deported? In a similar spirit, may I suggest that if she can get it done by Friday, I will gladly drive him to the airport myself?

**Yvette Cooper:** The last Government had 14 years—or at least four years, since the EU settlement scheme was introduced—to deal with some of these issues. We take very seriously the need to speed up and improve enforcement of returns for those who have no right to be here. The immigration system and the asylum system can only work and command public confidence if the rules are respected and enforced. That means that if someone does not have a right to be here, there should be proper enforcement. We are working to speed up enforcement, which is why there was a significant increase in returns over the summer, but we will continue to do so, and we will continue to consider what further amendments can be made to improve matters.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Home Secretary has quite rightly lambasted the absolute failures of the last Government on mass immigration, but could she comment on whether people in the Home Office will be held accountable for allowing systems and controls to crumble in the last five years, and on whether people in the Office for National Statistics will be held accountable for getting their numbers wrong by almost a quarter of a million people in just one year?

**Yvette Cooper:** Conservative Ministers made policy decisions that they asked Home Office officials to implement. Fundamentally, the Conservative Government need to take responsibility for policy decisions that they made in 2021, which led to a big increase in migration for work, for example, and a big increase in the net migration numbers, at the same time as training was being cut in the UK. That has had damaging consequences for confidence and trust, but also for the functioning of the UK economy and labour market, because we should

be doing far more to train people in everything from engineering to construction. There are a whole series of different areas where we should increase training here in the UK.

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Home Secretary confirm how many country deals are being worked on to ensure that people can be returned to their country of origin, and when does she expect them to have a material impact on the level of migration to the UK?

**Yvette Cooper:** Some of the work that we are doing with different countries is about speeding up existing returns arrangements, which sometimes do not work effectively enough. Sometimes it is about relatively practical improvements to existing arrangements that take far too long or have too many hurdles. We are already doing that, which is why we had a significant increase in returns over the summer. It is why we organised a series of charter flights, including the three largest charter return flights in UK history, which have all been organised since the general election as part of the practical work that we are doing, step by step, to increase enforcement and returns.

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): While we are reassured by the previous answers that the Home Secretary is committed to increasing the processing of asylum claims to clear the backlog, the Liberal Democrats would push her to go further and faster. Will she consider our calls to end the ban on asylum seekers working, and reduce the time limit to three months so that they are able to contribute to their cost of living, integrate into society and start to pay a fair share within the communities that they wish to join?

**Yvette Cooper:** No, I do not think that is the right thing to do. We need to clear the backlog, speed up decision making and ensure that those who do not have the right to be here are swiftly returned. Where we have had people arrive from Ukraine or Hong Kong, we want to see them working, being part of the economy and being able to support themselves and their families, but where somebody does not have the right to be here, the important thing is to make the system work and make sure that they can swiftly return.

**Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): Villages such as Datchet in my constituency are bearing the brunt of the fact that 6,000 more illegal economic migrants are staying in asylum hotels since this Government came into office. These single adult males represent something like 2% of the village's population, so what assessment has the Home Secretary made of the extra pressures on vital local services, particularly GPs and dentists? What assurances can she give my constituents that they will not miss out on vital appointments as a result of the sudden demographic change?

**Yvette Cooper:** We think that using asylum hotels is the wrong way to respond to the system that we have, which is why the increase in the backlog as a result of the previous Conservative Government's collapse in decision making has been so damaging. That is why we now have additional caseworkers in place and asylum decisions back at the levels that they were previously, so that we can clear the backlog and make sure that we do not need to use asylum hotels. The previous Government

[Yvette Cooper]

opened 400 asylum hotels and quadrupled the cost of the asylum accommodation system. That has a shocking impact on the taxpayer, and we are already saving money by bringing the costs down.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): We need a firm but fair and compassionate approach on immigration, as I think everyone in the House would agree. Human rights non-governmental organisations have warned that people being returned to Iraq could be at risk of human rights abuses, so can the Home Secretary tell us what reassurances she has had on that point? Will human rights always be a red line when she is striking migration deals in future?

**Yvette Cooper:** The agreement that we reached and signed with the Iraqi Government explicitly commits to support for international law, international humanitarian law and human rights, and this was one of the issues that we discussed as part of the meetings. The hon. Gentleman will also know that every decision in the asylum system is made on its individual merits to ensure that, where somebody is being rejected from the asylum system and is being returned, it is safe and appropriate to do so. But we do believe that there are many people currently in the immigration enforcement system who should be safely returned to their homes, and that is why we have increased the process around enforcement and returns this summer.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** To end, we have Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am sure that this is a thrill for everybody. I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. The failures of the previous Government

may undoubtedly be a reason for this uncontrollable migration number, but my constituents in Northern Ireland—who have had their winter fuel allowance removed and who are seeing an increase in the cost of living that is pushing many working families towards the poverty line at warp speed—are interested not in a blame game but in getting immigration sorted and the boats stopped.

What will the Government do to achieve a reasonable immigration policy? How they will deal with those who have not come here legally and who do not deserve to be here ahead of the families from Afghanistan, who were instrumental in the war effort there and who are still waiting in the correct procedural queue rather than jumping off boats?

**Yvette Cooper:** Enforced returns for those with no right to be here were up 19% this summer, and voluntary returns are up 14%. We think that those should increase. On the overall immigration system, we will be setting out in a White Paper new proposals to better link the Migration Advisory Committee, the skills bodies across the UK and other organisations to identify stronger controls that are also linked to stronger training requirements, so that as well as having the visa controls in place, we also have clear requirements to train here in the UK to ensure that we can tackle the big increase in net migration for work that we saw over the last five years.

I think the hon. Member would probably agree that most people across the country want to see strong border security and a properly controlled and managed immigration and asylum system. We have not had that for too long, but those are the proper controls and fair systems that we need to get back in place so that we can fix the foundations and everybody can have confidence in the system for the future.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That is the end of that statement. I will give the Front Benchers a few moments to shuffle over quickly and quietly.



## North-West Syria

5.48 pm

### **The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer):**

Last week, we witnessed a major new offensive by opposition groups in north-west Syria. On Wednesday 27 November, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham—HTS—along with several other opposition forces started to move towards Aleppo. By late Friday night, they were in control of the majority of Aleppo city. They had also captured Saraqeb, which intersects Syria's most strategic motorways. As I stand here, we do not know if HTS will succeed in pushing further south towards the city of Hama, which sits approximately 100 km south of Aleppo. What we do know is that these developments mark the biggest shake-up of the conflict lines in Syria since 2020.

In response, Russian airstrikes have increased on Idlib province—HTS's heartland—and on Aleppo. There have also been reports of Iranian-aligned groups moving into Syria to back up the Assad regime. Events are moving quickly, and the trajectory is unclear. My primary concern, in the immediate term, is the impact on civilians and, of course, the delivery of humanitarian assistance. It will be particularly worrying if we see more large-scale attacks against civilians by the regime or Russia. I call directly on all actors involved, including Iran and Russia, to act in accordance with international humanitarian law, and not to target civilians or civilian infrastructure, including health facilities. Humanitarian actors should be granted full humanitarian access on the ground.

In response to recent developments, we have been rapidly engaging key partners and interlocutors to assess the situation and co-ordinate responses. I spoke earlier to my Turkish counterpart, and I reiterated my concern about the potential for new escalation and the impact on civilians. I will be travelling to the region this weekend, where I plan to engage with a range of partners on the latest developments, and on Wednesday I will be speaking to the UK-funded White Helmets, a Syrian organisation operating in north-west Syria, to better understand how it and other non-governmental organisations are responding to the situation and supporting people on the ground.

The UK issued two statements over the weekend, including one with the US, Germany and France calling for de-escalation and the protection of civilians to prevent further displacement and disruption of humanitarian access. This is the right focus as the situation develops, but the current fighting underscores that the situation in Syria is not sustainable.

Thirteen years into the conflict, no side has won or can decisively win on the battlefield, including Assad. A frozen conflict is not the same as peace. Syrians continue to flee the country, drugs and arms smuggled from Syria threaten the region, and Iran and Russia continue to exert influence, propping up the Syrian regime. The underlying reasons for this conflict remain unaddressed.

Recent developments in the north-west only underscore the urgent need for a Syrian-led political solution to the conflict in Syria, in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254. We urge all parties to re-engage with this process and the efforts of UN Special Envoy Pedersen.

I recognise that this escalation raises other questions. First, on consular assistance. I make it clear that my Department's long-standing advice is against all travel

to Syria due to the ongoing conflict and unpredictable security conditions. Consular support is not available within Syria, and all British embassy services in Damascus are suspended. I reiterate our long-standing advice: any British nationals in Syria should leave the country by any practical means.

We are closely monitoring the wider humanitarian situation. In north-west Syria, 4.1 million people, 80% of whom are women or children, were already in need prior to this escalation. There is currently no humanitarian corridor for those fleeing, which increases terribly the risks to their safety.

The UK has spent over £4 billion since 2011, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. In October, we announced a further £3 million to provide lifesaving emergency assistance and healthcare to the most vulnerable citizens fleeing the Lebanon conflict into Syria. Many of them will be in north-west Syria.

Too many Syrians have tragically been displaced multiple times as a result of conflict. They bear the brunt of horrific violence. Sadly, more still will be displaced by this latest escalation, and I underline my concern about what we might see should Russia or the Assad regime start a campaign of bombardment on the area.

The UK has stood by the Syrian people, and we will continue to do so. Our assistance aims to improve humanitarian conditions for those in the direst need. We work with local and international NGOs and UN organisations to provide health, nutrition, child protection, water, sanitation and education services throughout Syria, including in the north-west.

As the situation develops, we are working closely with humanitarian actors on the ground to understand the impact and the need created by the latest escalation. We call on all parties to ensure full and unhindered humanitarian access throughout the affected areas and to protect civilians. For too long, the Syria conflict has been considered frozen. But if we have learned one thing in recent years, it is that there is no such thing. It is incumbent upon us to use this moment to find new momentum for the political track and to address the underlying causes of this conflict.

I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.54 pm

**Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** I thank the Minister for his statement. These developments in Syria are deeply serious and threaten further brutality and terror in a region under enormous pressure and suffering. We have seen an extremist rebel group make rapid progress and take territory in Aleppo, and the first Russian airstrikes in Aleppo since 2016. We know that there has been fighting in Idlib and Hama too. Civilian lives continue to be lost and homes continue to be destroyed.

As the Minister says, there has been more than a decade of turmoil and tragedy for the innocent people of Syria, which is beyond disturbing. With the eyes of the world focused on other conflicts, we cannot forget the brutality, the loss of life and the destruction that has taken place in Syria, or its consequences. More than half a million people have already been killed, with millions injured or maimed, with some being victims of chemical weapons.

[Priti Patel]

How many more innocent lives must be sacrificed to a savage dictator's thirst for power or at the whim of bloodthirsty terrorists?

The civil war in Syria was one of the most harrowing issues I had to deal with in government, and right hon. and hon. Members who have been in the House since 2011 will know from our debates how this conflict has disrupted the region and contributed to the global migration crisis. Like other Members, I have met Syrians in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon who spoke of their fear, concern and trauma. Both countries are under great pressure right now, particularly Lebanon.

People's lives have been turned upside down by this conflict, with those caught on the berm between Jordan and Syria facing terrible atrocities. The calculated and cruel barbarism of the Assad regime and the brutality of the terrorist groups have been horrifying at every stage of this conflict. They have held our belief in tolerance and freedom in contempt, and we should never turn a blind eye.

I have been very clear that when red lines are crossed in this conflict, the UK must be part of a firm response. We are in a dangerous place once again, and the situation could become even more severe. I saw the statements issued by the Government and our partners in America, Germany and France over the weekend, and I hope the Minister can answer some of my questions, as we need an honest assessment of this conflict.

Can the Minister tell us his assessment of the real threat that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham poses to our interests? In his statement, he commented on the drugs and arms smuggling through Syria, which we have known about for some time. Our dear friends and allies in Jordan have been raising this issue, so can he tell us what action he plans to take with international and neighbouring allies to address this?

With further instability and conflict in Syria, there is also a risk that criminal activities will proliferate. Instability also fuels extremism, and not just abroad but here at home too. Can the Minister therefore outline the risk that dangerous extremists in Syria pose to the security of prisons in the area? And can he confirm that there is cross-Government co-ordination to review the security and defence implications and the terrorism risks?

The House will know that the UK has been in the vanguard of the humanitarian response, of which we should all be proud. The previous Government invested £4 billion in support that has reached millions of people, saving lives with food, shelter, water, medicines, vaccinations and improved sanitation.

Can the Minister explain what this Government will do to ensure that aid gets into the hands of the right people, not the wrong people? I remember the day when we saw an aid convoy blown up, which disrupted aid when there was no humanitarian corridor. What is he doing to leverage our aid budget to respond to these new and recent developments? Can he also tell us whether aid is getting into the areas affected by the current surge in violence? How could this new escalation impact on the migratory pressures in Syria, and what will that mean for neighbouring areas?

We know that the Assad regime has been bailed out by the Russians, the Iranians and Hezbollah, but with Russia now focused on its illegal invasion of Ukraine,

and with Iran's presence in the region now depleted, what is the Minister's assessment of how this will affect the dynamics of the current insurgency? Finally, does he have a vision for what future we should now be discussing with regard to Syria, and for how we can get there?

**Hamish Falconer:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. She raised a lot of issues and I will endeavour to address as many as I can.

The right hon. Lady asked what regional co-ordination is under way. We are talking to partners in all the regional capitals, as she would expect, but let me be clear about who we are not talking to. We do not talk to HTS, which is a proscribed terrorist organisation—it is proscribed for a reason and remains proscribed, and we are concerned by many of the public statements it has made. We are not talking to the Assad regime; the right hon. Lady paints well the horrors that Assad and his regime have perpetrated across Syria. However, we are talking to all those with an interest. As I said, I will travel to the region at the weekend and undertake further consultations. I am talking to NGOs and other actors on the ground.

The right hon. Lady asked whether access is sufficient. As she will have seen, the frontlines are moving very quickly and we are concerned that practical access for aid agencies will be difficult to maintain. We are working with our partners to try to maintain access through established humanitarian corridors, and to ensure that a population that is already at great risk will be provided with the assistance it needs. At a moment of such quick changes, that is difficult, but we are working day and night to ensure that happens.

The right hon. Lady asked about cross-Government co-ordination. We are very alive to the terrorist threats that could emanate from Syria, not least from Daesh, which may be down but is not out. We continue to monitor those issues very closely, including the status of prisons, which she referred to.

On the dynamics in the region, clearly the region is in very significant flux. The position of Iran and Russia is in flux, which is why I call on them and say clearly that they must not conduct the large-scale attacks on civilians that I fear are their go-to in such a situation.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): During the Syrian civil war, millions of Syrians moved to Turkey and southern Lebanon, so they have already been displaced once. In Turkey, Erdoğan has been encouraging them to go home to Syria, and in southern Lebanon they have had to move back into Syria to flee from the invasion. Multiple traumas have been suffered by multiple innocent families, who have no guilt in any of this but are simply victims again and again. When families face such multiple traumas, what assistance are the British Government able to give them?

**Hamish Falconer:** It is incredibly difficult to provide appropriate and sustained care in north-west Syria. As my right hon. Friend says, many people have been displaced, not necessarily by the current conflict but by the Lebanon conflict, which we have discussed in the House recently.



People who have been displaced on multiple occasions are in a situation of acute vulnerability. Whether they have been displaced by the Lebanon conflict or the conflict in north-west Syria, we are extremely concerned and we will do what we can. The assessments are ongoing.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I join hon. Members across the House in expressing our deep concern at the toll of the latest outbreak of conflict on the innocent civilians of Syrian. They have borne the brunt of more than a decade of horrific conflict, and we should not forget the devastating impact of the 2023 earthquake on parts of the country as well. I offer my support to the Government in urging all parties to uphold international law. It is vital that the Government do all they can to prevent a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria, and in the region more broadly.

I spoke this afternoon to the Jordanian ambassador to the UK. He underscored the potential impact of this conflict on his country, with its long and porous border with Syria. With an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon and another 1.3 million in Jordan, providing necessary support to neighbouring countries that host those refugees is crucial. Yet thanks to successive cuts to the international development budget, including by the new Government, too often we approach such crises with one hand tied behind our back. Will the Minister set out what new development assistance we are providing in response and whether he is seeking additional emergency funds from the Treasury?

It appears that the fighting reflects interference in Syria by both Iran and Russia, as the Minister has said, each seeking to serve their interests during a period of instability. There is a very real risk that this new conflict in the north-west of the country may create a vacuum in the south of Syria that allows terrorist groups such as al-Nusra, al-Qaeda and Daesh to re-establish. Does the Minister share that concern?

The UK must hold others to account and press for an end to the use of proxies that show no regard for the rights of civilian populations or the role of international law. Will the Minister say how the UK is using its influence in international organisations and with our allies to achieve that?

**Hamish Falconer:** We are conducting rapid assessments about where the needs will be, in a situation that is rapidly changing. As I mentioned, we announced further funding for north-west Syria in October. It is not yet clear what further allocations will be required. I will update the House when those assessments are complete and our plans are clearer.

On counter-terrorism, I agree with the hon. Member. As I mentioned in my response to the shadow Secretary of State, there remains an extant threat from Daesh and other groups from Syria. We will continue to monitor those issues very closely. Our first responsibility as a Government is the safety of British nationals; that will continue to be the case and we take our responsibility seriously.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): I cannot process that this conflict has been going on for 13 years. From where I am sitting, I have a direct line of sight to the memorial shield for our former colleague from Batley and Spen. When she came to the House, she did so much to draw hon. Members' attention to the plight of civilians, but things have only got worse since then. It is already the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with nearly 17 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and 90% of families living in poverty. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the most recent escalation on the levels of need of those in Syria and those who have fled? Will the UK urge the UN to activate its emergency response plans? And—this is the bottom line—are the Government prepared to increase official development assistance on humanitarian support?

**Hamish Falconer:** We are talking to the United Nations about its plans. I will not give undue comment on operational matters, but the UN's system is under strain in north-west Syria, as my hon. Friend would expect. In the coming days I hope to be able to say more about what assessment we have made and what actions we will take about whether there will be an increase in ODA; that will be a question more properly for the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who is in the region now. I am conscious that there are significant needs across the middle east that we are trying to meet as best we can.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the former Minister.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Assad and his family have reportedly gone to Moscow, which is probably significant. Let us hope that he stays there; they deserve each other. However, HTS is very much worse. As HTS takes territory, people will be on the move in very large numbers. Historically, the United Nations has managed the situation in northern Syria and triaged those who are claiming asylum. This country has been generous in taking refugees, particularly from the most disadvantaged groups: old people, women and children. What discussion has the Minister had with the United Nations and will that process continue, because I feel sure that the British people will want to continue to be generous?

**Hamish Falconer:** The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point about minority groups. I underline to all parties to this conflict, whether they are proscribed in the UK or not, that minority groups across north Syria, of which there are many, deserve to be protected and have a right to exist. We are looking closely at the actions of all conflict parties, regardless of whether we have direct contact with them, and it is incredibly important that minority rights in northern Syria are protected.

On the right hon. Gentleman's question about the United Nations, to be frank there is, at this moment, panicked movement across frontlines. It is probably too early to be able to address the kinds of questions he raises, but I am sure we will be talking about this in due course.

**Blair McDougall** (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): My mind also turned to the former Member for Batley and Spen, my friend Jo, and the cry she made in this Chamber to

[Blair McDougall]

do something to help the people of Syria. Back then, we saw the widespread use of chemical weapons in the last moment when Assad's regime was under pressure. What steps are the Government taking to monitor any war crimes taking place in this moment? By way of deterrence now, will the Minister reaffirm that the British Government still believe there should be accountability for the use of chemical weapons a decade ago in Syria?

**Hamish Falconer:** I recognise the work of the former Member for Batley and Spen, our friend Jo Cox, and my hon. Friend himself, who has been involved in these issues, including accountability, for some time. I agree there must of course be accountability for the use of chemical weapons by Syria. I met as Minister the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to ensure that proper measures are in place and to assist it in its efforts to ensure that treaty conventions are upheld. In August, I instructed UK officials to join an expert-level working group convening a geographically diverse group of states, academics and technical experts to explore international legal mechanisms that could pursue individual criminal responsibility for chemical weapons use. I call on all parties in north-west Syria at the moment to be mindful that we are watching questions of chemical weapons use incredibly carefully.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The Syrian Democratic Forces have been an incredibly important ally to the United Kingdom and many other countries in pursuing and degrading Islamic State over a long period of time. Will the Minister assure the House that we will continue to give them as much support, including humanitarian support, as possible to establish and continue the stability that there has been in north-east Syria as a result of their work?

**Hamish Falconer:** The Syrian Democratic Forces are a member of the global coalition against Daesh, and they play an important role. We engage with them regularly—both the SDF themselves and the democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria—and we will continue to do so.

**David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and particularly the emphasis on protecting civilians. I associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) in paying tribute to Jo. I am convinced that if she was still with us, British policy on Syria would have been markedly better than it unfortunately has been over the past few years.

A particular concern over that time is that debates in this Chamber and beyond have not had Syrian voices. I was grateful to hear that the Minister, and the International Development Committee, will meet the White Helmets, which is fantastic. Would he also agree to meet me and the Syrian British Consortium—a group of Syrian activists in the UK—to discuss our policy towards Syria and how their voices can shape the debate going forward?

**Hamish Falconer:** Yes.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I would like to build on the question posed by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). Between

2014 and 2020, almost all Syrians who were given asylum in the UK applied from the region. The vulnerable persons resettlement scheme did not require Syrians to make it to the UK before applying; the small numbers who were successful had to apply through Syria's neighbours, such as Jordan. Does the Minister recognise that this safe and legal route encouraged asylum seekers to apply from the region, and it also deterred them from making their way across Europe to the UK?

**Hamish Falconer:** I am sorry; I am not sure I followed the question. Perhaps the Member can have another go.

**Richard Foord** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. The best thing would be to ask for the question in writing so that the Minister can respond—I have done it on your behalf, Minister.

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I would try to repeat the question, but I did not catch it myself.

I hope that it is recognised how interconnected the conflicts are in the region, which includes connections to Russia, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and even further afield. This escalation creates serious risks not only for the population of the immediate area, but for regional stability. How can we recognise that in our security and diplomatic policy? What measures are the Government taking to look at this collective series of risks that are increasingly interconnected?

**Hamish Falconer:** My hon. Friend is right that the security situation in the region is interlinked. Clearly, what is happening in Lebanon, in Iran and, indeed, in Moscow, as the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) mentioned, is having an effect in north-west Syria. I am concerned by reports of militia groups reinforcing the Syrian regime from Iraq and by reports of Hezbollah's actions in Syria. I assure my hon. Friend that we take a regional approach to these issues. I am the Minister responsible for all these areas, and we view them in the round.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call Stephen Gethins, whose question will no doubt be very clear.

**Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; hopefully I will be clear in my question.

I concur with the Minister's reflection on the devastating humanitarian consequences over the past 13 years. On the interconnectivity of conflicts, he mentioned the Russian attacks, which he will agree are of a similar nature to those we have seen elsewhere targeting civilian infrastructure. As such, what discussions has he had with European partners in particular, given the lack of reliance we may soon have on the United States, when it comes to a common approach on any political process, the targeting of disinformation, such as that rightly highlighted by the White Helmets, and a humanitarian response to international agencies?

**Hamish Falconer:** We issued a statement jointly with the French and the Germans over the weekend. We remain in close co-ordination on humanitarian matters and, as I think the hon. Member was alluding to, on the

importance of ensuring that the Russians understand that there is a common European position and that we are appalled by the kind of targeting of civilians we have seen in north-west Syria and in so many other places by Moscow.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I spoke today to a contact in the moderate Syrian opposition. I would be grateful for the Minister's view of my contact's assessment that the Assad regime appears weak without its allies' backing, that many malign actors have noticed that events in Aleppo indicate greater regime fragility than imagined, and that problems will continue while the regime persists. Though recent events are somewhat unexpected, could he expand on how the British Government, working with allies, can foster much-needed democratic transition for the Syrian people?

**Hamish Falconer**: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work on issues in the region over many years. We are calling for a resolution of this conflict in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254. It is vital that there is a political resolution. Assad's regime has been demonstrated on this day, as on many other days over the last 13 years, not to be the answer. It is not a sustainable position for the Syrians. We call on all parties to re-engage with the political process in line with the Security Council resolution.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Once again, we find the people of Syria squeezed between two vicious regimes: the Assad regime and the terrorists. We know from what has happened in the past that they will again be subjected to barrel bombs and find themselves cowering in basements, that they will be denied basic medical facilities and so on, and that they will flee. Are we pre-empting where bases and camps might be set up based on what we know from the past about the kinds of routes that people are likely to take? More importantly, given that minorities have been persecuted in such camps, have we put in place arrangements to safeguard them, and, as was suggested earlier, to assess asylum claims in those camps, rather than forcing people to flee across Europe in the hope that they get asylum once they reach the coast?

**Hamish Falconer**: As the frontlines move in north-west Syria, it is hard to work out where vulnerable people will settle. We are worried that this latest round of conflict will drive further displacement, and that that displacement will head towards Europe. Earlier, the Home Secretary spoke a little about the measures that she is taking to ensure that those movements towards Europe are done in the most managed way as possible. I share the right hon. Member's concern about the benighted people of Syria, particularly in north-west Syria, who are under the most extreme pressures. We are undertaking rapid assessments of how best to assist them.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): This appears to be a completely intractable situation, but I wish the Minister well on his trip. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) made clear, Iran has its fingers in many of the conflicts and tensions right across the region. I am sure that we all stand in complete solidarity with the ordinary Iranian people. I can only conclude that sanctions are not working.

**Hamish Falconer**: Let me talk about two sets of sanctions—and I apologise to my hon. Friend if I talk about the wrong ones. First, we have extant sanctions on Syria. I was recently in the House to amend them so that they do not unduly press on humanitarian agencies. Let me take this opportunity to say that we are doing everything we can to ensure that our own sanctions regime—vital and important as it is to signal and take real action against the Assad regime—is sufficiently flexible to enable humanitarian work. Secondly, our sanctions on Iran continue to play an important role in responding to Iran's malign actions across the region, including in Syria.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): This scenario is one in which we are considering the lesser of two evils in Syria, and I do not have enough information to gauge which that may be. However, as always, my concern is about what steps the Government are taking to secure food and water for 4 million women and children, and to provide freedom from sexual abuse and depravity. What more can we in this House do collectively to help those in need?

**Hamish Falconer**: I regret to tell the hon. Member that the Syrian people have to choose between more than two evils. There is a multiplicity of actors in the region, and that multiplicity makes humanitarian access particularly complex at the moment. We are focused on ensuring that there are routes for humanitarian aid into north-west Syria—that was one of the topics of my discussions with my Turkish equivalent earlier today—and we are keen to ensure that there are humanitarian routes out for those who might be affected, including the minorities who I know are on the minds of the hon. Member and others across the House.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Christian minority families find themselves facing jihadist terrorists and Russian airstrikes. The family of my Acton constituent Waheba fled to Aleppo 10 years ago from their original city of Al-Tabqah. She wonders whether there could be some kind of Ukrainian-style resettlement scheme for Syrians with blood ties here.

**Hamish Falconer**: In these early days of the conflict, we are focused on events in Syria, but I am happy to write to my hon. Friend with details about what else we might do.



## Point of Order: Rectification Procedure

6.24 pm

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Sammy Wilson on a point of order in connection with the code of conduct, to rectify a failure to declare.

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to apologise to the House for my failure to declare an interest when tabling a parliamentary question to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade on 26 January 2024. When I tabled the question, I inadvertently neglected to declare my interest of a fact-finding trip to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which was paid for by the Turkish chamber of commerce. That was a breach of the rules. I apologise to the House for that error. I am grateful to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for his time and care in rectifying this matter.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. There will be no further points of order on that issue.

## Point of Order

**Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek the assistance of the Speaker's Office. On Friday 29 November, I received an email from the parliamentary and diplomatic protection command regarding the honeytrap situation that hit Westminster. Unfortunately, in that email several other victims were named. It was then leaked to journalists and released from that point onwards. I have received a phone call and an email from the Met to apologise, but I would be grateful if Mr Speaker raised this significant issue with the Met to ensure that lessons are learned and that it does not happen again.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving us notice of his point of order. As he knows, we do not discuss security matters in the Chamber, but I share his concern, and I can assure him that Mr Speaker will raise the matter with the appropriate people.

## Deputy Speaker's Statement

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Before we begin the main business, I wish to make a short statement on behalf of Mr Speaker about the House's sub judice resolution. I understand that the Court of Appeal has recently handed down a judgment on three cases relating to motor finance. Since the lenders involved have sought permission to appeal those cases at the Supreme Court, they remain sub judice. Mr Speaker is exercising his discretion to allow reference to those cases now and in future proceedings where necessary, as they concern a matter of national importance.

## Grenfell Tower Inquiry

6.27 pm

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Grenfell Tower Inquiry phase 2 report.

We will never forget the 72 lives lost as a result of that fateful night seven years ago, or the family, friends and neighbours they left behind—some of whom are with us today in the Public Gallery. I know that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to them. It is thanks to their awe-inspiring tenacity that we have got to where we are today. Sir Martin Moore-Bick's report laid bare the truth of what happened. That day of truth must now lead to a day of justice. They have waited too long for both, and justice delayed is justice denied. There must be full accountability for the failures that led to the biggest loss of life in a residential fire since the second world war. The Metropolitan police will continue to have our full support as they carry out their independent investigation.

What we do know from Sir Martin Moore-Bick's report is that this tragedy was entirely avoidable. The bereaved survivors and the immediate community will have to live the rest of their days with the knowledge that they and those dearest to them were so comprehensively failed. The report makes for the most shocking reading, shining a light on the systemic failures over decades. Those who manufactured and sold building products; the British state; the local council; the tenant management organisation; the London Fire Brigade—every single institution failed to recognise and protect the residents of Grenfell. Reading the report, I was disgusted by the extent to which profits were put before people and by the systemic dishonesty of some of the manufacturers, which had catastrophic results. The families were not listened to—everyone dismissed their concerns.

The No. 1 priority of any Government is to keep their citizens safe. On the day that the report was published, the Prime Minister apologised to the families on behalf of the British state for the catalogue of failures that led to the disaster. He committed to respond to all 58 of the inquiry's recommendations within six months. To the bereaved families, the survivors, those in the immediate community and those who are with us in the Chamber today, I reiterate that apology and that commitment. As the Prime Minister said, bigger change is needed. We need system change—reform of a system that is not delivering the safe homes it should deliver—but where we can start to make immediate change, I will not wait, and neither will the Government. We are boosting the collective efforts to make homes safe, expecting leadership and action from industry, enforcing against landlords where necessary, and providing support so that leaseholders and residents can get on with their lives.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** First, I commend the Deputy Prime Minister on her words—they are the words of us all in this House. We welcome those words and the constructive way in which they have been implemented today.

Can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that action will be taken to hold to account those companies that are guilty? Secondly, when it comes to the findings of this report, will the Deputy Prime Minister share with



the devolved Administrations everything that is being put in place? There are lessons to be learned everywhere. To the Deputy Prime Minister's left and right are two of her Ministers, the hon. Members for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) and for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), who have conveyed that commitment in the past. It would be good to have it on the record from the Deputy Prime Minister.

**Angela Rayner:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I was speaking to families of the bereaved earlier, and I made sure to reiterate that, while this Chamber might not be full, I think I speak on behalf of the whole House when I talk about making sure we continue to learn the lessons of Grenfell. As for working with the devolved Administrations to learn those lessons, that is absolutely important. We have seen other fires internationally, across Europe—some of the survivors and the families have told me this. It is not just here, but abroad too, that people are in this situation, and we need to make sure that we continue to keep our residents safe here.

I can announce today that we have published our response to the emergency evacuation information sharing plus consultation, which provides details of our new residential personal emergency evacuation plans policy to improve the fire safety and evacuation of disabled and vulnerable residents in high-rise and high-risk residential buildings. Under those proposals, residents with disabilities or impairments will be entitled to an assessment to identify necessary equipment and adjustments to aid their fire safety and evacuation. Fire and rescue services will also receive information on vulnerable residents, in case they need to support their evacuation. We have committed to funding next year to begin this important work by supporting social housing providers to deliver residential PEEPs for their tenants. Future years funding will be confirmed at the upcoming spending review, and statutory guidance has been updated to provide for evacuation alert systems in all new blocks of flats over 18 metres. This means that, with our most recent move to provide sprinklers in all new care homes—strengthening protections for some of the most vulnerable—we have now addressed all of the recommendations made by the Grenfell inquiry to the Government in its phase 1 report.

The Prime Minister and I, and the rest of this Government, are determined that industry will deliver real change. As the Government, our role is to ensure that that change is delivered—a generational shift in the safety and quality of housing for everyone in this country. We now need leadership from industry to step up the pace on cultural change across the construction sector, but more crucially, we need a cultural shift that is about empowering people so that we put people and safety first, not profits. That is what needs to change. It is in that spirit, inspired by the Grenfell community's incredible strength and tireless campaigning, that we will continue to push industry to deliver the necessary changes. Let me be crystal clear: we will be holding industry to account as closely as we need to. I know that Members across this House share my desire that this report be a catalyst for change.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way on the point about industry's responsibility. It is right that social housing tenants and leaseholders should not have to bear the

burden of rectifying these buildings. Individual developers and the development industry have been financially held to account, at least to a significant degree, but the one part of industry that has got completely away with it so far is the product manufacturers. So far, they have not been asked to pay anything towards rectifying the buildings, and as the Grenfell inquiry showed, they are responsible for a lot of the problems. Will my right hon. Friend indicate what consideration is being given to a scheme to make sure the product manufacturers pay their fair share of the costs?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are continuing to see what measures we can take, and I have taken nothing off the table. I am working with my officials to make sure that those who are responsible are the ones who pay, not taxpayers.

Important progress has been made since 2017. Fire and rescue services are better trained and better prepared for large-scale emergencies, improvements have been made to local authority building enforcement, and a poor culture among tenant housing associations is being tackled through regulation. However, we must go further. If you speak to those who live in unsafe buildings, it does not feel like there has been progress—it does not feel like progress to them. They still feel trapped, powerless in the face of a system that is not designed for them, so this Government are acting.

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As my right hon. Friend has just said, many of my constituents feel very trapped, so I welcome the acceleration of action. However, does she have any timeframe—or will her Department be working up a timeframe—for when that action will have an impact on constituents? Some of mine will be facing bankruptcy because of the challenges they have been facing. I should declare for the record that I am a leaseholder.

**Angela Rayner:** The absolute deadline we have put forward as part of our remediation acceleration plan is 2029, but we want to go much further. The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), and I have met with developers and others, and we continue to push really hard on this issue—it has been one of our No. 1 focuses.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I commend the Deputy Prime Minister on the way she is introducing this debate. There is another group of people who I do not think have been properly considered yet: those who have lost their property, or could not remortgage it or sell it at the market rate, because they had cladding issues. My constituent Crawford Wilson invested his life savings in a property, unaware at the time that it had cladding problems. This meant that he could not secure a remortgage and could not sell it for anything like the market value. It was finally repossessed, and he lost hundreds of thousands of pounds as a result. What advice could the Deputy Prime Minister offer my constituent, and what is she going to do to try to ensure that that situation is put right?

**Angela Rayner:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, which shows how the damage caused by the organisations that cladded those buildings and their systemic failures have had a real impact. That is why,

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since we were elected in July, my No. 1 focus has been trying to make sure that those buildings are safe and that remediation takes place. Seven years on is far too long for those buildings to still be unsafe, and later in my speech I will come on to some of the issues we are trying to resolve, including the people who are paying exorbitant insurance rates at this time.

Seven years on from the Grenfell Tower tragedy, thousands of people across the country still live in homes with unsafe cladding. The toll that this has placed on thousands of people is, I know, intolerable, with the financial worries, the impact on mental health and the lives put on hold. People have been unable to plan their futures, and may fear going to sleep in case something happens in the night, as it did in June 2017. This is a scandal. It permeates every aspect of the lives of those who live in unsafe buildings—buildings bought or rented in good faith—and it is completely unacceptable.

People must be and must feel safe in their homes, and we are taking a major step towards that with the statement laid in the House today. Our remediation acceleration plan sets out our ambitious measures to fix buildings faster, identify those still at risk and ensure that residents are supported through the remediation process. We are committed to getting homes fixed faster through the remediation acceleration plan. We aim to do that remediation by 2029 at the latest on all residential buildings of 18 metres or over with unsafe cladding, through a Government-funded scheme. By the end of 2029, every residential building of 11 metres or over with unsafe cladding will either have been remediated or have a date for completion, or the landlord will be liable for severe penalties.

We will introduce new legal obligations on landlords to remediate unsafe cladding, with severe penalties, including sanctions for inaction. We are backing this up with new funding and new guidance for regulators to drive remediation forward. We have a plan to tackle the remediation needed in the social sector to support social landlords to ensure that their stock is safe. The building safety levy and developers' repayment of Government funds will ensure that the cost of fixing these buildings does not fall on the taxpayer. Above all, we will take measures to protect residents and leaseholders, who are the innocent parties in this, during remediation. This is our plan, and the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley, will be able to share more of its details at the end of this debate.

Developers must play their part in accelerating remediation. They have already committed to fix or pay to fix unsafe buildings at an estimated cost of more than £3.4 billion, but progress has been too slow. Works have started in fewer than half of developers' buildings known to be unsafe. That is why we have agreed a new joint plan with developers to accelerate remediation and improve the experience of residents, which we are publishing today. For the first time, developers are committing to achieve ambitious stretch targets to assess all their buildings by July 2025, and to start or complete remedial works on all their unsafe buildings by July 2027. To meet these stretch targets, developers will need to more than double the pace at which they have been

assessing buildings and starting remediation work so far this year. Already more than 25 developers have signed up to the plan, bringing more than 95% of the buildings that developers need to remediate into scope, which is encouraging.

We are often reminded just how crucial decisive action to replace unsafe cladding is. Just last week, a fire at the Quadrangle building in Greater Manchester, a building that was remediated in 2021 through the ACM private sector cladding remediation fund, thankfully did not turn into an emergency situation. If the building had not been remediated, that situation could have been much more serious. To keep residents safe in their homes until remediation work has been carried out, we are extending the waking watch replacement fund until the spring of 2026. I will confirm the long-term plans at the end of the next spending review.

Too many leaseholders in buildings that need remediation face unaffordable insurance premiums, and this cannot continue. I can confirm that from today we will start working with insurers to consider whether, for the duration of the remediation programmes, the Government might support industry to reduce fire-related liabilities to lower the high insurance bills that leaseholders face. As part of our commitment to minimising unfair costs to leaseholders, I can also announce that we are tackling the problem of the unfair charges from those managing buildings insurance, and we have launched a consultation on that today.

I want the message to go out loud and clear that we expect the industry and those who build and maintain our homes to lead the way in creating a culture that puts the safety of residents first. Money is available to make buildings safe, but, incredibly, some landlords are still failing to act. Through their inaction, they are preventing homes from being made safe. It is outstandingly neglectful and a dereliction of responsibility. We will not stand for this any longer.

**Apsana Begum** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): The Secretary of State may be aware that my constituency has the highest number of high-rise buildings in the entire country. My constituents want reassurance on whether the scope of penalties and sanctions for landlords that do not comply and do not follow the remediation acceleration plan will include preventing them from expanding their portfolios and continuing to build in the manner they are, thus ensuring accountability and that the harms they have caused are not reproduced.

**Angela Rayner:** I have been very clear with developers by asking why somebody would want to purchase a home from a developer that is not seen to be taking action on remediation. That is why we have got many of them round the table to sign up to this acceleration plan. I do believe that they want to remediate this problem. It has been too long and things need to change. We are clear that there will be consequences for landlords for failing to act. With the support of Parliament, we will put in place legislation to ensure that they do.

The London borough of Tower Hamlets recently became the first local authority in England to successfully obtain a remediation order, and I expect to see many more in the future. To ensure that regulators can act, we will provide £33 million in the next financial year to local authorities, fire and rescue authorities and the Building Safety Regulator, so that they can tackle hundreds

of cases per year. We will provide a further £5 million to the recovery strategy unit to increase its capacity to act. Let me be clear that this includes, where necessary, pursuing landlords in the courts. The industry must act now to fix the thousands of unsafe buildings that must be made safe. It must take seriously its obligations to remediate buildings and to design, construct and maintain buildings safely.

If you own an unsafe building or you are a landlord who is not fixing a building, this Government will make sure that you do, and we will propose legislation to ensure that you do. There can be no more delay, no more excuses and no more obstruction. To make the change that this Government and the Grenfell inquiry demand, we must build effective services that command public trust and confidence, and that are fit for the 21st century. Those who flout their responsibilities will have nowhere to hide. We will take direct action to hold to account those who are failing to meet their obligations. That is why we have committed to a system-wide reform of the construction products regulatory regime, and why we will consult on robust sanctions, penalties and liabilities against manufacturers.

I can update the House that we have made good on our pledge to write to organisations identified by the inquiry for their part in this tragedy. Organisations will hold different levels of responsibility, but I can announce that we will publish guidance early next year to support the first set of decisions that will stop the most appalling companies from being awarded Government contracts.

As I have said, the system itself needs reform. Statutory guidance on building regulations covering fire safety and building design is now subject to continuous review by the Building Safety Regulator, but I want to go further. I can announce today that I have asked the regulator to undertake that a fundamental review of the building safety regulations guidance will be produced, updated and communicated to the construction industry, because we must get this right.

**Mr Betts:** I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way once again. To go back to the issue of the product manufacturers, I am really pleased to hear what she says about Government contracts for the worst offenders, but will she consider giving guidance to local authorities and other public bodies, such as the NHS, to make sure that they are also aware of the need not to award contracts to these companies?

**Angela Rayner:** Yes, I am happy to look at that issue. The spirit I am trying to get across is that we have to have a cultural shift, and everyone has to play their part in ensuring that that happens. I am willing to look at anything the Government can do to make it happen.

**Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab):** The Secretary of State is making an excellent speech, and I wholeheartedly welcome the measures she has announced. In my constituency, one challenge is that, sadly, there have been some poor examples of workmanship—or workpersonship—and some sloppy building that has opened up residents to a risk of fire: poorly built compartmentalisation, fire safety walls not built properly, gaps, the use of wood where wood should not have been used—that sort of risk. Will she ask her officials to look into such matters, and for better guidance to be provided?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Cladding is one element of what many tenants face with unsafe buildings, and we are looking at how we can strengthen measures to ensure that action is taken. Some local authorities have already started to take enforcement action, and I have pushed hard to ensure that we continue to do that. If a building is unsafe, people should not have to live in it, and it should be dealt with as quickly as possible.

We are bringing local authority leaders and Ministers together through the new leaders' council to work through these issues. I thank them all for their engagement today, including our mayors. The resilience review announced in July will continue to bring together the devolved Governments, local leaders and experts to consider where things are working well and where there could be improvements, to ensure that the UK is prepared for the risks we face. We must work with those in industry to ensure that buildings are safe, to raise professional standards, and to create a culture that puts the safety of residents first.

Fire and rescue services need to do more to develop high quality leadership, and support learning and professional excellence. We are carefully considering the inquiry's recommendation to establish a college of fire and rescue. We expect all firefighters to have access to the vital education and training they need to save lives, and to be the best they can be. Culture and integrity in fire and rescue services are vital. Poor culture, a lack of integrity and bad practice can risk public safety, as was highlighted by the Grenfell inquiry. That is unacceptable and a culture change must begin immediately.

Our response to the Grenfell inquiry report must be a watershed moment not just for safety and quality, but for a new vision of housing that gives every resident a voice and the respect that they deserve—a change in culture that truly empowers people. As I said earlier, the failure to do that with Grenfell residents, who repeatedly raised concerns and were repeatedly ignored, stands out starkly. Everyone deserves a warm, decent home. They also have the right to be treated with dignity, and to have access to redress when things go wrong. That includes the millions of people living in social housing, which is why we have introduced a stronger set of consumer standards that applies to all registered social landlords. Routine inspections of large landlords have already started, and the Regulator of Social Housing has published the first set of judgments.

Many landlords must do more to improve the quality of their buildings and communicate better with their tenants. When it comes to quality and tackling unacceptable housing conditions, we will legislate to introduce Awaab's law in the social rented sector as soon as possible, setting a requirement for landlords to investigate and repair serious hazards with specific timeframes. We will also extend Awaab's law to the private rented sector through the Renters' Rights Bill. We will bring forward regulations to set standards for the competence and conduct of staff in the sector, and enable residents to request information about their landlords through new access requirements that will apply to housing associations. We will monitor the new regime and its effectiveness closely.

While we are doing more to raise the bar for social landlords, we are also empowering tenants and giving them a seat at the table, relaunching our communications



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campaign on how people can raise complaints, and extending that work so that all residents know their rights and can hold their landlords to account. To hear at first hand what matters most to social tenants, this week my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Housing and Planning will join our relaunched social housing residents panel. Changing the culture in our social housing system will take time, but those are important first steps.

In conclusion, the reforms I have set out are about much more than new regulation and legislation. Indeed, the Grenfell inquiry made it clear that those things alone are not enough, and that nothing less than a shift in culture that puts people and safety first, not profits, will do if we are to turn the page on the shocking failures exposed by the Grenfell report. Accelerating the pace of remediation and empowering tenants are important steps in the right direction, because no matter who someone is or where they live, a good life starts with a safe, secure, decent home and a strong community. We owe it to the Grenfell community, and everything they stand for and have fought for, to make sure that everyone can count on that. To the Grenfell community I say this: we will continue to work with you to build a fitting and lasting memorial. This Government will support you now and always, in memory of the loved ones who were lost so tragically.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the shadow Secretary of State, Kevin Hollinrake.

6.56 pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Grenfell Tower fire was an unthinkable tragedy that claimed 72 lives. It is one of the few moments in life when we all remember exactly where we were when it happened. Our thoughts are with those who lost loved ones, the survivors who endured unimaginable trauma, and all those who were affected by that devastating night. The state failed them in its duty to protect, and we must ensure that such failures are never repeated. We will work collaboratively with the Secretary of State and the wider Government in the interests of everyone directly and indirectly affected by this tragedy, and I very much welcome today's announcement about the acceleration of remediation.

Following the tragedy, the Conservative Government took decisive action to uncover the truth, initiating a public inquiry to learn lessons and implement changes to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again. The right hon. Lady may remember that we served briefly together on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee which, under the extremely capable leadership of the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), led much of the thinking and debate following the tragedy. We successfully campaigned for a banning of combustible materials on the outside of new buildings over 18 metres, and for a Government remediation fund for existing buildings. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) who was the first to properly grasp that nettle as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Chancellor, and Prime Minister. More than £5.1 billion has since been allocated for building remediation, and we have acted to strengthen regulations and implement recommendations from the inquiry's phase 1 report.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Lady's predecessor, the former Member for Surrey Heath, for his work in this area, not least the establishment of the building safety levy, which is the source from which much of the funds will flow. However, publication of the phase 2 report in September 2024 revealed the scale of failures that occurred over decades and across multiple sectors, making clear that much more remains to be done, as the right hon. Lady set out. Even those of us who have followed the inquiry closely find the report truly shocking to read. The phase 2 report, chaired by Sir Martin Moore-Bick and supported by panel members Ali Akbor OBE and Thouria Istephan, makes 58 recommendations to improve fire safety and address systemic issues within the construction industry. Crucially, the report concluded that the Grenfell Tower fire was the result of decades of failures by Government, regulatory bodies and the construction industry to act on the known dangers of using combustible materials in high-rise buildings.

One of the most alarming findings was the role of systemic dishonesty in the construction industry. Companies engaged in deliberate and sustained strategies to manipulate safety testing processes, misrepresent test data and mislead the market. For instance, the insulation product Celotex RS5000, used on Grenfell Tower, was found to have been sold using manipulated test results—incredibly, with the Building Research Establishment complicit in those practices.

**Mr Betts:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about the work of the Select Committee. On product safety and product testing, what the Hackitt report, as well as the Select Committee, found was the extent to which product manufacturers were going from one testing place to another until they found one that agreed that their product was safe. Products often failed the tests, but those failures were never in the public domain. Does he think that there ought to be a change of process, so that when a product fails in one testing place, that failure is made known publicly?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, as I did during much of our work on the Select Committee. One of Martin Moore-Bick's recommendations was exactly that: that all test results should be published, not just the ones that support the safety of the product. That would go a long way towards ensuring that the true safety of the products is established.

The BRE findings highlight a shocking betrayal of trust, and a callous disregard for public safety, driven by financial gain. The report also identified severe leadership and management failings within the London Fire Brigade. It described a chronic lack of effective management, an undue focus on processes, and a complacency among senior officers regarding the brigade's operational efficiency. Those weaknesses hindered the brigade's ability to respond effectively to the crisis, and underscored the need for systemic reform and improved leadership in fire services.

To address those failings, the phase 2 report made far-reaching recommendations, including the establishment of a single construction regulator; centralising fire safety responsibilities under one Secretary of State, to end fragmentation across Departments; regular updates to approved document B, to keep fire safety regulations current; and the creation of a chief construction adviser



and a college of fire and rescue to ensure high standards in fire safety training and practices. We fully support those recommendations and urge the Government to implement them swiftly and effectively. We will scrutinise their progress to ensure that the necessary reforms are delivered without delay.

Some have questioned the pace of the remediation efforts. I think the Secretary of State was right to do so. I emphasise that the remediation efforts prioritised the highest-risk buildings, and by July 2024, 98% of high-rise buildings with the most dangerous, Grenfell-style ACM cladding had either completed or started work. On the remaining buildings, enforcement action is being taken against non-compliant owners. The complexity of the buildings and legal disputes over responsibility have caused delays. Nevertheless, all building owners must step up, take responsibility, and act swiftly to address the issues, or face the consequences of their inaction. It is important to note that the building regulations regime was established under the Building Act 1984, and fire safety reforms were introduced by other Governments in previous decades, as the Secretary of State acknowledged.

From 2010, the coalition Government sought to remove unnecessary bureaucracy, but fire safety and building safety were explicitly excluded from those reviews. The inquiry acknowledged that key safety regulations, including the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 were excluded from deregulation initiatives. Under our leadership, safety was never treated as red tape. Nevertheless, as the report confirms, mistakes were made by Ministers and officials on our watch. The frequency of changes under Governments of different political stripes, and the frequency of changes in housing Ministers and Secretaries of State, would not have helped. I hope that Parliament may learn that lesson for the future. Since 2017, the Conservatives in Government led comprehensive reforms of building compliance and fire safety. Measures introduced include the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022, which created the Building Safety Regulator to oversee stricter compliance with standards.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** One issue that arose at an early stage, about a year after the tragedy at Grenfell, was the need for fire safety surveyors. These people are experts and take about three years to train. In retrospect, does the hon. Gentleman not think that a lesson for future Governments of any colour is to look at such issues at an early stage, because we still have a shortage of those people now in 2024?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I agree. Mistakes were made—there is no doubt about it. As the phase 2 report recommends, there should be greater oversight and regulation of people who proclaim themselves to be experts in these fields. I agree with the hon. Lady's points.

Accountability must remain a cornerstone of our response. Those who knowingly cut corners on safety to maximise profits must face justice. We call on the Metropolitan police and the Crown Prosecution Service to pursue criminal charges against those responsible, be it through a deliberate act, a willingness to look the other way, or gross incompetence. Companies implicated in such wrongdoing should not receive future public contracts. Let us be clear: this was not the responsibility of any single Government, Minister or official. As the report sets out in its opening paragraphs, failures occurred over decades, involving Administrations of all

political colours. We must approach these difficult questions with the honesty and determination that they deserve, ensuring that we learn the lessons of the past to protect lives in the future.

While we have made significant progress, the journey is far from over. As we look to the future, we must acknowledge the hard questions raised by the report about past governance. Those failures occurred over decades, involving Administrations led by Labour, the coalition Government, and Conservative Governments. This was a systemic failure, which requires an open and honest response. Our party's record demonstrates our commitment to making things right. We took swift action after the tragedy to establish the public inquiry, launch the independent review of building regulations and fire safety, and allocate significant resources to remove unsafe cladding from high-risk buildings. The Fire Safety Act 2021 implemented recommendations from phase 1 of the Grenfell inquiry, and the Building Safety Act 2022 overhauled existing regulations, setting up the Building Safety Regulator to oversee stringent compliance measures.

**Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab):** Bournemouth East constituents, such as Katie from Queen's Park in Charminster, have been in touch, horrified about the Grenfell Tower tragedy and desperate for a turning point. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to reach such a turning point? We need justice for those who were let down by the last Government. Does he also agree that we need to get rid of the social housing stigma, which has made so many people in social housing feel like they live in shame?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** There are so many lessons that I hope will be learned across the House. The report is clear that there has been failure by Governments of all stripes over the years, in terms of both building safety and social housing. With the Regulator of Social Housing and the new fire safety regulatory regime, it is hugely important that we turn the page, but I do not think that we will win back the trust of the people affected by this scandal, or by the cladding scandal in other areas, until we have made progress, completed the remediation, and put in place a regime that is seen to be working and bringing about the cultural change to which the Secretary of State referred. It is hugely important that we make that progress.

The actions that we have taken have made strides towards addressing safety concerns, but we recognise that more is needed. I welcome the Labour Government's pledge to respond to all 58 recommendations within six months and to provide annual progress updates to Parliament. This is a critical moment for accountability and reform, and we stand ready to support all proportionate and necessary measures to protect public safety. Does the Secretary of State agree with the recommendation of a single construction regulator, with one Secretary of State holding end-to-end responsibility, and will that be her? Does she also agree with the point raised by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East about product manufacturers being held responsible for remediation costs, too? It is her stated policy to continue the use of the CE marking scheme for construction products in the UK, but those standards were set in 2015, three years prior to the post-Grenfell standards revision in the UK. How will she ensure that all products sold in the UK

[Kevin Hollinrake]

meet the post-2018 UK standard? That issue has been raised on the Floor of the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who is next to me on the Opposition Front Bench.

I recently met campaigners, including Steve Day, who raise the case of the 1.7 million leaseholders who do not currently qualify for the Building Safety Act 2022 protections and who still suffer from higher insurance premiums, higher mortgage rates and an inability to sell their homes. Will the Secretary of State meet him and others to see what additional measures need to be taken? Can she share with the House when announcements will be made on the future memorial on the site? Indeed, can the renovation of properties in the Grenfell community be accelerated? Can we get a target for when that will be completed? Accountability must be at the heart of the response, and those who knowingly cut corners on building safety must face justice.

Grenfell was a tragedy of unprecedented scale, but it must serve as a turning point. We owe it to those who lost their lives, to the survivors and to the public to ensure that their legacy is one of justice, reform and safety. Let us move forward with determination to build a safer future for all.

7.11 pm

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): It is now more than seven and a half years since 72 people lost their lives at Grenfell Tower in my constituency in north Kensington. It was a greater loss of life than any terrorist attack in London's history. That is seven and a half years of no justice, and seven and a half years of no meaningful change. It was a tragedy that was entirely preventable, and entirely foreseen. To our shame as a country, and as the recent fire in Dagenham showed, it could happen again today.

As the Grenfell inquiry sets out, the fire occurred because individuals and organisations were systematically dishonest, put profit before lives and were part of a system and culture that too often denies agency and power to those living in social housing in this country. I pay tribute to the next of kin, bereaved, survivors and our community, many of whom have joined us here today, for their resilience and strength in continuing to fight for truth, justice and change. I know that with each hearing, each story, each Government announcement and each new promise of change, they are forced to relive the horrific events of that night, and I know that today will be painful, too. Their voices must remain at the heart of this Government's response and of all future decisions about Grenfell. I hope I speak for the whole House when I say to them that justice will only truly be served when there are criminal prosecutions and those responsible pay the price.

I welcome the Prime Minister's apology on 4 September on behalf of the British state, and I thank Sir Martin Moore-Bick and the whole inquiry team. The report is an important step in uncovering the truth of what happened that night, who was responsible and what must be done to ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated, but the path to justice is long and we are far from the end. In recent meetings with the then Minister for Courts and Legal Services, my hon. Friend the

Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander) and the Metropolitan police, I have been clear that our community is watching and waiting. I urge all involved to remain focused on expediting the process as much as possible.

I fully understand the frustration that it has taken this long. On 24 June 2017, then Ministers Alok Sharma and Nick Hurd wrote to bereaved families. They said:

"The inquiry will not delay the conclusion of the Police inquiry...If criminal proceedings result from these investigations...we would not expect them to be delayed by the establishment of the public inquiry."

That has clearly not come to pass. Justice has been delayed, but it must not be denied. While we wait for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to complete their work, there are actions that must be taken now. Companies identified in the report, such as Arconic, Rydon, Kingspan and Celotex, must be excluded from public contracts while criminal investigations are ongoing. I thank the Secretary of State for her commitment to that, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that local authorities across the country should be encouraged to follow suit.

Justice is about more than contracts and criminal charges, and it goes beyond Grenfell. Across the country, up to a million people are still stuck in unsafe buildings. They are victims of the building safety crisis. The National Audit Office has just reported that, on current trends, it will take until at least 2037 before the last unsafe building is remediated, at a cost of £16.6 billion. I therefore welcome the Government's announcement today that they will speed up the remediation work, that developers will be forced to double the pace of fixing the crisis and that building owners who sit on their hands will be subject to severe penalties. That is right, because while residents wait, they also pay the costs.

In a block of flats in Earl's Court, just two miles south of Grenfell, a recent fire inspection found flammable rendering. The insurance premium has gone up from £15,000 a year to £375,000 a year, meaning an extra £400 a month in service charges for leaseholders. While leaseholders face this increasing cost of living crisis, and the fear of living in buildings that are unsafe, the insurance industry has so far failed to tackle the problem. The Association of British Insurers committed to bringing down costs, but the experience of my constituents shows that it is not working. I am delighted that the Government have committed to working with insurers to consider urgently how bills can be reduced during remediation programmes. That cannot come soon enough. I know that Members from across the House will have their own horror stories of leaseholders who cannot sell and cannot move on with their lives, who are caught in the middle between freeholders, developers, managing agents and all levels of government. My test of this Government's plan and whether it will be deemed a success is whether it brings this merry-go-round of buck-passing to an end.

I know that the Government are also considering their formal response to the inquiry, including ending the chaotic and fragmented regulatory system. Accountability for building regulations should be streamlined under a single Secretary of State. We need one regulator—a high-quality, well-resourced public body reporting directly to that Secretary of State—and we need robust product regulation. Currently, only a third of construction products are regulated. Instead, all construction products should be subject to regulations to ensure safety and public trust.

This inquiry is just one of many recent high-profile public inquiries into state injustices, whether that is Hillsborough, the Post Office, Windrush, infected blood or LGBT veterans. I welcome the Government's resolve to righting the wrongs of the past and tackling the injustices that the previous Government largely failed to budget for. Time and again, we have seen a pattern of inaction and too many lifesaving recommendations from public inquiries and inquests ignored by corporate bodies and Departments, and that failure to act has had fatal consequences. Had the coroner's regulations following the Lakanal House fire, which claimed six lives, been implemented, it is likely that the Grenfell Tower tragedy would have been prevented.

The previous Government dragged their feet on implementing personal emergency evacuation plans for disabled people in phase 1, so I welcome the Government's announcement today on the next steps to protect disabled tenants. Such examples have convinced me that we must consider an independent oversight body, answerable to Parliament, to track the implementation of inquiry recommendations and prevent avoidable deaths. I welcome the commitment to passing the Hillsborough law duty of candour to ensure that public authorities and officials act in the public interest, with openness, honesty and transparency about their actions, decisions and failings.

Nowhere is the need for candour and oversight more evident than with the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which failed residents in the years leading up to the Grenfell fire, on the night of the tragedy and in its aftermath. The inquiry determined that RBKC bears

"considerable responsibility for the dangerous condition of the building",

highlighted a

"persistent indifference to fire safety",

and found that RBKC's response was

"muddled, slow, indecisive and piecemeal",

with it

"ill-equipped to deal with a serious emergency",

exposing a complete failure to protect and serve the community for whom it was entrusted to care. Even today, many north Kensington residents still rely on community groups for essential support and services. In stark contrast to the failures of RBKC, the community acted decisively and heroically on the night of the fire and in its immediate aftermath. I am proud of how our community responded to the fire and continues to support residents across north Kensington.

But this is not just about one council; it is about a culture of neglect and disrespect that impacts millions of people living in social housing across the country. Some 60% of my casework in Kensington and Bayswater relates to slow repairs, damp, mould, overcrowding and poor communication from landlords. On Saturday, I visited a council estate close to Grenfell and spoke to many residents, including a woman who has been in temporary accommodation for 19 years out of the borough and who has had to chase relentlessly to get her move back home, and a resident with an extractor fan that has been broken for years, despite multiple surveyors coming to assess the job.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful speech on behalf of his constituents. What he

has described reflects all our inboxes. Does he agree that to address residents', tenants' and leaseholders' concerns in a timely manner with good customer care does not cost any money?

**Joe Powell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The waste of councils' and housing associations' precious resources and the waste of people's time in taking time off work and disrupting their lives to deal with the inefficiency and repairs is something that we have to fix. I am really hopeful that incoming legislation such as Awaab's law will help with that.

The case study from Saturday is a good example. A constituent is forced to open the windows to prevent mould coming into her home, which means that she has paid thousands extra in energy bills over the past few years while she waits for the council to fix the fan. On the Lancaster West estate, where Grenfell is located, there are concerns that the promise from all levels of government for a modern 21st-century social housing estate will not be fulfilled.

It is essential that RBKC, residents and Ministers agree a plan to complete the refurbishment with transparency and accountability on budgets and timelines, because those residents have been living on a building site for far too long. It is not enough just to talk about change. Until the tenants of RBKC and the housing associations in my constituency are treated with respect and have access to what they are entitled to as a right, they will lack trust in the institutions that are meant to serve them. Just last week, the regulator found one of our major housing associations, Notting Hill Genesis, to be non-compliant after an inspection revealed governance failings and poor health and safety outcomes for tenants.

I do not want just to criticise; I want to help RBKC and our housing associations to find solutions. In the new year, we will be launching a new campaign on social housing quality in Kensington and Bayswater, because I want our community to be a trailblazer on how to implement Awaab's law on damp and mould, how to enforce the new decent homes standard and how to break people out of the doom cycle of endless emails, phone calls, missed appointments and subcontractors even to get simple repairs done. If we cannot get it right in Kensington and Bayswater given Grenfell, given our amazing community organisations and given that we are on the frontline of the nation's housing crisis, what hope does the rest of the country have? Central to the campaign will be the voice of tenants. I extend an open invitation to anyone who can help to join our campaign and make a practical difference for the community.

It has been over seven years since the bereaved, the survivors and the local community endured a tragedy that changed their lives forever. I will continue to advocate in this place for truth, justice and lasting change, and for Grenfell bereaved and survivors to be heard. Their dignity and resilience have held up a mirror to us as a nation, forcing us to confront a fundamental question: do we truly give everyone an equal voice in how this country is run?

The opportunity is for the Government—a mission-led Government—to focus on service and give people a real say in decisions that affect them. We cannot afford to continue with nearly a million people sleeping in unsafe buildings. We cannot afford another Grenfell Tower. True justice means criminal charges for those responsible,



[Joe Powell]

a complete culture change with respect for every tenant, and every child in the country growing up in a safe and decent home. That must be the legacy of Grenfell.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

7.25 pm

**Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD):** Like Members across the House, Liberal Democrats stand firmly with the many bereaved and their immediate community of family, friends and neighbours as they mourn the 72, including children, who tragically lost their lives in June 2017. In this debate, surely one thing matters more than anything: that their memory must be respected. But, as Sir Martin Moore-Bick's phase 2 report on the underlying cause of the fire graphically lays bare, they were cruelly let down by the systems, companies, Governments and government bodies that should have protected them.

We welcome the Government's commitment to address all the recommendations in the report, and the Prime Minister's promise in response to the phase 2 report to take the necessary steps to speed up the rate at which unsafe cladding is removed from buildings and to ensure that tenants and their leaseholders can never again be ignored. However, the National Audit Office has said that the pace of remediation work is behind where it should be and called for the onus to be placed on developers to pay for the work. Although the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's figures show that works have begun in 44% of buildings with unsafe cladding, it is deeply worrying, seven years on, that 66% are waiting and that thousands of people in the UK are still living in buildings with dangerous cladding. I therefore welcome the Government's announcements about accelerating progress.

As the National Housing Federation has pointed out, 90% of Government funding for the work so far has been received by private building owners, but many have passed the costs of remediation work on to tenants and leaseholders, putting many, quite unfairly, in serious financial peril. Leaseholders have struggled under the cladding crisis, buying properties they believed met safety standards, which they realise now do not, and suffering from huge increases in insurance premiums, as we have heard. We therefore call for the removal of all such dangerous cladding as soon as possible without tenants and leaseholders—including non-qualifying leaseholders—having to pay. After all, they placed their trust in the private companies and regulatory bodies that let them down, so they should not have to pay a penny towards that work. As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, product manufacturers surely should be paying.

The whole picture points to the need to create a legally enforceable order to remediate premises so that they are safe on pain of criminal sanction. I welcome what the Deputy Prime Minister said about that a few moments ago. Seven years on from this scandal, it is time for justice both for the victims and all those living with potentially unsafe cladding.

The inquiry report clearly establishes lessons to be learned for every authority in the land. The "pathway to disaster", as Sir Martin called it, is chilling. It is incumbent

on all of us in the House and everyone connected with the built environment and fire safety, not least those in my own professions—as an architect and town planner, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—to ensure that change happens and to take forward the report's recommendations. The Architects Registration Board, working with the Royal Institute of British Architects, has a duty under the Building Safety Act 2022 to monitor the training and development that architects complete throughout their careers. The Liberal Democrats welcome the fact that this year it is mandatory for all architects to complete training in fire safety.

But there is one factor that comes through in the fateful chain of events that led to the fire in 2017, and it is one that had a devastating effect on the lives of so many: the promotion of gaining commercial advantage at the expense of building and fire safety. The inquiry said that the Building Research Establishment—originally a public body but privatised in the '90s—exhibited in its testing of dangerous cladding

"a desire to accommodate existing customers and to retain its status within the industry at the expense of maintaining the rigour of its processes and considerations of public safety."

The inquiry reports says that the supplier companies

"engaged in deliberate and sustained strategies to manipulate the testing processes, misrepresent test data and mislead the market. In the case of the principal insulation product used on Grenfell Tower, Celotex RS5000, the Building Research Establishment...was complicit in that strategy."

Since the privatisation of building inspectors in the 1980s—a move with which even the most commercially minded partners at the practice I worked in a few years later strongly disagreed—they have also faltered as a result of commercial pressures, with a resultant unacceptable blurring of responsibilities. Sir Martin's report concludes that the privatised inspector NHBC

"failed to ensure that its building control function remained essentially regulatory and free of commercial pressures. It was unwilling to upset its...customers".

The report goes on:

"We have concluded that the conflict between the regulatory function of building control and the pressures of commercial interests prevents a system of that kind from effectively serving the public interest."

It is also clear that NHBC practices exposed what remains of local authority building control to similarly unscrupulous competition, and has driven down standards there as a result.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful speech. Does he agree that a lot of problems have arisen from the poor funding of local authorities, where building control services have been severely undermined?

**Gideon Amos:** I very much agree. It is clear from my time in the profession that the exposure of local authority building control to private competition, with which it is difficult to compete, has led to a race to the bottom. In fact, hon. Members should not take my word for it; expert witness Professor Luke Bisby summed it up:

"A culture shift in building control had gradually occurred, from one of building control actors 'policing' developers to one of them 'working with clients' under commercial duress. This resulted in a 'race to the bottom'".



Liberal Democrats therefore strongly support the recommendation for the Government to consider whether it is in the public interest for building control functions to be performed by those who have a commercial interest in the process. We would go further and say that the evidence to the inquiry is such that commercial interests cannot be in the public interest, and that both the Building Research Establishment and building inspectors should be brought back under public control. We also urge social housing providers to pay particular attention to their new requirements under the Social Housing Act (Regulation) 2023, and to the need for better inspection and timely remediation of defects.

We also strongly endorse the need for a recognised profession of fire engineer. It is important, too, that our local fire services are properly funded. I was concerned about the reduction in the number of appliances at Taunton fire station, and I have written to the Treasury on behalf of the Devon and Somerset fire and rescue authority, asking the Government for flexibility in funding and tax-raising powers. It is vital that no further reduction of appliances at stations such as mine go ahead.

We support all 58 recommendations in the report, whether for local authorities, the fire brigade, tenant management organisations or local authorities, or on personal emergency evacuation plans being put in place—it is good to see the Government establishing that today—or indeed for the Government themselves. Since what has turned out to be the fatal folly of promoting commercial interest above building and fire safety in the decades from the '80s and '90s, Governments of all persuasions have let down some of our most vulnerable citizens. The situation has been reviewed many times over the years by Governments of all stripes. It is now time to put safety once again before profit.

7.34 pm

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) on outlining the concerns of his constituents. In the short four-and-a-half months that he has been here, championing their cause has been central to his role as an MP.

This evening a number of colleagues will touch on the technicalities outlined in the report. I want to focus my remarks on the survivors and victims of Grenfell. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), said that we all remember where we were on 14 June 2017. I remember very well where I was, because my son was just a week old—he was born on 7 June. As a new mum, though a second-time one, I was sitting up nursing him through the night. I remember my husband coming into the room and asking “What are you watching? Why’ve you still got the TV on? What film is this?” It was not a film; it was real life. I sat there during the night, which many Members probably did as well, just watching that fire. Remembering back to that scene, things were dropping that we might have thought were items, but they were people. Today’s debate has to be about the victims of Grenfell, their families and the 72 people who died.

In May 2023, I went to the Serpentine gallery to watch a short film produced by Steve McQueen. It is a 24-minute film that follows a drone or a helicopter coming in from way out near Heathrow. It is an aerial shot, and quite silent—at first, you can hear the sirens and

the noise in the background, but as it gets closer and closer to Grenfell Tower, there is just silence. That aerial shot gives a good overview of just a tall, charred building. As the helicopter goes around the building, you can see inside—the debris, the remnants and the forensic cases. But what is glaringly obvious in that film is blackness. You can almost smell the burning as you watch the film. I challenge anyone who has not seen it to try to watch that film.

I think about the families and the victims, and their long battle for justice. We are now going into the eighth year. This is a fight that they should never have had to endure in the first place. We as a House must have the courage to deliver a fairer society for them—one where the pain they feel can never be inflicted on anyone again. I cannot imagine the anger they feel at the deep failures outlined in the phase 2 report. It outlines over a decade of missed opportunities to identify the risks associated with combustible cladding. The shadow Secretary of State quoted it, as did the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), and I will quote again. There were “deliberate and sustained strategies” from cladding providers

“to manipulate the testing processes, misrepresent test data and mislead the market.”

Shame on them. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

That was compounded by a complete failure of oversight within the Government at every level, and the local council, which ignored residents who raised those safety concerns. The Grenfell disaster represents nothing less than a catastrophic failure of the duty to provide people with even the most basic level of safety. Yet here we are, more than seven years down the line, and those responsible for this tragedy have still not been brought to justice.

As a slap in the face, thousands of people up and down the country still go to bed every night knowing that their building is wrapped in this unsafe cladding. Can you imagine the mental toll? We asked those same people to sleep in their homes and not leave during the covid pandemic, knowing full well that if their building went up in flames, they could not escape. Many of those people are my constituents in Vauxhall and Camberwell Green. Like many other Members of this House, I have had conversations with constituents who are caught up in the cladding scandal through no fault of their own, with the ripple effects of this crisis ruining their lives to this day. We must solve this as a national emergency.

I was shocked that the National Audit Office said that we could not expect an end to the remediation until 2035, which would be 18 years after Grenfell. I therefore welcome the Government’s commitment to step up the pace and finally set a deadline of 2029 for the completion of the remediation. I also welcome the fact that the Government adopted measures to improve fire safety standards on 2 September, and that they have promised the House that they will address the recommendations of the phase 2 report within six months of its release. As Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I look forward to that, and will be holding Ministers to account. However, as important as those steps are, we cannot pretend that these announcements do enough—they do not address the systematic failures that led to the Grenfell disaster.

I urge Members to read part 4 of the report, if they have not already done so. It outlines how residents felt that the tenant management organisation was an uncaring

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

and bullying overlord that belittled them, marginalised them and regarded them as a nuisance. That behaviour is something that I saw growing up on a council estate, and it may feel familiar to others who grew up in social housing: we know the stigma we faced and the assumptions made about us; we know the disdain we faced from housing providers; we know how often we are ignored, despite knowing our communities better. I take on the challenge raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater in putting the question of how we address the systematic culture back to the Government. Like I said, it does not cost anything for someone to respect their constituents or customers.

We must not ignore how this systematic discrimination against people and treating them as a box-ticking exercise leads to tragedies such as Grenfell. While there are no recommendations on the TMO and tenant relationship in this report, I urge Ministers to look closely at how such relationships work, and at how we can swing the pendulum back to ensure that tenants are listened to.

While it is not mentioned in this report, we must acknowledge that those killed in the fire were disproportionately from black and minority ethnic communities, which suffer from racism and the hostile environment. I want to speak specifically about disabled people, too; they were failed by a basic lack of safety provisions at Grenfell. They have also been failed by delays to the implementation of personal evacuation plans, which leaves disabled people with no clear escape route in a fire, unable to evacuate with everybody else—left to simply hope, pray and wish that the fire does not reach them. I first raised the issue back in 2022 with the then Prime Minister, and nothing has changed since then. I therefore welcome the Government's commitment today to deeper information sharing between the authorities and emergency services on the requirements of disabled residents. However, I am concerned that Ministers are falling short on four of the recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry. I will be following this up with the Department.

These are people who were never listened to back in 2017, and they are not being heard now. They could not hold their local authority to account when their problems were not dealt with, and some of them still cannot do that today. I urge the Government to act on the findings of the phase 2 report in full, but they must go further to address the inequalities at the heart of the Grenfell fire disaster.

It is more than seven years since 72 people lost their lives. If we are honest as a House, the problems faced by Grenfell victims are still faced by people up and down the country today. This will be fixed only if the Government look beyond targets to address the toxic culture in our housing sector that Grenfell so tragically exposed. This work demands a lot from all of us, but we can and must ensure it never happens again.

7.44 pm

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (*Florence Eshalomi*) and for Kensington and Bayswater (*Joe Powell*), who both spoke very movingly on behalf of the victims of this tragedy who want to see justice done. I venture to suggest that what they want

above everything is to know that nothing like this will ever happen again—that whatever happened that night, there will be some glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel and that some good will come of it.

I praise the Secretary of State for recognising that it is the system itself that needs the most fundamental reform, and that the failures of individuals—whatever incentives existed and whatever conflicts were unresolved—were system failures. The cultural shift will come about as a result of a systemic review—a system change.

Hon. Members might well ask why I am taking an interest in this debate. I do not think I represent any community in a high-rise building with cladding problems in leafy Essex. The only interest I have to declare is that it turned out that my late mother was living in a block with unsafe cladding, so, to a very limited and minor extent, my family are suffering the loss of being unable to sell her flat. That is very small beer, but I put that down as an interest I should declare.

I have long taken an interest in safety management systems—ever since I was shadow Secretary of State for Transport at the time of the Ladbroke Grove disaster, when I took an interest in what was being submitted to the inquiry and made a submission of my own, recommending that there should be a systemic approach to the safety system. That resulted in the formation of the rail accident investigation branch of the Department for Transport, with the result that no public inquiry into a rail accident has ever taken place again.

Similarly, as Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I took a close interest in patient safety because we received the reports from the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. We had Mid Staffordshire and all the maternity scandals, and we had public inquiry after public inquiry, until somebody suggested that there should be an investigation body accountable and answerable to the Secretary of State to look at why things go wrong in patient care and investigate the causes of incidents—without blame, incidentally—to find out what went wrong in order to make recommendations and put it right. Those are the lessons drawn from all the effective safety regimes in other industries, which should perhaps be applied in this case.

I co-authored a submission to the Grenfell inquiry with three others. The first was former Labour Housing and Fire Minister Nick Raynsford, who, at the time, was chairman of the Construction Industry Council approved inspector's register—CICAIR—which relates to the private sector building control surveyors the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (*Gideon Amos*) spoke about. I will come on to that conflict, which the hon. Gentleman is very concerned about.

Another co-author was Kevin Savage, a leading figure in the building control profession; he happens to be a constituent of mine, but that was a coincidence. The third was Keith Conradi, the former chief investigator of the air accidents investigation branch of the Department for Transport—who, as it happens, became the first chief investigator for the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, which, as a result of the inquiry conducted by my Committee, is now a statutory body. He helped set that body up; he is now retired. He helped with the submission.

Keith Conradi in particular enabled us to understand building safety management as a safety management system. The events leading to the Grenfell disaster were

not just the random failings or crimes of individuals. Where there is culpability, prosecutions must certainly follow, but that is not the main point. Grenfell and previous fires, such as Lakanal House, demonstrated that there was a comprehensive failure of the safety system that should exist to keep buildings as safe as possible.

We made our submission in September 2021. After seven years—a disadvantage of public inquiries is that they take a very long time—I was disappointed that the inquiry did not really find time to engage with our recommendations. It did publish our submission, but from the recommendations, I think it is fair to say that a number of issues have been handed back to the Department to be resolved. Paragraph 113.58, entitled “Implementing change”, simply suggests that the London Fire Brigade should

“establish effective standing arrangements for collecting, considering and effectively implementing lessons learned from previous incidents”. That is an odd recommendation when we think about it, because the London Fire Brigade was itself very, very severely criticised in the report. That it should be left responsible for marking its own homework and making recommendations about itself underlines that the lacuna in the recommendations is the lack of an investigation body. There were two other paragraphs about building control that I shall come to: paragraphs 113.37 and 113.38. Those were our two urgent priorities to be addressed in our submission.

By the way, I am very grateful to the Minister for accepting our request for a meeting, which the Prime Minister promised on the Floor of the House when he announced the outcome of the inquiry. We had a very good meeting with the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention. I think she was taken with our recommendations but I think that they fall to the Minister’s Department, so I look forward to meeting him later this week.

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The delays in addressing the fire safety issues that pertain to the Grenfell tragedy are having significant consequences for those who reside in buildings that are not being remediated in a timely fashion, particularly in my constituency. For example, the residents of Johnston Court have faced more than four years of uncertainty following a B2 rating, and the progress of remediation has stalled due to disputes between the developer and freeholder. The deadlock has left residents unable to sell, remortgage or feel safe in their homes, so we need faster action and accountability from all parties involved. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government’s actions and interventions will be critical to ensure that disputes do not keep delaying this urgently needed work, and that, as he is discussing, this is fundamentally about leadership?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I am very happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman and to welcome the Secretary of State’s announcements today about accelerating all of this and ensuring that action is taken much more quickly. I hope that that will result in much quicker action for his constituents.

I was addressing the first major recommendation in our submission to the inquiry, which is that there should be established an independent building safety investigation branch of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, reporting directly to the Secretary

of State. That removes any possible conflict that investigations have with any other part of the system. The idea that the Health and Safety Executive or the new Building Safety Regulator should be conducting investigations is absolutely fine, but we can never guarantee that they will not come across a failing of their own and be conflicted in that investigation. The public will not have confidence in any investigation that they conduct unless there is an independent investigation that looks at all the elements of the system. The Hackitt review rather overlooked this issue. It failed to underline how future fire incidents would be investigated. This is a gap that is still to be addressed.

The current system of resort to public inquiries, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green confirmed, takes far too long. I feel for those who were caught up in the tragedy directly. They have waited far too long. An air accident investigation rarely takes more than a few months because the capability exists. In the Grenfell case, the Housing Ombudsman still felt that “residents’ complaints were dismissed and devalued.”

I think the inquiry was overwhelmed with so much material and so many different elements. In a way, its terms of reference were too wide to be able to capably come up with a comprehensive set of safety system recommendations.

It is also notable that although there was an inquiry into the Lakanal House fire, we had another inquiry into Grenfell. Public inquiries do not seem to resolve problems. A building safety investigation branch would transform that. It would operate independently, modelled on similar bodies for air, marine and rail. These bodies have proven their worth in both the rail and aviation. No public inquiry has taken place into an aviation accident since 1972 and there has not been a public inquiry into a rail accident since the Ladbroke Grove inquiry, because people have confidence in the new independent arrangements. They conduct rapid investigations. They focus not on blame, but on understanding failures and issuing binding recommendations for the future.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** The hon. Gentleman has spent a lot of time in this House thinking about how systems work. Does he not think that there is now an argument for the Government to have a proper review process of all coroners’ recommendations and all public and other inquiry recommendations, so they do not just get responded to in the moment and then not followed up in the months and years that follow?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I am sure that may be a very good suggestion, but the point I am making is that we need an apex to our safety system. Whatever else the Government do to remediate the safety system as it exists at the moment, they need an independent safety investigator as the apex of the system, which is like a guardian angel over the whole system. The hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater said there should be—I think I quote him correctly—an independent oversight body. Well, this is the body he seeks. It would be constantly looking for risks in the system, not just investigating accidents, and following up directly with the Secretary of State to say, “This has not been done.”

Crucially, the independence of the bodies is what commands public confidence. They also provide a very significant capability that no other regulator can do—a



[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

safety investigation body is not a regulator, of course. They provide a legal safe space where anybody can go and say anything without fear or favour. Witnesses have protection and, if necessary, anonymity, so they can openly speak without fear of retribution of being sued or the words they give in evidence being used against them in court. This creates a culture of openness that accelerates the learning process while maintaining accountability.

The introduction of a BSIB would not trespass on any other part of the safety system, such as the HSE or the Building Safety Regulator. It is an essential additional capability which needs to exist, otherwise we do not have that ultimate check over the whole system. Regulators, if necessary, can still run their investigations, as I was saying before. The safe space in the safety investigator does not protect anyone from legal culpability, as we saw when the air accidents investigation branch investigated the Shoreham air crash. It passed a file to the police, because it believed there had been negligence. The pilot was prosecuted. The safe space does not protect someone from wrongdoing.

**Mr Bailey:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I will give way once more, but I have rather a lot to say and I do not want to take up too much time.

**Mr Bailey:** The fundamental difference between an air accident investigation and a public inquiry is that as culpability is identified it is then passed on for action. This lies at the heart of the problem, which is the slow pace of bringing about justice. An extended period for a public inquiry has prevented and inhibited the delivery of justice for the people of Grenfell. Does the hon. Gentleman—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. I remind Members that interventions need to be pithy and short.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I have got the point. The problem with a public inquiry is that it starts from ground zero. It assembles a group of people who may be expert, but most of the lawyers will not be expert and will have to learn everything from scratch. The advantage of a standing capability is that there are experts who are permanently employed and who really understand everything about building safety, as it would be in this case. There would be human factors analysts, structural engineers, architects—key people with key skills, fully knowledgeable about the safety system that exists. They would start immediately after a tragedy, and they would conclude much more quickly on the basis of much better expertise.

I had hoped that the inquiry would adopt this recommendation, as did the Cullen inquiry into Ladbroke Grove, and also the inquiry into offshore safety following the Piper Alpha disaster. It now falls to the Government and Parliament to get this right.

The second recommendation in our submission is for a comprehensive reform of building control. Building control is the inspection system which should ensure

that building regulations are followed, but Grenfell demonstrated its failure. I accept that there has already been some reform here since we wrote our submission. Much has been said, as we heard earlier, about how private sector building inspectors are endemically conflicted because they are appointed and paid by constructors and others, but that misses a horrible truth about the Grenfell case. Ironically, it was the building control function of a local authority, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, that failed so disastrously in Grenfell's case. Despite that, everyone's emphasis still seems to be more focused on restricting private sector involvement than on reform of the whole building control sector.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My hon. Friend is making an important speech. One of the facts that the phase 2 report has established is that the system is too fragmented, and needs to be brought together under a single construction regulator, as he recommends. Does he envisage the functions that he has described, involving investigations of incidents, not falling to the responsibility of that regulator?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** No, because a regulator is a part of the system, whereas a safety investigation body stands above the system. It is very simple. If you are a regulator, you are a participant. You are capable of making mistakes, and you need to be independently investigated, or checked, to confirm that you are not breaching rules, or failing in some way—through no fault of your own, perhaps. Everyone makes mistakes. Most bad things happen because of human error, not because of bad people doing bad things.

**Gideon Amos:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so many times. Is it not the case that when you set profit-making companies against local authorities, you end up with a race to the bottom, across the board? Is that not the evidence from the inquiry? I had cause to look at the report of the original debate, in the 1980s, about bringing in private inspectors. A less than entirely left-wing organisation, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, said that it was opposed to building control being taken away from local authorities.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I am not in favour of taking building control away from local authorities, but if we go down the route recommended by the hon. Gentleman, we will not succeed in making buildings safer, not least because of the shortage of capacity in the sector. If it is decided that there cannot be any private sector building control surveyors, there will be even less capacity, and remediating all this will take even longer.

An approach that relies entirely on local government or a state body of building control risks worsening a situation that we are already experiencing. The building control workforce is ageing, and recruitment struggles to keep up with demand. Restricting private sector competition would exacerbate these problems, driving skilled professionals not back into local authorities—because they cannot afford them—but into consultancy roles in which they would be working for the construction companies directly, not inspecting what those companies are doing. Rather than narrowing the pool of inspectors, we should be raising the standards of building control across the board.



Private sector approved inspectors were already subject to a strict licensing regime through the Construction Industry Council approved inspectors register, with a code of conduct, regular auditing and a complaints process. Moreover, the local authority, not the private sector building control sector, was responsible for the problem at Grenfell. Our recommendation suggests a fully integrated building control service involving both local authorities and registered building control approvers working to common standards within a framework designed to promote continuous improvement. That, I think, is the right answer. To deal with high-rise blocks, multidisciplinary teams would be set up to perform the building control function, recruited on the basis of proven skills and experience from both public and private sectors on a level playing field without the choice being biased in favour of the former. That, I submit, should be the Government's objective.

We welcome the steps taken to require all building inspectors, whether working for local authorities or registered building control approvers, to be individually registered by the BSR, but further steps can and should be taken to drive up standards and to maximise much-needed capacity. However, recommendations 113.37 and 113.38 in the final report of the inquiry could undermine this process. Implicit in recommendation 113.37 is the assumption that it is inappropriate for private sector commercial organisations to be involved in building control work at all, although no evidence is advanced to support that assumption. It is an assumption that many people make, but there is no evidential basis for it. Recommendation 113.37 proposes that there should be a panel to consider the matter, which I hope will happen, but if it decided to ban private sector building control, that would seriously aggravate the capacity problem.

**Joe Powell:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I will certainly give way, because this is a crucial point.

**Joe Powell:** I simply wanted to ask for a clarification. Surely the issue, which was raised earlier, is that there is a conflict of interests when you are paying to have your product assessed. As we know from Sir Martin's report, there was a cover-up of testing results. If you accept that, how do you get around the "conflict of interests" issue?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I am not going to admonish the hon. Member for using the word "you", but, Sir Bernard, you have now spoken for longer than both Front Benchers put together, and many other Members wish to get in.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I will be as quick as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am extremely grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question, because that was a failure of regulation. The crucial point is this. In other safety-critical industries, such as the civil aviation, rail and marine sectors, there is no ban on the private sector being selected to perform inspections. Employees of airlines, of aircraft manufacturers and of aircraft engine manufacturers perform the inspections, but they are independently regulated, overseen and certified by the Civil Aviation Authority. The fact that they are employed by the airlines or by commercial interests does not make

them incapable of objective judgment. The whole aviation sector flies incredibly safely on the basis of aircraft being inspected not by Government inspectors or public employees, but by the private sector.

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): My experience in the aviation industry includes overseeing and being part of the record-keeping process for inspections. Does the hon. Member agree that the requirement to record and store all successful and unsuccessful testing results would resolve some of the issues that we saw in the Grenfell disaster, where unsuccessful test results were hidden and not made accessible to the public?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I completely agree. The record keeping of airlines, air engine manufacturers and aircraft maintenance companies has to be absolutely meticulous. It is inspected by the CAA, but the information originally comes from inspections conducted by people who are employed by the private sector. I think the hon. Gentleman agrees that we need to tackle the regulation, not indulge in shorthand for saying that anybody making a profit must be guilty. I abhor the idea of people making a profit at the expense of safety, but that is not what happens in other industries.

The success of independent accident investigation and safety investigation branches in other sectors speaks for itself. Aviation and rail safety has much fuller public confidence and a lower accident rate under such models, delivering safety improvements faster, more effectively and at lower cost than traditional public inquiries. Reforming building control would ensure that all inspectorates operate under consistent and rigorous oversight, regardless of whether they are in the public or private sectors.

Our proposals are not just about learning from the Grenfell tragedy, but about preventing the next disaster. The inquiry shows the systemic failures in building safety and regulation that led to an avoidable tragedy. I regret to have to warn the House that if we do not get this right, and do not finish working on what the inquiry has presented to us and fill in the gaps, there will one day be another Grenfell, just as Grenfell was a repeat of earlier safety failures. We have an obligation to get this right finally for the Grenfell community, for the memory of those who died and for future communities. The Government now have the opportunity to follow up the inquiry, to build on its findings and to put in place institutional arrangements that will embed learning and safety improvement in residential building management in a comprehensive safety system that matches those of other safety-critical industries.

8.12 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Seven and a half years on from the Grenfell Tower fire, it often feels that we are no further forward than the last debate, silent walk or stage of the inquiry. There have been no prosecutions, no accountability and insufficient movement on remediation of buildings, including those with flammable cladding.

In the last seven years, a lot has happened—the Windrush scandal, Brexit, four changes of Prime Minister, a new monarch and a global pandemic—but little has changed for the families and survivors of Grenfell Tower. They are still waiting for justice and for answers, and

[*Andy Slaughter*]

their trauma endures. That trauma, which each of the survivors bears, is incomprehensible to those of us who have never experienced such a horrific event in our lives. Children who lived in the tower have said that candles and bonfires trigger their fears, and they worry about the safety of even ordinary electrical items in their home. Those worries should be far from a child's mind but, unfortunately, they are ever present and lasting. We are simply not doing enough to prevent this tragedy from happening again. That in itself is retraumatising to those who know at first hand how devastating a fire in a tower block can be.

The Fire Safety Act 2021, the Building Safety Act 2022 and the appointment of the Building Safety Regulator were all steps taken by the previous Government in response to phase 1 of the Grenfell inquiry, but gaping holes in safety regulations still remain. Phase 2 of the inquiry asked for a more cohesive approach. It points to the confusing situation of multiple Government Departments holding responsibility for fire safety, and to the need for a unified response to regulation under a single construction regulator. In order to learn from mistakes, we cannot allow another situation in which warnings are missed, accountability falls through the cracks and responsibility is denied or passed on. However, although the phase 2 recommendations seek to fix the gap in fire safety to prevent future deaths, we must not lose sight of justice for the victims of the fire and for the survivors, who await the identification of those responsible.

The delays to prosecutions are increasingly unacceptable. The former Director of Public Prosecutions, Lord Macdonald, has said that the biggest barrier to justice is the precarious state of our criminal justice system. He estimates that criminal trials for those responsible for the Grenfell fire may not begin until 2029. We cannot accept that. I am pleased that the Chancellor has provided an uplift in the budgets of both the Ministry of Justice and the Law Officers in order to fix our justice system, but the conversations I have had with the senior judiciary on visits with the Justice Committee show that the backlogs in our courts continue to delay justice. I know that the Lord Chancellor is committed to fixing these issues, but we have to make haste, and I join survivors' calls for criminal and civil trials to be expedited. The victims of Grenfell should not have to wait as long as the victims of Hillsborough for justice.

I will talk briefly about the site itself, where the tower stands to this day. Many Members have spoken about its retraumatising impact on the community, as the tower stands as a monolithic reminder of the tragic and horrific events of that night. It is visible from all across west London, including from high-rise blocks in my constituency and from those that have experienced fires—thankfully, without fatalities. The report drawn up by the Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission shows what needs to be included and what design choices are important to the bereaved. I understand that a competition to design the memorial is running until spring next year, and I would be grateful if we could have on the record a commitment from the Government that once they have the plans of the approved design in front of them there will be no further delays. The completion of the memorial will give bereaved families and survivors a place to

gather and remember their loved ones. It is important to the community that we get this right, but we must also get on with it.

I want to mention remediation—another delayed and underfunded response to the findings of phase 1 of the report. Under the previous Government, social landlords were excluded from Government funding for remediation to buildings that were deemed to have unsafe cladding. I never understood the justification of that decision by the former Levelling Up Secretary, and I am pleased that the Chancellor committed to a further £1 billion investment for remediation in her Budget, and that social landlords will no longer be excluded from financial assistance. There is also a commitment to go faster with the works, which is very welcome, as there remain 4,000 buildings across the country with unsafe cladding. However, there is still concern that the money allocated does not meet the reality of the costs for social landlords, which are estimated to be around £6 billion.

Those who currently live in unsafe social housing deserve to be safe and to feel safe. To find the money, social landlords have made cuts, which have unfortunately come from future building programmes. As a result, national figures show that affordable housing starts have fallen by 39%. A number of housing associations have had to merge or have been taken over, and we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) that even very large associations, such as Notting Hill Genesis, find themselves in financial trouble.

In the social housing sector, funding is currently available only for buildings over 18 metres with ACM cladding, and for buildings with combustible cladding that are over 11 metres and house leaseholders. That often means that social tenants are the only people footing the bills for remediation work through their rent, because private developers have much easier access to funds to fix their buildings, and leaseholders are eligible for the Government scheme. Using rental income to fund building safety works means that there is little money left over for social landlords to carry out routine maintenance, which is a lose-lose for social housing tenants, many of whom are vulnerable and low-income families.

In the light of the time available, I will not go into as much detail as I would like, but I want to commend some of the briefings that we have had in preparation for this debate, including from the Royal Institute of British Architects and from Rockwool. They talk about the need to fireproof buildings, perhaps through retrofitting them with sprinklers or ensuring that they have two fireproof staircases. I do not know why buildings over 11 metres are not included. I do not know why all buildings that contain vulnerable residents, such as care homes and schools, are not included in having no combustible cladding allowed. I find it extraordinary that we are still allowing some buildings to be built with combustible materials on them, in the light of what happened at Grenfell.

I also want briefly to mention the causes of fire. In July this year, there was a fire—the latest in a series of fires—in a high-rise block in my constituency, caused by the failure of a battery pack on a converted e-bike. Thankfully no one was killed, but the outcome could have been much worse, had the London Fire Brigade not acted as swiftly as it did. The batteries in those products are lithium ion and if they catch fire, there is a

high chance of an explosion. We know the Grenfell Tower fire was started by a faulty fridge freezer. The year before, there was a very serious fire at Shepherds Court, a high-rise block on Shepherd's Bush Green, less than a mile from Grenfell, which was caused by another electrical device, a tumble dryer. Hundreds of these fires are happening every year.

I know that the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister are committed to justice in this matter, to building safety and to a proper memorial at the site. They have shown their commitment to justice for the bereaved families and survivors through the Hillsborough law, they have made positive steps to fund remediation works and I am convinced that they will move swiftly on plans for the memorial site. I would ask also that they look at the recommendation from the organisation Inquest that we should have a national oversight mechanism so that recommendations such as these—there are 58 from this inquiry—are followed up and implemented, and that goes for both public inquiries and prevention of future death reports issued by coroners. It is all very well having good recommendations, but if they are not pursued, they become worthless. We must move more quickly and more decisively, and continue to keep the survivors and bereaved families at the forefront of our minds, so as not to prolong the trauma and heartache of a community that has already been badly let down time and time again.

8.22 pm

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a leaseholder. I welcome this debate and, in particular, the Deputy Prime Minister's considered, sympathetic and empathetic contribution. I agree with her wholeheartedly that the Grenfell disaster was caused by systematic failures across the board, including in the Government—or Governments—and in the private sector, where commercial gain was prioritised over people's lives while a broken system allowed unfettered competition to bulldoze through what little regulation was in place.

As the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) said, we all remember where we were that evening. It was the month of Ramadan and we were coming home from evening prayers. My heart broke twice that evening. Once was when I saw the victims in front of me on my television screen and mobile phone. The second was knowing that those victims were going to have to wait an age for justice. Even I did not perceive that it was going to take this long. The 72 people who died on that terrible night, their relatives, the bereaved and the survivors, deserve justice, and it can happen with real change to the building safety system from top to bottom. That is why I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's commitment to putting into place all 58 of the recommendations, but it has to be done as soon as possible.

Furthermore, we welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's expediting the remediation of the unsafe cladding. This has simply taken too long. On 9 September, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), said in answer to a parliamentary question:

"Speeding up the remediation of buildings is absolutely critical. Seven years on from Grenfell, action has been far too slow and the fire in Dagenham is a horrific reminder of the risk unsafe cladding still poses to far too many people."

For the 49 private tenants of Abbey House, an eight-storey block in Leicester South with dangerous cladding, that remediation cannot come too quickly. However, they are caught between a bureaucratic rock and a commercial hard place. The freehold of that block is owned by Leicester City Council, but in 2015 the mayor granted a 150-year lease to a private company to refurbish the block as private rented accommodation. As the block contains no individual leaseholders, it is not eligible for any Government funding for cladding remediation. This is clearly intolerable for the residents of that block. While the to-ing and fro-ing goes on about who should remediate the block, the residents are living in constant fear that their block is unsafe, and the lack of resolution just makes it worse.

As the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) mentioned, if the Government are truly serious about making homes safe, ownership issues such as those at Abbey House cannot be allowed to get in the way of removing unsafe cladding and other materials. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that it is now essential that Government funds are made available across the board urgently, to make all our buildings safe? Once that is done, issues of who is responsible and how to reclaim the costs can be resolved.

8.26 pm

**Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I will start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell). He is the voice of his community, and he has given a moving tribute today. As we have heard, it is now more than seven years since 72 people lost their lives in the devastating fire in Grenfell Tower. Our thoughts are with the bereaved families, the survivors, the residents and the local community. That this tragic fire happened in modern Britain is a scandal and it should fill us all with deep anger and fear. Every single person was let down by the failure of almost every institution that existed to serve them, and by decades of failure by the state.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) spoke powerfully of the moment she first saw the tragedy. I will never forget seeing those images as I travelled past not even 48 hours afterwards: the embers, the smoke, the smell—that memory will stay with me forever. The Grenfell community has demonstrated enormous strength and courage in giving evidence to the inquiry and campaigning tirelessly for justice—justice for the victims and families of Grenfell Tower, and justice to ensure that such a tragedy never befalls another community.

My Stratford and Bow constituency sits between the two boroughs with the highest number of high-rise, cladded blocks in the country. Tower Hamlets has more than 400 buildings with unsafe cladding, and Newham has more than 200. I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement that Tower Hamlets was the first to obtain a remediation order, but there is still so much more to be done.

There are thousands of residents in my constituency who, through no fault of their own, find themselves caught up in the cladding scandal. I have been inundated with messages from constituents who feel unsafe in their own homes. I have sat with them as they told me deeply personal stories, through tears and anger—of



[Uma Kumaran]

being unable to move to be with their mother who is dying of cancer; of the mental health impacts; of being unable to start a family; and of having their life savings trapped in un-mortgageable properties. The scale of anger, distrust and betrayal felt by my constituents, who are caught in this situation through no fault of their own, sits heavily with me. I share their frustration, which I can feel across the House today. It is frustration at the pace of remediation works, which are already long overdue and, for many, still feel years away.

It is shameful that, seven years after Grenfell, remediation has been completed on less than 50% of mid-rise and high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding. We have recently seen a terrifying fire in Dagenham, which is why residents across the country, including in Stratford and Bow, live in fear of what might happen to them in the event of a fire.

But this is not the end of the matter. Many leaseholders, including shared owners, feel trapped in properties that they are unable to sell, facing significant financial uncertainty and distress. In my constituency, residents in East Village—the site of the former Olympic athletes' village—have been left in a protracted legal battle between stakeholders over who is liable for remediation costs, which has delayed essential works.

Residents of Thomas Fyre Drive are still waiting for work to start, despite their service charges going up, and some are stuck in the leasehold trap because they cannot sell their property. Many feel that saving face and saving costs have been prioritised over their safety. The distress and frustration are palpable, and the situation is becoming untenable for many.

I know that the Government share my view that every person deserves to feel safe and secure, and be safe and secure, in their home. Sadly, too many of my constituents—and too many people across the country—fear being the victim of yet another Grenfell-style tragedy.

Will the Minister meet me to discuss the cases in my constituency, as we have the most high-rise, cladded blocks in the country? I acknowledge that he has inherited a shameful situation from the previous Government, and it is scandalous that remediation has been so slow. I welcome the work that this Labour Government are undertaking to put it right, particularly today's announcement committing to the remediation of all high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding by 2029 through a Government-funded scheme. I am also pleased that the Deputy Prime Minister has said today that we want to go much further.

At the election, we promised to speed up the removal of unsafe cladding. Today, we are acting on that promise. However, too many leaseholders in my constituency have had to pay the price of removing unsafe cladding that they had no role in putting up. I welcome the reforms announced today to give tenants, including social housing tenants, a seat at the table, but I urge the Minister to make sure that remediation costs do not fall on leaseholders. We must take account of all the views and give everyone a seat at the table.

We must truly mean it when we say, "Never again." We must learn the lessons of Grenfell so that the tragedy is never repeated. I join colleagues in urging the Government to act in full on the findings of the phase 2 report,

and to address the inequalities in housing—inequalities that we see due to class, race and disability. There is still so much more to be done, and I look forward to working together to ensure this never happens again.

8.32 pm

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I associate myself with the remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) in recognising the pain, grief and hurt caused to so many connected to the Grenfell Tower tragedy, in which 72 lives were lost. I have heard the sombre comments in this debate and mean no disrespect by raising a specific matter relating to the understanding and interpretation of the legislation passed subsequently—namely, the anomaly of non-qualified leaseholder status, as it affects some constituents of mine.

My constituents own a one-bedroom flat in north Somerset. It is not a penthouse or anything luxurious; it is simply a home. They purchased it in 2015 with a 999-year lease, and it was a new build, so it was theoretically covered by the NHBC 10-year guarantee. They believed it would be an ideal long-term rental property, without too many maintenance issues ahead.

A neighbouring flat went up for sale in August 2024, and the buyer's solicitor asked for an up-to-date fire risk appraisal. This prompted the management company to organise an assessment of the external walls, and the report strongly recommended cladding remediation work. My constituents would have known none of that, had it not been for the seller keeping them in the loop.

The new financial protections in the Building Safety Act 2022 apply to leaseholders in buildings above 11 metres, or five storeys in height, with historical safety defects. From 28 June 2022, qualifying leaseholders in England could no longer be charged for cladding remediation, and there are legal protections for non-cladding costs. The accompanying secondary legislation came into force on 20 and 21 July 2022.

The Government are clear that developers must pay to fix buildings that they had a role in developing or refurbishing, even when they no longer own the building. That seems right. The Act ensures that building owners who are, or are associated with, the developer must pay for the remediation of historical defects. The courts have been granted new powers to extend liability to associated companies, ensuring that civil cases for claims against defective buildings can be brought against companies associated with a developer, preventing the use of complex corporate structures to avoid that liability.

Qualifying leaseholders are protected from all cladding system remediation costs. Those whose property is calculated to be worth less than £175,000 outside London, or £325,000 in Greater London, or whose building owner has a group net worth of more than £2 million per relevant building as of 14 February 2022, are exempt from all historical safety remediation costs. The Act also includes a robust package of measures designed to ensure that those responsible finally put right the buildings they have contributed to making so dangerous, and that leaseholders are firmly protected from the unfair costs of remediation that they previously faced. No one could disagree that, on the face of it, that is fair.

Unfortunately, the previous Government failed to notify any leaseholders, qualifying or non-qualifying, of the implications of the Building Safety Act 2022, which came into force on 28 June 2022. However, four months ago, my constituents had no knowledge of the non-qualified leaseholder status that had been bestowed on them. Without any prior notice or consultation, my constituents' legal rights as leaseholders had been significantly changed, backdated to 14 February 2022. That is because, as of that date, the threshold for non-qualified leaseholder status cuts in at ownership of four properties.

It is very hard to find definitions of non-qualified leaseholder status on the Government website. There is plenty about qualified leaseholder status, but very little about non-qualified leaseholder status. The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), has confirmed that, weirdly, under the previous Government's legislation, a couple can own five properties, provided that they own their primary home jointly and two other properties each. However, a couple who own four properties jointly become non-qualifying leaseholders. Who on earth can think that is fair? That will discriminate against couples and families as compared with sophisticated business entities, which are probably the intended target of the legislation.

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Grenfell Tower inquiry has laid bare the failure of successive Governments in their duty of care to their citizens and revealed a catastrophic culture of carelessness that has caused untold suffering? Does she agree that the Government must act urgently to assist all leaseholders, including those currently excluded, such as non-qualifying leaseholder residents, like my constituents, who are unfairly left in financial and emotional turmoil through no fault of their own?

**Tessa Munt:** Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come on to some of those issues.

Sophisticated business entities are probably the intended target of the legislation, so there is good news for people who have divided their property assets, and bad luck for those who jointly own their property investments, which is a terribly random criterion. It was shocking enough for my constituents to find out that the nine-year-old building in which their flat sits had a cladding issue, but due to the fact that they jointly owned four properties on 14 February 2022, they were left largely unprotected. They are not like the developers or cladding suppliers. Not only that, but their status as non-qualifying leaseholders has been attached to their flat in perpetuity. Even after all the remediation work has taken place, centuries have passed—currently, this is another 990 years on the lease—and they have departed this world, every future owner of their flat will inherit the same diminished lease, while neighbouring flats are protected from the costs of making the building safe.

The impact of the legislation is profound. Solicitors are advising their clients not to buy any flat with the non-qualified leaseholder status attached, even after the fire safety work has been completed. Lenders are refusing to lend on properties of that status. The values are expected to reduce considerably, possibly by as much as 50%. Estate agents realise that trying to sell properties

with this status is pretty much a lost cause. Non-qualified leaseholders cannot sell their flats—they are mostly flats—and cannot mitigate the risks they have been exposed to. If a leaseholder has a 75% mortgage and the value drops by 50%, it is easy to see how financial crisis can hit ordinary people who saved hard, invested in bricks and mortar and are providing homes for rent all over the country, helping alleviate our housing crisis. Insurance premiums are sky high. If this continues, it is likely that lenders will not want to take possession if there is a default on the mortgage, because they themselves would become liable. Leaving a flat with this status in a will may expose family and friends to long-term problems associated with its status, as they will potentially inherit a liability not an asset.

The legislation has removed a whole tier of property from the ever-increasing number of young buyers and those who want to downsize, such as older citizens. It is clear that without the support of surveyors, agents, solicitors and lenders, it will become increasingly hard to secure one's first or last home. Whatever one's political ideals, surely we all agree that there is a terrible shortage of affordable homes, and the affordable end of the market often comes in the shape of a leasehold flat. I cannot find the path of logic through this legislation. I have no idea who tried to think this one through—I recognise that it was not the Minister. It seems deeply unfair that someone's legal rights can be different from those who own flats in the same building, just because my constituents had four or more properties in their ownership on 14 February.

Will the Minister try to explain the logic, though I recognise he did not write the legislation? It would be nice if his opposite number, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), would have a crack at trying to tell me how it works—I just do not get it. It is a bit like someone having their car recalled for a safety issue and having to pay to correct the problem and any other safety problem in the future due to the fact that they and their family have three other cars between them, and they might want to sell the car once the safety fault is fixed. This is madness.

The Minister is on the record as having confirmed that the Building Safety Act 2022 was written to safeguard the health and safety of those who lived in the affected buildings. If a non-qualified leaseholder has a leasehold flat as their principal flat, they are protected. What about the tenants who live in the flats owned by private landlords who are in this trap? Are they not important enough to be protected, too? The Minister further confirmed in a letter last month that once the property is brought up to standard and safety remedies are completed, in the years ahead

“the expectation is that the qualification point should essentially become moot”.

There is plenty in the Government's guidelines about non-qualifying leasehold status remaining with the property in perpetuity. I can find absolutely nothing about it becoming moot. I wonder how the Minister sees that being legislated for.

On the subject of Government guidelines, they are so complicated and hard to interpret that solicitors are at loggerheads over their ramifications. My constituents' management company initially confirmed that they would be liable for all the costs associated with cladding remediation works, even if the building were accepted

[Tessa Munt]

into the cladding safety scheme—that is, until my constituents were able to get the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to write to them confirming that they would be protected under the cladding safety scheme. However, it fell to my constituents to get proof and to convince their management company.

Worse than that, the Department advises owners to contact LEASE—the Leasehold Advisory Service—to establish their rights. LEASE confirmed both on the phone and in writing that my constituents did not qualify for any help or support in the cladding safety scheme. They were advised by others in the same predicament to contact the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Can the Minister confirm who should indicate whether non-qualifying leaseholders are covered by the cladding safety scheme?

These Government Departments are set up to help and guide people such as my constituents, yet they are giving completely conflicting advice. That situation has caused my constituents anguish, sleepless nights and constant worry about the possible life-changing financial burden that may be heading their way. If the Government do not sort that out so that advice is clear and consistent, we are all lost. Will the Minister meet my constituents and me to further discuss non-qualified leaseholder status as soon as possible?

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. As the House will have realised, many Members wish to speak in the debate, so in order for us to help each other, I am afraid that I will have to impose a four-minute limit on speeches. I call Ben Coleman.

8.46 pm

**Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I fully understand the challenge that you face, so I will do my best to keep to four minutes. It is an honour to follow the Deputy Prime Minister and so many hon. Friends and hon. Members, and to have so many people sitting up in the Public Gallery listening patiently to the debate, having suffered so much over the years.

I begin by recalling, as others have, the 15 disabled people who died in the Grenfell Tower fire. There was no plan in advance to ensure that they could be evacuated in a crisis. I am pleased that the Government have announced today, in publishing their response to the consultation, that they will introduce a set of measures on residential personal emergency evacuation plans. However, I agree with Grenfell United that personal emergency evacuation plans for disabled residents must be mandated—that is essential.

Let me turn to other matters that my hon. Friends have set out so well. The report is scathing about the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and its tenant management organisation. What leaps out in page after page of the report is the council's absolute lack of respect for so many of its residents—how it refused to listen to people living in social housing when again and again they raised concerns about the problems with the Grenfell building that eventually contributed to the terrible fire; how it treated the most dissenting voices as enemies; and how, once the fire had happened, it treated its own residents.

At the time, I was a councillor in the neighbouring borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. The day after the fire, our council became aware, purely by chance, that Kensington and Chelsea council had placed Grenfell residents in hotels in our borough, because some of those residents happened to wander down to the local West Kensington and Gibbs Green estate, where they were given food, shelter and clean clothing. They happened to mention that they had been placed at the Holiday Inn Express in Fulham, and our council leader got council officers to go to all the hotels in the borough, which we discovered were full of Grenfell residents. No one from Kensington and Chelsea council had tried to tell us. The report talks about the council's response being “muddled” and “piecemeal”, but perhaps another word is “cruel”.

Teams from Hammersmith and Fulham council kept a close eye and visited every week to look after the residents as best we could. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) came and sat with Grenfell residents on the grass at the West Ken and Gibbs Green estate. They asked, “Are you really a Member of Parliament? Because no one official from our borough has been to see us at all.” I cannot speak highly enough of how the community responded. I am keenly aware that where Kensington and Chelsea council failed, the community got it right.

The council in Kensington and Chelsea says that it is determined to learn from what it got wrong. That is very welcome, as is the fact that the scope of its review is going to explicitly consider racial as well as social discrimination—I look forward to that being the case. However, I still have serious questions about whether that council really gets it, because thousands of my Chelsea constituents live in social housing, and time and again they say that they do not feel that their voices are being heard, or that the culture has changed.

The Friday before last, I decided to call a meeting on the World's End estate to talk about some serious crime issues—sadly, a man from another estate had been stabbed in an altercation and had died. I invited all the residents to come and have a conversation with me about it. To my surprise, senior councillors from the Conservative Kensington and Chelsea council tried to dissuade me. They said that they had already engaged with residents and that another meeting would bring no more benefit. In the event, more than 50 residents came. We had a great conversation; not everyone agreed with each other, but everyone had a chance to speak and to be heard. Only one thing really shocked me, which was the number of residents who said at the end of the meeting, or even during the meeting, that they had lived on that estate all their lives or for decades, and that this was the first time they had ever been to a meeting like this on the estate—one where they felt listened to.

To sum up, I hope that residents will be listened to. If I may, I hope that we will have a debate like this every year, so that we can look at the recommendations. I request that Front Benchers enable that to happen. I am grateful for your time, Madam Deputy Speaker.

8.50 pm

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I, too, start by joining the Deputy Prime Minister in expressing my sincere condolences to the families tragically impacted



by this avoidable disaster. I welcome her statement and the positive steps and actions she has outlined to address the findings of the inquiry.

I welcome the plans to introduce heavy penalties for those who fail to meet repair deadlines, but I share the concerns of campaigners that the timescales for making properties safe are way too long. The Deputy Prime Minister may say that the Government are taking “decisive action”, but the building safety fund was first opened for registration in 2020. The 2029 target must not be for the first building to be remediated—it must be guaranteed to be when the last one will be.

For over seven years, residents and leaseholders have continued to live with the mental anguish that the properties they and their families go to sleep in every night are unsafe, aware that what happened to the residents of Grenfell could well happen to them. As we have heard, residents also face extortionate home insurance bills and rising costs for repairs that should be the sole responsibility of the developers, while leaseholders face ruin, financially trapped in properties that they bought in good faith but were built in bad faith.

To widen the argument and the issue at hand, the picture of property developers cutting corners to make a profit and disregarding human life in the process is one that, before Grenfell, we wanted to believe belonged to a bygone era. Unfortunately, it is very much the reality of 21st-century Britain; a culture has become embedded where corporate bosses think they can get away with cutting corners in the pursuit of profit. We have seen the ugly imprint of that culture again and again, whether it is Government lobbyists scamming the public purse during the covid crisis, water companies polluting our rivers, the blatant disregard for truth and basic decency in the Post Office Horizon scandal, or people being burned alive in buildings that are not fit for purpose.

The only way to root out that culture is regulation to protect the public from those who seek to exploit them, and I am concerned that the Deputy Prime Minister does not go nearly far enough in that regard. We know that the property industry in general is rife with profiteering, and I am concerned that we will see more of the same as property agents hike up fees, earning hundreds of millions of pounds in the process by charging administration fees on works to make buildings safe. In opposition, the Labour party committed to preventing this by calling for the nationalisation of the process of fixing high-rise flats to eliminate administration fees, and I encourage the Government to pursue that policy.

I would like the Deputy Prime Minister to consider applying the risk assessment to buildings of under 11 metres as well. Campaigners are right to say not only that a comprehensive risk assessment must apply to buildings of all heights, but that building safety crises go far beyond external cladding and a holistic approach must give equal consideration to non-cladding defects—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order.

8.55 pm

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for her speech, and I associate myself with her words. She reminded us that we should once again remember the victims, the survivors and

those left behind after the tragedy of the 72 entirely preventable deaths in Grenfell Tower. There are many lessons to be learned from this tragedy, and residents in Southampton Itchen, especially those in the 46 blocks still affected by unsafe cladding, are looking on anxiously to see if we learn those lessons. These are some of the people who know far too well and far too personally just how slow the progress has been of making all buildings safe.

As this Government embark on our ambitious plan to build 1.5 million new homes, we and, importantly, those who will call those houses their homes, need to know that they are safe. Sadly, however, such peace of mind is not yet felt by many residents in my constituency, where an unacceptably high number still live in buildings affected by cladding or fire safety risks. Some remediation has happened, and that is to be welcomed, but in too many places it is not happening fast enough, or leaseholders are paying the price, as in the countless examples we have heard. They include those who live in blocks that do not meet the 11-metre threshold, and who are getting unexpected bills for tens of thousands of pounds through their letterbox.

I recently held a public meeting with constituents awaiting fire safety works. Among the many who came to share their experiences, Ellie has seen her service charges soar from £1,600 a year to over £6,000, and she has no idea how she will afford it. In the same block, Stewart told me he feels as though no one cares after the same service charge hike left him and his family trapped in a property they have outgrown. Just down the road, Daniel is not only facing escalating service charges of £3,000, but his insurance now tops £4,000 on top of his rent and on top of his regular bills. James happens to live in one part of a taller development in which his building is under 11 metres, yet he is facing remediation charges of between £15,000 and £30,000. Those responsible cannot yet decide how much they are going to charge the residents, and this is simply not acceptable.

Others have told me about the changes they want to see implemented, so in the time left I want to make my constituents' views and voices heard in this place. They want a clearly defined single construction regulator that can channel efforts to drive change, and I am sure they will welcome today's announcements. Many are stuck in unsellable flats, and they could not tell us who exactly is responsible for keeping them safe. That needs to change. They want to see a much clearer role for managing agents. What exactly are their responsibilities, and what standards will they be held to? They want to see improved regulation of insurance and service charges—again, that is touched on in the report—so they are not charged for remediation works through the back door, which is simply not fair. With an eye to the future, people want us to move away from the feudal system of leasehold, which this Government are committed to delivering. They want much better-quality housing, so they can move into places where they know they are safe. In short, people want, need and deserve a way out of this mess.

The remediation action plan shows that this Government are taking these issues seriously. I would just urge Ministers, even where deadlines are set, to move even more quickly, where possible. We have begun the crucial work to put right this scandal, and we must not rest until that is done in full.

8.59 pm

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I am here to talk about the people, their treatment and their rights, and I am sorry I do not have more time to do the topic justice. I had been a London Assembly member for one year in 2017 when the Grenfell disaster happened, and it had such a huge impact on my work and on me personally. I will never, ever forget the many things that I saw and heard. I will never forget the smells, the burned debris on garden hedges, the community's shock and heartbreak, and its spirit as it called me and many other elected representatives down there to try to deal with the issues that they themselves were dealing with and identifying. The people around Grenfell, the victims, the 72 people killed that day—they are constantly in my heart when I work on any related issue. I was also a councillor in Camden, and a few days later five of our blocks had to be evacuated due to related issues, so I have a perspective of dealing with a non-fatal but nevertheless disruptive evacuation and incident.

Let me rattle quickly through a few of the recommendations relating to people, and to these issues. I am desperate on behalf of the residents I represented then, and those I represent now in Brighton Pavilion, where we have a huge number of medium and high-rise blocks that need work. For no good reason I still see many of these issues emerging in relation to the treatment of residents in blocks, the information they can get out of their landlords, the slowness of the action, and the fact that substandard work is still being done on many people's blocks—I should not still be doing this so long afterwards.

Let me start with the recommendations related to management. The way that the TMO treated its residents was abysmal. We have seen much evidence for that, but the report gets to the heart of it when it states that however “irritating and inconvenient” it may have been to deal with those residents,

“for the TMO to have allowed the relationship to deteriorate to such an extent reflects a serious failure on its part to observe its basic responsibilities.”

The housing ombudsman echoed that, speaking of gross imbalances of power. Residents who ask questions, or who start to organise their neighbours to have some kind of collective voice that might get things done, are still talked about as troublemakers, as militants, or as a nuisance. I am still encouraged not to listen to those residents when there are issues, which is not correct.

I also want to focus on transparency of information—these things are the basic building blocks on which resident trust can possibly be built. In 2017 I was having trouble getting fire risk assessments from Camden council. I went to the Information Commissioner's Office, which responded in a fantastic way. She was clear that councils needed to publish those assessments proactively, yet here I am representing residents in Brighton, and it has taken 18 months. My predecessor, Caroline Lucas, first asked the council to publish its fire risk assessments when she realised that it was not complying with the ICO's recommendations. I wrote to the council about the issue back in September when I realised that was the case, and finally last week I was told that some assessments would be published imminently. That is just not good enough from councils. I do not even know where to start when trying to get information about non-council landlords. It has been ridiculous on behalf of so many residents.

Finally, I want to talk about the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and its recommendations, which are tremendous. The humanitarian response on the ground was nowhere near good enough—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order.

9.3 pm

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), and others, and I very much welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's written statement today, and her speech highlighting why the Government are acting and what they are doing.

We know that this was a systemic failure over many generations and across many parts of Government. In fact, in 2018 the late James Brokenshire issued a ministerial direction to civil servants to ensure that the original money was spent to remove the most dangerous cladding. I spoke to the senior civil servant who had had to go back and speak to predecessors about what had gone wrong, but no one had seen this coming. So I say to the Deputy Prime Minister that if there is a bigger lesson in this, it is about how the Government manage risk and watch for the unintended consequences of actions. Even with all the problems nobody intended that such things would happen, but that is what can happen if we do not keep our eye on the ball, and I hope my right hon. Friend will take that back to the heart of Government.

The impact in my constituency has been immense. Hackney as a borough has the second largest number of unsafe buildings in London, with the London Fire Brigade showing that 93% buildings in Hackney are at high risk—a larger figure than all other London boroughs except Tower Hamlets, as we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran). We have 72 buildings that are over 18 metres tall. Together, Hackney and Tower Hamlets in the heart of east London account for almost a quarter of the buildings in London with fire safety failures. I invite the Minister to meet us in any of our constituencies, or indeed in this place, to talk about what can be done across east London, because the impact is terrible. Insurance premiums have gone up massively. Many of my constituents who are leaseholders face bankruptcy. The mission to achieve change by 2029 will be too late for some. There is also disruption to their lives. They are unable to move on, and are putting off having a family. Their lives are on hold while they wait for the matter to be resolved.

I concur with the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) about housing associations, but in the interests of time I will not repeat them. Some of these properties are owned offshore or have opaque ownership. That is one of the reasons that James Brokenshire issued a ministerial direction. He realised that one of the buildings with the worst cladding had had 89 owners since it was built. If there is one thing that the Government can do, they can stop our homes becoming vehicles for offshore finance. That is why 2029 is a challenge.

The National Audit Office report that has been cited says that we will not see changes until 2035. With the construction industry in its present state, and all the other pressures that the Government will face when

trying to invest in infrastructure, I would love to hear from the Minister how we will ensure that we have the right construction skills in this country and, if it is what is required, that the Government will allow migration in order to ensure that we have the right skilled people in place.

Finally, I will highlight a wider issue about how we support families affected by fire. On 5 June this year, during the election campaign, a fire gutted a building on Dalston Lane in the Pembury Estate, with 36 households escaping with just the clothes on their back. Of those households, 10 are still in temporary accommodation—the Peabody housing trust did a good job in the early days of getting them housed—and many are still living in hotel rooms. Someone who is in her 90s is trying to be offered a place by an estate agent. Today, I launch a campaign, which other Members are welcome to join, to require landlords to have a wider set of plans to help tenants in the aftermath of a fire or other crisis. Yes, there is the immediate challenge—happily, there were no fatalities on Dalston Lane—but the ongoing impact on residents is immense, with mental health challenges, disruption to their lives and trauma. We need a holistic approach to supporting tenants and residents in those situations, and every landlord should be required to have that model.

9.7 pm

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I associate myself with the remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister, who did well to capture the tragedy that we all experienced so many years ago. The tragedy of Grenfell Tower will forever remain in our collective memory. On the devastating night of 14 June 2017, 72 lives were lost and many more were impacted forever. The events of that night left a deep wound in London's history, physically and mentally. I extend my deepest sympathies to the victims, the families and all those affected. The fire changed their lives in unimaginable ways.

Seven years on, justice for the victims is painfully overdue, yet thousands in the UK still live in buildings wrapped in dangerous flammable cladding. Of the nearly 5,000 buildings identified as having dangerous cladding, less than half have begun work and only a third have completed it. Between 4,000 and 7,000 buildings are still unidentified, highlighting the absolute failure of the last Government to get a grip on the crisis. That failure leaves an alarming number of buildings and residents still at risk. Just days before the publication of the final report in August, a fire broke out at a tower block in Dagenham. Thankfully, there were no fatalities, but more than 200 firefighters battled flames that spread rapidly due to non-compliant cladding.

These unsafe buildings are ticking time bombs. Residents in London live in constant fear of another disaster. Across London, including in my constituency of Sutton and Cheam, tower blocks still possess non-compliant cladding, which could pose a serious risk to residents. The previous Government mandated that local authorities must make these buildings safe; however, crucially, they provided no funding to support that, at a time when local authorities were already facing severe underfunding. As a result, millions of pounds were added to council housing revenue accounts as an unplanned financial burden. Worse, Government assistance through various schemes was exclusively directed towards leaseholders, leaving local authorities and tenants without support.

Although I welcome this new Government's commitment to the replacement of all flammable cladding by 2029, urgency is of the utmost importance. It is essential that all dangerous cladding is removed as soon as possible and that leaseholders should not be required to pay a penny towards these necessary safety improvements. This work is as a result of the failure of builders, product manufacturers and regulators to ensure that the buildings that residents live in are safe. The report is utterly damning on the failures of the industry and the criminal negligence as a result of the failed safety tests that were hidden. The industry focused on contrivance and profiteering, instead of residents' safety. We must all work to ensure that the mistakes of the past are never repeated. Another Grenfell must never happen. This tragedy will always serve as a stark reminder of the devastating consequence of neglecting safety and justice for local authority residents. Justice for the victims of Grenfell means a commitment to immediate action to implement the 58 recommendations of the phase 2 report. That is not just for them, but for every community still at risk.

9.10 pm

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): In the short time available I want to say to the survivors and the next of kin—some of whom are here today; some will be watching from home—that I am sorry they have been so severely let down by the previous Government and by their council. I hope that the words of the Deputy Prime Minister today have given some comfort.

Brent East is just next door to Grenfell, and we watched the fire unfold. They say that 72 people died, but the reality is that we do not really know the exact number, as people from Kensington tell me. Every time we say that this disaster was preventable, we have to be honest about what happened in the system. Some 85% of people were black and a minoritised group. That is why they were not listened to and were ignored. Grenfell United and Grenfell Next of Kin have been fighting for more than seven and a half years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) said, they are still not being listened to. They have been so badly let down, and there needs to be an investigation into what happened, how the council used Grenfell to get funds and what happened to those funds. There is so much that needs to be discussed.

I also notice that Kwajo is here. He is a housing campaigner and activist. That is an indication of how much people of colour are not listened to when they try to say that there is an injustice. Why was the cladding put on the building? The residents did not want it. It was so that it looked pretty and nice to the more wealthy residents down the road. We have heard about the profits, the greed and the deregulation that caused this catastrophe. If we want it not to happen again, we have to be honest about why it happened in the first place.

My thoughts are with the bereaved families and survivors. Every year, we go on the silent march. I remember speaking to a little girl who is a little bit older now. She said she was studying for her GCSEs and that the day after she was taking them, which she passed. She said that was what she was focused on, but what are the families and survivors focusing on now? It is justice, which they have not got. Until they have justice, none of us should rest, and none of us should feel comfortable—this



[Dawn Butler]

may well happen again—because justice delayed is justice denied. I pass Grenfell on my way home most nights, and every time I pass that building, I say a prayer for everybody who died, everybody who survived and all the names we will never know.

9.13 pm

**Sarah Hall** (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): On 14 June 2017, the country watched in horror as images of the fire engulfing Grenfell Tower emerged. I felt it in the pit of my stomach as the true scale of the devastation and loss of life became apparent. This tragedy should never have happened. I will call it out for what it is: a national scandal.

I hope that the family, friends and community affected by the fire can find some peace in the fight for justice, but as I stand here I am reminded of another disaster: the Summerland fire in 1973, with combustible cladding, critical matters of safety of life ignored and disregarded, and a catalogue of failures. Fifty people died in that fire, including 11 children, and many more were injured. Those events were 44 years apart but the parallels are all too clear.

Speaking in 2013, a photographer called Noel Howarth, who captured pictures of the fire as it engulfed the Summerland leisure complex, said:

“Unless we learn from history, we will repeat the mistakes we made in history”.

Whether it is 2017 or 1973, justice must be served and lessons must be learned. Both campaigns for justice have my full support.

9.15 pm

**Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I might only be five months in as an MP, but I have heard every Government promise to cut red tape. The thing is, regulations keep people safe in their homes and in the workplace. There are organisations and people who should have faced a trial over Grenfell by now. The criminal process should have happened simultaneously with the inquiry. There is plenty of evidence—plenty of proof—but the survivors of Grenfell are still waiting for action and justice. When we look at Orgreave, Hillsborough, infected blood, the Women Against State Pension Inequality, Horizon and Grenfell, we see that the list of injustices that impact working-class communities goes on and on.

These are shared struggles, because Grenfell is not about cladding. Grenfell is about how the state has repeatedly treated the working class with utter disdain and contempt. In reality, there has been a lack of urgency around implementing lifesaving changes so far. The inquiry must change things. Time is of the essence, because how many Lakanal Houses or Grenfell Towers must there be before things really do change? We can all talk in sombre tones in the Chamber, but why are people still going to their beds surrounded by flammable cladding tonight?

Grenfell survivors deserve justice, and firefighters and every community across the country deserve a properly funded fire service with the equipment they need to save lives and keep themselves as safe as possible. For example, firefighters deserve proper decontamination

units to reduce their risk of getting cancer while at call-outs. Funding, rules and regulations do save lives. Our fire service and our working-class communities across the country need to be invested in, not stripped bare, hollowed out and failed by the state.

9.17 pm

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for her speech. I put on record my deepest sympathies to all the families affected by this terrible tragedy and thank Members from across the House for their thoughtful contributions to the debate. In particular, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) and for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) for their emotive and powerful speeches.

Group Commander Rod Wainwright served for 26 years. He had a distinguished career of service in the London Fire Brigade. He said:

“I was not on duty that night, 14 June 2017. The fire brigade did not have the correct team on duty and called me to assist with the incident but never recalled the correct team or number of staff required to be effective from Gloucester. That team should never have been outside of the M25 leaving London unprotected. I was called around 1 am. I spent 15 hours on the scene and was never relieved or given the assistance that was required.

I had counselling from LFB counsellors on three different occasions but it wasn't effective. I asked for specific PTSD counselling from a specialist and for the brigade to pay. They said 'no' and to use the in-house option again. The specialist would have cost around £2,000, but I was told”—

by the director—

“that it wasn't suitable and sent the wrong message. I was diagnosed with complex PTSD and subsequently medically retired with no recognition, thanks or acknowledgement from senior management.”

As I have told the House before, Rod blames himself for not saving more people that night. However, in my view, he too is a victim of failure. I will say again that people like us in suits in this room are to blame for the tragedy of Grenfell, not heroes like Rod Wainwright. The executive summary to the phase 2 report makes that clear. It makes grim reading to us all. It describes the systematic dishonesty of those who made and sold the rainscreen cladding panels and insulation products. They allowed customers to continue to buy products in the UK despite knowledge gained from fires in Dubai in 2012 and 2013. I repeat: systematic dishonesty.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) because this was in his constituency, but briefly, in another early MP surgery I was visited by Claire Newman, who told me of the story of her mother Daphne Holloway and her neighbour Ivy Spriggs, who died in their beds during a nursing home fire around the same time as the Grenfell disaster. The nursing home had no sprinkler systems. I welcome the commitment from the Deputy Prime Minister that all new care homes will be given sprinkler systems, but I ask for some consideration, as Claire is asking for, of putting in sprinklers retrospectively. Although care homes do not meet the 18-metre requirement, I also ask that they be included on the higher risk register.

On that terrible morning in 2017, 72 people died in their homes. Families were broken. Lives were destroyed. Let us please learn lessons from that tragedy.

9.21 pm

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Member's Financial Interests.

First of all, I thank the Deputy Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), plus all the London MPs who have brought home what Grenfell meant in their constituencies. However, the consequences of Grenfell are felt right across the country, and they have gone on for far too long for the residents of my constituency. Had the previous Government proceeded at pace with the confidence to take on developers with legal obligations and severe penalties, my residents would not still be stuck in buildings that have not had the remediation required. Each year since Grenfell, thousands of people in Milton Keynes have been left worse off, impacting their financial and mental health.

A woman in my constituency—we will call her Angie—bought her flat with her husband in order to downsize, and be mortgage free and financially secure in their retirement. Unfortunately, she lost her husband, and with her single pension she cannot afford the 600% increase in insurance costs that she has seen in the past seven years. She is accumulating debt that she will never be able to pay, and she cannot sell her flat to prevent further debt. Her plan for a secure retirement has turned into a nightmare that she cannot get out of. That is why I welcome the Government's announcement today to challenge that practice by the insurance industry, and to promise to act if the insurance industry does not. Has the Deputy Prime Minister had discussions with the industry about any retrospective reductions for those who have been affected by those huge insurance hikes?

The Grenfell report rightly identifies the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea for its many failings, but not all local authorities were slow to respond, such as my own in Milton Keynes Central where two council housing tower blocks were dealt with within a year of the tragedy—well within the guidelines that the Government recommended, and with no financial support from the Government. I would welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's views on whether the councils that took action, at huge cost to their housing revenue account, should be rewarded for their proactive attention with help to build more council homes.

I welcome the Government's commitment to putting local authorities at the heart of the solution, but developments are still being put forward that might not meet building control requirements, especially the permitted development of office conversions to flats. That is not currently a material consideration, so local planning committees have no choice but to pass it. Will the Secretary of State review the planning rules so that no building, new or converted, is unsafe for its residents? Will she also consider whether building control should be fully in the hands of local authorities, so that developers can no longer use their favourite private building control to sign off developments? The privatised BRE and its role in ensuring new materials has been brought up by many. Will the Minister consider renationalising the BRE, so that there can be no question of any company influence over the safety of new building products?

Finally, it is not just tall buildings that have been affected. For far too long, those in buildings like Backus Lodge in my constituency, which has been rated B2 under the EWS1 framework since March 2022—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. I call the final contribution from the Back Benches.

9.26 pm

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's statement, which shows that she cares and is resolute in seeking redress. The essence of how our country is run with regard to public safety is at stake, so I hope my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members will agree that, for public confidence and for the deterrent effect to grow, not only must we ensure that justice is not denied by being delayed; it is also for us to ensure that justice—in the form of individuals, organisations and companies being properly held to account—happens at all. That is important because, as other hon. Members have alluded to, in previous cases of egregious state and business failure, there has been insufficient justice of this kind. We owe this to the Grenfell victims, to the survivors and indeed to wider society.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

9.27 pm

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): This evening's debate has been appropriately serious and wide-ranging, and I will open by thanking the many who have enabled it to be just that: the excellent journalism of the BBC, which has ensured that not just the initial fire, but the inquiry and the lessons learned from it have remained at the forefront of public debate; and the survivors, the supporters of Grenfell United, some of whom are here tonight, and the many others who contributed to the inquiry process and to ensuring simply that Grenfell remained at the forefront of the public mind. I also thank Sir Martin Moore-Bick, who chaired the inquiry. I know it was the subject of some criticism when he was first appointed, but when we read the phase 2 report and consider everything that led up to it, we can see that it is a serious piece of work that puts us in a position to make good decisions about what needs to change.

It is our parliamentary duty to consider these most serious of matters. We need to ensure that we get it right for the sake of the survivors and the families of victims, but also for all the other people who have been spoken about in the Chamber this evening: those who live with anxiety about their own personal safety and circumstances, and those with a stake in the system, who need to ensure that the legislation that has flowed since the tragedy, and the actions that the new Government will need to continue, are fit for purpose. To that end, I confirm that the Opposition will support the Government to implement the proportionate and necessary measures that are required to keep the public safe.

Many Members across the Chamber have said that those who have intentionally cut corners on building safety need to be held to account, and the Opposition agree. While it has taken a long time, the inquiry process has gathered really good evidence, which will provide the Metropolitan police and others that may be involved, including the Crown Prosecution Service, with the beginnings of the evidence base needed to hold specific individuals to account through criminal charges and to pursue action against those developers and contractors who we now know clearly and fraudulently cut corners on building safety for their own financial gain. It has

[David Simmonds]

been said very clearly that we also need to ensure that the bigger businesses—the big corporates—that may have condoned that action need to be excluded from profiting from future public sector procurement activity.

There will be further lessons to learn from the inquiry. I pay tribute to a number of Members who made very serious and considered speeches. The hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) talked about the rise of the tenant management organisation. That is example of where there will be difficult questions for all parties and Government Departments to consider. The purpose of the previous Labour Government in introducing arms-length management organisations was to create a mechanism by which additional funding could be put forward to enable a higher standard to be achieved in the social housing sector.

However, I also know—the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation is a good example of this—that that created an additional barrier of governance between the local authorities, which in most cases were the freeholders of the properties in question, and the tenants, who in theory gained additional control through the creation of boards to oversee what happened in their buildings. However, as the phase 2 report spelt out very clearly, effective governance often failed to materialise. Instead, there was often mutual finger pointing, with each thinking that somebody else was responsible for the critical fire safety issues. Those lessons about governance, however difficult they may be for both sides of the Chamber, must not be glossed over.

It is clear, as has been set out, that the Government intend to take robust action. It is the Opposition's contention that they have solid foundations to build on. As the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) set out, James Brokenshire—the then Minister, since sadly deceased—set out swiftly after the fire, once some initial information about its causes was available, that £400 million funding was to be made available to social housing providers and local authorities in 2018 to ensure the swift remediation of social housing settings with the most high-risk cladding on the exterior.

That was followed with legislation: the Fire Safety Act 2021, the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023. Each was designed, as the process of inquiry was progressing and as other evidence came to light, to ensure that we were addressing, as far as we could, those things that we were legally able to do at each of those stages, first on the basics of fire safety, and then on to the broader lessons emerging about building safety and ensuring that social housing regulation—in what is a diverse sector—was fit for purpose.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I want to repeat the point I made earlier, to see if I can get a response this time. We knew at various stages that there needed to be skilled people, from surveyors to contracting, to carry out the remediation work. Looking back, does he regret that perhaps some of that effort was not put into developing those skills earlier, so that constituents of ours who are still waiting for remediation could perhaps have had it done more quickly?

**David Simmonds:** The hon. Member is absolutely right to highlight the lack of capacity as a huge issue in the sector. Those who have been interested in housing for a long time will know that the remediation of risks can be incredibly complex. The Bison blocks, which many of us will have in housing built in our constituencies and across London, were supposedly made safe in the 1980s in response to particular gas safety risks, and we know that other structural risks have subsequently emerged. Making sure there are people with the detailed knowledge and technical ability to address those risks effectively is critical.

We welcome the plans that the Government are setting out to accelerate the work that was under way to remove dangerous cladding. We will be scrutinising and working with the Government to ensure that that continues to progress. The previous Government made available over £5.1 billion to remove unsafe cladding from buildings identified as high and medium rise, and therefore most at risk, given the inherent risk to residents of it being on buildings with a higher number of floors. We need to ensure that that work is completed. It is positive news that, according to the Government's figures, on 98% of the high-rise buildings with the most dangerous styles of cladding, the work to remove it had been either started or completed by July 2024, but we know that that comes in the context of many other risks about which our residents and constituents will be concerned, and we must ensure that those are addressed effectively.

When we look back to previous debates about building safety, we see that, as a number of Members have mentioned this evening, we cannot simply focus on the issue of cladding and materials and set aside issues such as the effectiveness of fire-stopping and fire doors, which have often come to light during inspections subsequent to Grenfell as being deficient in all manner of buildings. We should bear in mind the debates between the technical experts about whether sprinklers or misters are the most appropriate means of fire suppression in different types of settings, about the need to provide effective sources of water for the fire brigade, and about whether dry risers or wet risers are the most effective. Issues involving access for rescuers and fire safety operatives, and also the ability of residents to escape—again, those have been highlighted this evening—also need to feature in our thinking.

As a number of Members have pointed out, including the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), the emergence of new risks, such as much larger numbers of lithium batteries driving electric bikes that are being charged in residential premises, are now at the forefront of the thinking of our fire brigades, as they look not just at the historical risks, which we know about and can take action to mitigate, but at the emerging new risks. They need the equipment, the technology and the capacity to ensure that they can deal with those factors, should they encounter them in a context in which there is a risk to life.

Other Members have highlighted the importance of dealing with the problems of, in particular, constituents who may not be able to benefit from the funding already in place for social and council tenants because they are leaseholders—in some cases, leaseholders in investment properties. They find that their properties are uninsurable, and that it is very difficult to obtain a mortgage. People want to purchase those properties to be their homes or to be part of a pathway that will give their families



access to the size and quality of housing that they need. Those pathways must be reopened, and people who are trapped by some of those issues must see them addressed. In all those respects, we undertake as an Opposition to support the Government in ensuring that fully effective measures are in place for the future.

While much of the debate has focused on the role of the suppliers of products used in construction, it is important to acknowledge the need to ensure that our existing estates are safe and fit for purpose. Local authorities, social housing providers and other landlords have a multitude of legal obligations, but I am conscious, from my experience as a local authority councillor, that not all occupiers wish to engage with that process. The local authorities that serve my constituency have to go to court from time to time to gain access to properties, simply in order to carry out safety checks for which they are responsible as landlords and which are an element of keeping the bigger building of which those individual homes are a part safe for the benefit of all the residents. We must ensure that those local authorities, social housing providers and other landlords have effective tools, so that the expectations we are setting for them can be realised without compromising the safety of residents, and that means being able to gain access expeditiously. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), in what I thought was a very thoughtful and considered contribution, henceforth we must have a more effective, more independent system for managing all those risks.

When the phase 2 report was published, Councillor Elizabeth Campbell, who is now the leader of Kensington and Chelsea Council, set out, in a way that I think deserves credit, her acceptance of failure, on behalf of her local authority—I should make it clear that she was not in charge of housing before the Grenfell fire, although she was a serving member then—a willingness to take responsibility, and the ownership of that improvement journey, in response to the detailed recommendations in the report.

Clearly, the response to Grenfell has now spanned two Governments of different parties. We can be broadly proud of our record. We have passed those pieces of legislation and allocated substantial sums of money, which has built the foundations to ensure that public and private housing in this country is safer for the tenants and residents of the future. The baton has now been handed over, and it is the Government's job to ensure that everyone else in the system is doing their job to the highest standards and in accordance with the law. The Government can count on the Opposition's continued support in the delivery of that, but they should also expect to be held to account, because it is the interests of everybody in this country to ensure that it is achieved.

9.40 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** This has been an important debate on the findings and recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry. As the inquiry's phase 2 report and today's debate have made clear, fundamental change is needed to make our homes secure and safe, both now and in the future.

I said in a building safety debate a few weeks ago that, like other colleagues, I reflect on where I was on that night seven and a half years ago. It was a poignant

moment. Having sat on the other side of the Chamber, I think that if we had said then that we would be where we are now, we would have been exceptionally surprised and disappointed that not enough progress has been made. It now behoves the Government of the day to move at much greater pace, building on the inquiry's recommendation to move at speed.

The inquiry's findings on the causes of the tragedy tell us something about a building safety system that was fundamentally broken, that had baked-in deficiencies and that went unchallenged by authorities across the piece, and about the relentless dishonesty of individuals. But it also tells us about Britain and the country in which we live. The consequence was buildings with unsafe cladding and 72 people losing their lives, which was devastating for their families and for the community. As the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister have said, we apologise on behalf of the British state. We cannot say sorry enough.

As the Prime Minister has set out, the Government are considering our response to the report and have committed to come back within six months with our response to the recommendations, as well as to give Parliament the opportunity to debate it at that time and on an annual basis. I say from the bottom of my heart that this has been an important debate for shaping the Government's response to the report. I have some points of my own to make, but I will major on the points made by colleagues, because there have been a lot of important questions and comments that need a reply at this stage.

I will start with my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), who shaped both the spirit and the content of the debate. He spoke with purpose, but I could detect quite a lot of anger as well. When I speak to bereaved people, the next of kin, survivors and the immediate community, it is clear how angry they are with how little progress has been made, how tired they are of telling people like me their story, how much pain it causes them to tell their story again and to hear it played out in our nation's Parliament, and how angry it makes them that we cannot say that this tragedy will not happen again, which is shameful for our country. My hon. Friend talked about the merry-go-round of blame. Let me tell him that the report's recommendations provide a chance for a single response, owned singularly by the Government of the day, to break that merry-go-round.

The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), spoke with characteristic power. What I took from her contribution, and what I suspect will be the work of her Committee, is the need for more systematic action. We have said that we will address the recommendations within the timeline to which we have committed, but we understand that systematic challenges in the building safety industry have been highlighted by the inquiry report, the Morrell-Day report and the Hackitt review, all of which we will pick up as part of the process, because the whole system needs reform.

That takes me to what the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said. He is coming to see me in the next few days to discuss his thoughtful ideas about safety investigations that have worked in other industries, and the Government are all ears.

[Alex Norris]

My hon. Friends the Members for Kensington and Bayswater and for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green talked about manufacturers. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, the Prime Minister has committed that we will take action against culpable manufacturers. As the first step in that process, the Cabinet Office has written to organisations named in the inquiry who bear different responsibilities for these failings. For those found by the inquiry to have been part of these horrific failings, this is the first step in stopping them being awarded Government contracts. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, the Government intend to publish guidance to support this first set of decisions early next year to stop the most egregious companies getting Government contracts.

A number of colleagues mentioned issues relating to leaseholders, and I shall start with leaseholder protections, which came into force on 28 June 2022. Qualifying leaseholders are protected from the costs of legal or other professional services relating to the liability or potential liability incurred as a result of a relevant defect. The Building Safety Act 2022 also provides for remediation contribution orders, which allow interested persons to apply to the first-tier tribunal for an order requiring building owners to pay to fix unsafe buildings, but I am struck, as a Minister, by how often colleagues tell me that these things are not happening. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam), who is no longer in his place, mentioned Abbey House, which I am keen to talk to him about. I will also meet my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) to understand how this is manifesting itself for her constituents.

My hon. Friends the Members for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) talked about insurance for leaseholders, and it is impossible not to be struck by the financial and emotional impact that high insurance premiums are having on leaseholders. Affected leaseholders have been burdened with paying high premiums for too long, and as part of the remediation acceleration plan, we have announced that we will work with insurers to consider whether, for the duration of remediation programmes, the Government might support industry to reduce fire-related liabilities in order to reduce the high insurance bills that leaseholders are facing. We have also launched a public consultation today on our plans to prevent excessive buildings insurance commissions for landlords, for property managing agents or for freeholders being charged to leaseholders. Our intention is to replace those with a fair and transparent fee.

I have mentioned qualifying leaseholders, which takes me to the point about qualifying and non-qualifying leaseholders that the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) raised in this debate and earlier in oral questions. She invites me to set out a path of logic for the distinction between qualifying and non-qualifying leaseholders. I would maintain that, in principle, the difference between what we would consider an ordinary resident and what we would consider a business owning perhaps very many properties is a distinction that we would want to draw when providing public relief. At some point we have to draw a line. The hon. Lady spoke

with great eloquence about how that has manifested itself for married couples, and I know from my conversations with many others that there are similar edge cases. We will look at those edge cases, and I am keen to meet her because she spoke with great power about one such case in her community.

With your forbearance, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to correct something that I said during oral questions earlier, because it is an important distinction. I talked about the need to find the balance between those who built a building and those who live in it, but in reality, the balance we need to find is between those who have financial interests in a building and those who live in it. That is slightly different. I will correct the record formally, but I did not want to miss this first public opportunity to do so, given the importance of the point that was raised.

The question of justice was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) and for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman). Speaking to survivors, to the next of kin and to the immediate community, it is impossible not to be struck by their anger and their entirely natural need for justice. I have to say, as building safety Minister, that to some degree this is the element of the entire piece that I find most challenging because, quite rightly, the police and courts are independent of Government. We of course speak with the authorities, and I know that they hear very clearly from those affected about the need for pace. The Metropolitan police have said that it will take time, that it is one of the largest and most legally complex investigations they have ever conducted, and that they have 180 officers and staff dedicated to the investigation.

A question was asked about court capacity, which colleagues will know is of great importance to this Government. We are working very hard to relieve the pressure on Crown courts to ensure they are not the point at which justice is prevented.

An hon. Member whose name I have not noted asked about memorialisation, and it is important that I make it clear on the record that no decision has been made about the tower's future. This matter is being led by the Deputy Prime Minister, who recognises the importance of listening to the community on this sensitive issue. She is actively doing so, and it is right that the bereaved, the survivors, the next of kin and the immediate community are at the heart of this conversation. It is part of a process, and there is unanimity across all involved, including in this place, on the need for a fitting and lasting memorial. We salute the important work of the independent Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission and will support it in any way we can.

Colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) and for Brent East (Dawn Butler) and the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry), mentioned the role of local authorities. As the shadow Minister said, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has admitted that it failed in some of its most basic duties: to keep residents safe; to listen to and act on their concerns; and to respond effectively when disaster struck. The Government will work very closely with the community to hold the council to its commitments to improve its services for residents. I will shortly meet the council leader to discuss a number of issues that residents have asked me to raise—we will work very closely.

The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East both spoke about the importance of transparency. Transparency is always important in local government, but it is crucial when rebuilding trust after a tragedy has laid bare such failings.

In that spirit, my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) spoke powerfully about Rod Wainwright, the brave firefighter on duty that night. The actions of the London Fire Brigade have been referred to the independent inspectorate, which is very important. However, with the Fire Minister sitting beside me, I assure the House that the Government are responsible for overall oversight of fire and rescue services, and for ensuring public safety more broadly. We will work with the inspectorate, the Mayor of London and the LFB to support the brigade's continued progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch spoke about skills. Seven years on, it is clear that we have missed an opportunity. Young people should want to go into the house building industry, as this is skilled, well-paid and important work. The Government are working with the Industry Competence Committee to make sure that we have a competent house building workforce capable of delivering safe, high-quality homes, which is especially important in the light of our commitment to build 1.5 million homes during this Parliament.

In the autumn, the Government launched Skills England, which will work closely with employers and other key partners to identify and address priority skills gaps, including in construction. The Budget made more money—£300 million—available for further education, including in construction.

Today, I have had a conversation with mayoral combined authorities and elected mayors about how they can use their locus on skills to promote this industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch asked whether we would be willing to lean on the shortage occupation list, if needed. That would not be the Government's preference, of course, but it is a commitment that has been made.

I will use my remaining time to talk about the remediation acceleration plan, because a number of colleagues have talked about the importance of quicker remediation. I am grateful to the Opposition and the Select Committee for their warm sentiments, but I am clear that success is never in a plan's publication. As the shadow Minister said, we expect to be held to account for the commitments we have made today.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) talked about the need to be quicker and, again, 2029 is not when it will start but when it will be resolved. Our commitment is that by the end of 2029, all residential buildings 18 metres and over with unsafe cladding in a Government-funded scheme will have been remediated, and every residential building 11 metres and over with unsafe cladding will have either been remediated, have a date for completion or the landlord will be liable for severe penalties.

Our plan has three objectives. First, it will fix buildings faster. I am pleased that we, as a Government, have secured an important commitment from developers to accelerate their pace. Secondly and crucially, it will identify all buildings with unsafe cladding. If we talked to ourselves seven and a half years ago and said, "In seven and half years' time will not even be able to say how many buildings there are with unsafe cladding, but

the best range we will be able to give the House is somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000", that speaks to the point made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) that that clearly is not good enough. Finally, it will support residents.

On acceleration, our plan has set a clear timeline and we will actively pursue the landlords of buildings who refuse to act. We will ensure better co-operation between regulators. We are working hard with metro mayors to provide localised plans, because often the buildings are in combined authority areas, so we need to work in partnership.

On identification, we have set up a "tell us" tool through the cladding safety schemes, so residents can tell us directly. We are working very hard going through Ordnance Survey maps and doing all the line-by-line work needed to assess 175,000 building records by April—540,000 in total—to ensure we find all the buildings that have cladding defects, so remediation action can take place.

I know there is a lot of interest in protections for residents, which I have talked about a little. I hope what I have been able to say about insurance is welcome. We look forward to making good on that. If the market will not deliver, we will work closely with developers to change commissioning.

I will draw my remarks to a close. Today's debate has been very important and has highlighted just how far we have to go, as the inquiry shows us. We still have thousands of buildings with unsafe cladding. We need a complete reversal if we are going to put people and safety first, ahead of profits, empower residents and hold those responsible for the safety crisis to account.

We have committed to building 1.5 million homes during this Parliament, which our country desperately needs, but they must be safe, secure and decent homes. The package of measures we have set out today through the remediation acceleration plan will help us with that. As has been mentioned, residential PEEPs will improve fire safety and evacuation of vulnerable people in high-rise and high-risk buildings. I have not had time to talk about the replacement of waking watch, but we are extending the waking watch replacement fund, so that leaseholders can access that and get an alarm in place.

All of our work takes place with those 72 lives held at its heart, and in our hearts. They were failed by the system at all points and failed by this country to all degrees. We are so sorry for what happened, but I know the people involved have heard those apologies and those words from people like me too often. We can do only one thing to make things better: deliver. The inquiry has helped us on our way and our plans are developing. I am grateful for the contributions colleagues are making, but now we must deliver.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Grenfell Tower Inquiry phase 2 report.

## Business without Debate

### HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

*Ordered,*

That Tom Gordon be a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights.—(*Samantha Dixon, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)



## NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Liam Byrne, Sarah Champion, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, Bill Esterson, Andy Slaughter, Emily Thornberry, Derek Twigg and Matt Western be members of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.—(*Samantha Dixon, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

## Medical Aid During Conflict

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

10 pm

**Dr Zubir Ahmed** (Glasgow South West) (Lab): Civilians always pay the highest price in conflict. Medical aid during conflict is critical to saving lives and, more importantly, is protected under international law. Yet, in recent conflicts, much of that lifesaving aid has been denied. Not only does that shame all of us on a basic human level, but as a surgeon where healthcare and aid have been at the forefront of my professional life and, notably, where I have been directly involved in providing aid, I feel that as a particular pain.

I secured this debate to highlight the fact that civilians and medical aid workers are impacted by armed conflict. Everyone caught up in conflict has an inalienable right to aid, and it is not the gift of any country or anybody else. I note that under international human rights law, the rights of the wounded and the sick must be respected in all circumstances, and attempts on their lives and violence against their person are strictly prohibited. Wilfully killing them or causing great suffering or serious injury to their bodies or their health constitutes war crimes, as grave breaches of the Geneva conventions.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman, who I spoke to beforehand, for bringing forward such an important issue. Does he not agree that even during the worst of the world wars, and there have been some terrible wars over the past few years and there still is, the red cross symbolising medical aid was always a signal of ceasefire, and that that must still be the case today? Does he agree that we must further encourage all our allies and friends across the world to ensure that medical aid is never prevented from reaching those who need it most?

**Dr Ahmed:** I thank the hon. Member for putting that so eloquently, and I wholeheartedly agree with every word and sentiment.

It is not just those typically physically injured by conflict that medical aid supports; it is those who need insulin for diabetes, dialysis machines to keep their kidney function working, and antibiotics to treat life-threatening bacterial infections. People who need basic medical support are caught up in the struggle. The figures support this: in Lebanon, 74% of people over 50 have two or more chronic conditions, so are at increased risk during times of conflict.

The same rate of aid is clearly not getting through in current world conflicts. Those suffering in Gaza are not receiving the same aid. Since April 2023, the escalation of armed violence in Sudan has resulted in famine and displacement. To our credit, in November 2024, this UK Labour Government increased aid to Sudan by £113 million, including medical aid. That has provided medical staff, out-patient consultations, emergency room admissions and access to feeding programmes for children and adults. Of course, there is lots more to do.

Since Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022, the UK has given £5 billion in non-military contributions and a total of £457 million in humanitarian support, including medical aid. That is in addition to what people are

doing locally on the ground in every city in this country, including my own city of Glasgow, where my friend and surgical colleague Mr Vladyslav Shumeyko, a consultant surgeon at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, has personally sent tons of medical aid to Ukraine. I pay tribute to his tireless, selfless work and that of other charity workers, whose contributions have saved thousands of lives.

**Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op):** I thank my hon. Friend for securing this fantastic debate. The whole House will benefit from his medical expertise and political commitment to this issue.

I had the great honour last week of hosting a meeting in Parliament to hear the heartbreaking testimony of Professor Nizam Mamode, a good friend and former colleague of my hon. Friend—he is a great transplant surgeon. Professor Mamode explained how during his work in Gaza this year for Medical Aid for Palestinians he treated child victims of drone strikes and snipers' bullets. He said he had worked in war zones around the war, but nothing had been as horrific as what he had seen in the repeated, regular attacks on children in Gaza by the Israel Defence Forces. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Israeli Government are allowed to get away with what they are doing in Gaza under international law, other regimes around the world will see it as a green light for thinking that civilians and medical staff are a legitimate target in war zones?

**Dr Ahmed:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. That highlights this country's adherence to the international rules-based order. We must always comply with international law, even—and perhaps particularly—when that may seem difficult.

I acknowledge the important work of organisations such as Islamic Relief, which operates in my Glasgow South West constituency, throughout the UK and across the world. Since October 2023, Islamic Relief has provided over £30 million in aid and delivered over 51 million hot meals in Gaza alone—and that does not include its work in South Sudan. Despite that, medical aid is severely restricted in Gaza. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency and other agencies have been unable to deliver essential medical equipment—including medical swabs to stem bleeding and lifesaving medications such as penicillin—and essential vaccine campaign roll-outs have been delayed. That has all been compounded by this weekend's events.

**Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind):** I thank the hon. Member for giving way and pay tribute to him for securing this important debate. As well as providing valuable aid to various areas of conflict and need, does he agree that the UK and organisations such as the UN should do more to enable its delivery and to take action against the looters and oppressors who stop it getting to the people who need it?

**Dr Ahmed:** I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member's sentiments. Aid should not be impeded by anyone, be they state actors or individual criminals.

At the moment, further aid in Gaza has been suspended following an Israeli airstrike that killed five humanitarian workers employed by US-based organisation World Central Kitchen. The UN has said that it is necessary to

stop the delivery of aid into Gaza because of the threat posed by armed gangs. UNRWA's final decision comes after the latest airstrike. According to the Famine Review Committee, there is a strong likelihood of famine in Gaza. My conversations with colleagues on the ground in the region have confirmed how scarce food is, with very limited meat, cheese, snacks, fruit and vegetables. I understand that people are now surviving on rationed rice. What conversations has the Minister had with international partners to ensure that famine does not break out in Gaza?

As an international actor, it is imperative that the UK ensures that international law is upheld and medical aid reaches people caught up in conflict everywhere. International law dictates that people who are providing medical tasks must always be respected and, more importantly, protected. Medical professionals in the region are risking their lives to treat the injured and ill. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) mentioned my colleague Professor Nizam Mamode, who recently returned from a month performing surgical operations in Gaza. He told me when he was there, and on his return, of the lives that he tried to save in increasingly difficult circumstances. He described it to me as hell on earth. What discussions has the Minister had with regional actors, including the Israeli Government, about ensuring the safety of those delivering medical aid in Gaza?

Ambassador Barbara Woodward, the UK permanent representative to the UN, recently said to the UN Security Council:

"There is no justification for denying civilians access to essential supplies. The Government of Israel must do more to protect civilians, civilian infrastructure, and allow aid to be delivered safely and at scale."

I am sure that those words are wholeheartedly endorsed by all Members of this House. I am proud that this Labour Government restored funding to UNRWA, providing £21 million to support its work, and have given £5.5 million to UK-Med to support its lifesaving work in Gaza. That funding and aid is necessary, but I wonder whether it goes far enough. Our concern now is how we ensure that the correct amount of aid reaches the people of Gaza. What discussions has the Minister had with the Israeli Government to allow aid convoys to enter safely into the region?

Children in Gaza are dying and suffering needlessly. According to the UN Human Rights Office, nearly 70% of people killed in Gaza are women and children. That report has found unprecedented levels of international legal violations, including of the right to medical aid. This includes children now having complex medical needs without access to the requisite specialists in any other nearby country. What discussions could be had with regional actors and the UN about potentially bringing such children to the United Kingdom for treatment, as some of our international partners have already started to do?

I will conclude by reiterating the salient point that anyone caught up in conflict has the right to aid—it is not a gift or an act of benevolence by anyone else. We must now ensure that our record on this issue is one that future generations in this House can look back at, not with regret or contrition, but with pride.

10.10 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West):** We have had an excellent debate, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed). I congratulate him on securing this debate, on his work in the national health service, on his ongoing commitment as a surgeon, and on his deep expertise in this issue. I am also grateful for the interventions of other Members present, and I will try to respond to the points raised.

This debate takes place at a timely moment, because the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), is actually in Cairo as we speak. She is at the Gaza humanitarian conference, discussing—among other issues—the importance of ensuring that aid workers, including medical workers, can operate effectively and that civilians have access to the services they need. The Foreign Secretary, alongside his French and German counterparts, has also written this week to the Government of Israel to urge stronger action.

I begin by paying tribute to the extraordinary work that aid organisations and health workers are doing in some of the harshest conditions around the world. As Members would expect, the UK firmly supports all efforts to prevent conflict in the first instance, but where conflict does occur, those affected must have access to medical services. Medical workers and facilities must be protected in line with international humanitarian law. Access to medical services includes routine care for pregnant women, safe delivery of babies, child vaccinations and primary healthcare for all. Those services are always important, but they are especially so when people are desperate to reach a safe place; when food and clean water are scarce; and when sexual violence is an increased threat, as is so common during conflicts. The tragic loss of life among health workers, including in Gaza and Sudan, is a stark reminder of the dangers faced by those who deliver lifesaving medical assistance during conflict and crisis.

Let me now turn to how the UK is helping. In short, we are acting on three key fronts. First, we remain committed to promoting compliance with international humanitarian law and encouraging all parties to armed conflict to respect it. We are working to minimise impacts on civilians by protecting health workers and medical facilities, by working with the United Nations and the Red Cross to ensure that those affected by the conflict have access to the help they need, and by signing up to the political declaration on strengthening the protection of civilians from the humanitarian consequences arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. We reaffirm long-standing and ongoing efforts to protect civilians in this regard.

Secondly, we are targeting our aid towards those most in need, whether by providing medical supplies, helping to train medical staff, or ensuring that those medical staff have safe access to patients.

**Iqbal Mohamed:** Can the Minister inform the House how much of the aid provided by the UK is actually getting into Gaza, and to the people who need it?

**Catherine West:** The most recent figure in open sources from the weekend is that, of the usual 500 lorries going into Gaza, about 67 got in. That was in the press

at the weekend. I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West talked about the importance of aid getting in. We have redoubled our diplomatic efforts in imploring that access be improved, so that we can get aid in. We have tripled the aid, but what is important is that we gain access. That is the case whether it is in the Gaza conflict, in Sudan or in helping desperately ill people in Myanmar. All across the globe where that is an issue, we are making access a key issue in our diplomatic work. Sometimes we are more successful at that than at other times, but we try to work across international organisations to ensure that crucial access for patients.

The FCDO is also funding partner organisations within countries, such as the World Health Organisation, UN agencies and the Red Cross, to help them to prepare for and respond to conflicts effectively. We are supporting a range of specialist non-governmental organisations and local partners to deliver critical medical services at the frontline, especially where no other partner can deliver. The key strength of locally led organisations is that they are staffed by people from the affected areas and the communities themselves.

The third way we are helping is by deploying specialist medical teams on the ground, of which my hon. Friend has a great deal of knowledge.

**Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab):** Will the Minister join me in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) for securing this Adjournment debate? He will be too modest to highlight his considerable skill and knowledge on this subject, but before taking his place in this House, he practised as a transplant surgeon in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire and my home town of Clydebank, where he worked in the Golden Jubilee hospital. Does the Minister agree with me that the situation in Gaza is catastrophic, that Gazans are in desperate need of food, shelter and medical support with the onset of winter, and that the UK should be the lead voice in ensuring real world humanitarian solutions?

**Catherine West:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the expertise of our hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West. Very modestly, our hon. Friend also mentioned another colleague from Scotland. It is these professionals who make such a difference on the ground, and I know the whole House is thankful to them for their work. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) is excited to have these experts in his constituency.

We know that there are times when the health system of a country is so depleted during conflict that there simply is not the capacity to help people despite international support. That is why we invest in the UK's official emergency medical team, so we can deploy specialist medical staff to help save lives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West will be aware, the team are made up of highly qualified medics from around the UK and beyond our shores. They are trained to deliver high-quality surgical and specialist rehabilitation care to save lives and reduce disability. For example, the British emergency medical team have recently started providing services in Lebanon, treating patients with burns and other injuries. The same team have helped alleviate suffering in Gaza this year. Until now, they have provided 275,000 patient consultations



across a wide range of medical services. He mentioned the winter, and there is a new term in the world of aid, which is winterisation, where aid organisations club together to address the specific issues that come up at this time of year.

I am sure hon. Members will agree that this is an extraordinary accomplishment under the most challenging of circumstances, yet perhaps one story captures the impact of all strands of our work better than anything else. I would like to share with the House the story of a three-year-old girl called Razan from Gaza. In the early morning hours of 1 September, a bullet passed through the thin fabric of the family's tent. It went through her mother's hip and lodged in the neck of her child. The child was rushed to a hospital run by UK-Med and funded by the FCDO, and the mother was taken to another facility for her own life-threatening injury. The little three-year-old girl was in surgery for three hours in a tented field hospital surrounded by fighting, fear and uncertainty. Miraculously, the bullet had narrowly missed her spinal cord, and thanks to the skilled work of the UK surgical team, it was removed and she has recently been discharged. That is only one story among a quarter of a million patient consultations seen by the British team, and it brings home the importance of the trained medics, critical supplies, and safe access that we talked of earlier.

Let me respond specifically to the point raised by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) about evacuations. We all know that the plight of sick and injured people in Gaza is deeply distressing, but we

have tried to work closely with Israel, asking it to engage with partners urgently to establish sustained safe and timely passage for patients who need medical or surgical interventions that are not available in Gaza.

We recently announced £1 million for the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, delivered through WHO Egypt to support medically evacuated Palestinians from Gaza, because it is close to the region. The UK is also supporting the provision of essential healthcare to civilians in Gaza, including support to UK-Med for operating its field hospital. There are provisions that allow Palestinians to come to the UK for private medical treatment under the immigration rules. Where a relevant application is made, consideration will be given to exceptional circumstances, or where there are compelling or compassionate grounds. The Government are keeping all options under review in response to events in Gaza.

In conclusion, the UK remains fully committed to protecting medical workers and ensuring that people have access to medical aid during conflicts. While those actions are making a tangible difference on the ground, there is of course more to do. That is why we will continue to advocate for the protection of the most vulnerable, address barriers to accessing medical services, and strengthen our own medical and surgical capabilities to deploy in conflicts.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.21 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Monday 2 December 2024

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

## Children and Bereavement

4.30 pm

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 636718 and 624185 relating to children and bereavement.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. This is my first time opening a debate as a new member of the Petitions Committee; I am delighted to speak to the two incredibly important petitions. Before I begin, I want to thank the House of Commons staff for enabling me to engage proactively with the petitioners, charities, advocates, representatives and supporters involved in both petitions. I feel privileged to stand here today as an advocate for the campaigners who have worked tirelessly for years to get results on these vital matters. This debate takes place during National Grief Awareness week, which is run by the Good Grief Trust, who chose this year's theme: shine a light. That is exactly what I hope to do today in this debate.

First, I would like to set out the two matters at hand before I make the case for each. Crucial in all of this is that both petitions go hand in hand in with the same diagnosis and cure, which I will describe. I will delve into it further towards the end of my speech. I want to start with the petition entitled, "Record the number of bereaved children to ensure they are supported". That might not be something we would consider every day, but currently we do not know how many bereaved children there are in the UK right now. The petition argues:

"If we don't know the true scale of childhood bereavement, the services that exist to help are unable to proactively offer the support that children and their families need to cope with their grief. Without support, unresolved grief in young people can lead to an increased risk of youth offending, family breakdown, underachievement in education and employment and long-term mental health conditions."

I want to thank Winston's Wish and its inspiring ambassador, Mark Lemon, for the work that they have done submitting the petition and campaigning for it over the years. One of the fundamental reasons why I am in favour of it is Mark's own personal story, which I am deeply grateful to be able to share on his behalf today. At age 12, Mark experienced the horrific murder of his father. With nothing registered and no real support around at the time, Mark received no help to cope with that traumatic incident or adjust to the massive impact that the loss had on his life until his 20s. Mark is here today, and he argues that recording the number of children in the household when a death is registered could help thousands of bereaved children and ensure that services can better plan, reach out to families and offer much-needed support. Mark is working hard to make sure that no child faces the isolation he did after such devastation, which is hard for any of us to fathom even as adults.

Setting aside the emotional aspect of the argument, I support the practicalities of the proposal. From service delivery to charities, local councils and schools, how can anybody work to tackle the consequences of childhood bereavement if no one knows where it is occurring in the first place?

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I concur exactly with everything the hon. Member has said. It is a cause close to my own heart. In fact, I have a private Member's Bill on this very subject due to be considered in July. Does he agree with me that this is something the Government should look at and help to happen, because it should not need legislation?

**Kevin Bonavia:** I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. Obviously, there are things that can be done through law. There are things that are done through good practice and guidelines, and I am sure we will hear from my hon. Friend the Minister in due course as to what can be done. If it needs legislation I am sure she will consider that, but we should do all that we can to encourage the Government to take whatever steps they can to help achieve the aims of the petitions.

On the first petition about collecting data, a simple change would be to support registrars to collect the data when a death is registered while protecting the anonymity and data of the family. That seems achievable without being overly invasive. After all, it would simply be an option, and it would indicate where bodies need to target their support. Winston's Wish, the child bereavement charity, has regular get-togethers with young people so they can share their stories of grief with one another. Imagine how that data could transform where it allocates its resources, time and effort. It could be transformational for our kids.

From speaking to colleagues across the House, including the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who brought a debate on this subject to Westminster Hall earlier this year, it is clear that such a move could attract cross-party consensus. I therefore ask my hon. Friend the Minister what legislation would be needed to enact the change permitting registrars to collect data on the number of bereaved children at the point of registering the death. If enacted, what support and training could be given to registrars so they can direct families who register bereaved children towards charities and bodies that can help?

The previous Government essentially said, "We won't do this, because it is not the done thing," and pointed people towards the support that schools and charities can give. Let us make it the done thing, because it would help schools and charities to do their jobs in the first place.

The second, and equally important, petition argues that we should add content on death, dying and bereavement to the national curriculum. It states that, under compulsory relationships education, schools should be required to provide age-appropriate education to help children understand death as a part of life:

"Talking about death can be helpful for children and issues of bereavement should be compulsory learning for children in preparation for life as an adult. Children are taught how life begins through the national curriculum and similarly we should not hide from equipping children with the skills to comprehend death. Children must be provided with the skills to comprehend loss and to prepare for the emotions and feelings that accompany a bereavement which at some point, we all have to face."



[Kevin Bonavia]

I commend the research, testimony and briefings from the childhood bereavement network and the National Children's Bureau, which have compelled me, emotionally and logically, to support these changes. I also want to highlight the work of the petition creator, John Adams, past president of the National Association of Funeral Directors, whose membership includes more than 4,000 funeral homes. He has used his story of grief as a young child as a motivator to call for these changes, which will help all other children in need.

**Stuart Anderson** (South Shropshire) (Con): On that point, I want to give credit to my constituent, John Adams. He did not let the death of his mother, Maria, hold him back in life. He was determined to see change, and he should be championed for all the work he is doing.

**Kevin Bonavia:** I wholeheartedly agree, and I commend John and others who have used their experience to help other people. There is nothing better than a person's own experience for reaching out and supporting people.

Every day, an average of 111 children in the UK lose a parent. After charities, schools, local authorities and family members and friends have stepped in, how many of those children fall through the net and have no one to talk to or cope with? Our job is to level the playing field. Not everyone has a fantastic teacher who goes the extra mile, working within parameters of the curriculum, which could allow the teaching of bereavement through links to other topics, such as the family. Not everyone attends a school that has a bereavement policy or a pastoral support team that identifies and supports bereaved children. Not everyone has access to a phenomenal organisation such as Winston's Wish or Stand-by-me in my constituency of Stevenage—a local childhood bereavement service that launched a "Contact-me" bereavement programme, which offers a whole-school approach to supporting bereaved students. Stand-by-me now has children who have experienced bereavement as young ambassadors. For example, Evie received support from the charity and has helped three other children in her class with similar experiences. There is nothing like the peer-to-peer support of a person who helps somebody they know who feels the same way as them. I thank Evie and the many other children like her who support others in the same situation, but not everyone has a network of family and friends who can step up and find out how to get the right help.

Let us stop the postcode lottery and bring grief education into the school curriculum. That will guarantee that at least one effort is made with every child across the country to break the stigma of bereavement. It will foster healthy discussions about what has happened and what is to come, and make those affected feel that they have a network of support they can access safely.

I do not believe bereavement education would add a burden to already pressurised schools and staff, because as I have learned in the past few weeks, resources from all the organisations I have spoken with on the petition are ready to do the job. We must be proactive, not reactive. We should not take the risk that a single child in 10 years' time will tell a story like Mark or John's. I ask the Government, what is the latest guidance following a recent curriculum review? Can bereavement education

be included if that is not already the case? The previous Government left the matter up for review, stating that it could be taught in school if schools wanted that. No more "could"; let us move to "should", or even "must".

I want to end where I started. The matters in the two petitions are inherently linked, one perfectly complementing the other. With a register for who needs support, alongside the guarantee of intervention in our schools, we will be making an active choice to see all the invisible bereaved children in the UK today. Let us turn isolation into embrace, and do whatever is possible to enshrine both petitions in law and practice as best as we can.

4.41 pm

**Stuart Anderson** (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and to follow the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia), who opened so eloquently, setting the tone for what is an important debate.

Benjamin Franklin said that nothing is certain in life except death and taxes. We certainly spend enough time in this place discussing taxes—as I am sure we will do later this week—but not enough time discussing death. We even try to educate children and young people about taxes and finance, but we do not do that with death at the right level in the national curriculum. It is a subject that many find hard, so the easiest way to deal with it is to not talk about it.

I pay tribute to John Adams, who is in the Public Gallery. He is a funeral director from Bridgnorth in my constituency. He has been a champion for adding death, dying and bereavement to the national curriculum, and he has done tremendous work. John is leading that work both nationally and internationally, and I believe he has been asked to go to Australia next year to speak there and help them. What we are doing here is pioneering, and that is good to see.

John has worked within the industry on this issue as the president of the National Association of Funeral Directors, as well as with Child Bereavement UK. There is an excellent video of John being an ambassador for The Good Grief Trust, where he shares resources to support education on the subject. He is also working in the education sector, as well as with many other organisations. He is certainly spending time doing everything he can, and it is to his credit that we are here today to speak about the subject.

John is committed to making the necessary changes to get the best outcomes for children, young people and their families—it is important to remember the families—when dealing with death and grief. That is no small thing; it is not an easy topic to pick up and run with. I was delighted to speak to John, who is one of my constituents and pioneered one of the petitions behind this debate. During our conversation, John told me of his personal experience of losing his mother Maria when he was 12. For John to pick himself up, not let life get him down or stop him talking about it, and decide that other people should not have to go through his experience, is excellent. Maria is the reason we are here today, so I give credit to John for the work he has done.

John told me that adding a standalone provision for grief education to the national curriculum will strengthen families when they need it most. It will improve resilience in school communities, and mitigate the impacts of bereavement as an adverse childhood experience. It builds

on recent research that shows that children who are educated about grief before a traumatic experience can discuss grief and have less anxiety about the death. I know that from personal experience. My father Samuel died when I had just turned eight, and my mum was left alone with my two younger brothers and me. My father was only 37, and it happened in the school holidays. I remember going to school later in the day, because the teacher had to tell my class, “Stuart’s dad has died. Nobody mention it to him.” That was how it was dealt with. Even with the teachers and the children, nobody knew what to say. My friend told me what the meeting was about and what had been said, but nobody discussed it. If I misbehaved it was put down as, “Oh, he’s lost his dad—don’t say anything,” or, “How can we leave Stuart out?” If something went right or wrong nobody knew how to deal it, from the teachers to the students.

It was almost as if the event had never happened, and it was through other circumstances—I have spoken about this in the main Chamber—that I discovered the impact that it had on me. It took me many years to deal with it myself, but if I had had that education and awareness, and it could have been spoken about openly.

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): I worked as a mental health nurse in the NHS for many years and saw many people struggle with their mental health due to traumatic experiences, including family bereavements that happened many years ago, and they were never able to deal with it. Does the hon. Member agree that not addressing traumatic episodes at a younger age can lead to long-term damage to people’s mental health later in life?

**Stuart Anderson:** The hon. Member makes an excellent point. I agree 100%, but it is not always a single significant point. I lost my dad at eight, and I was shot at 17 in the military. For me, it was a culmination of different things. I have spoken openly about how I ended up with post-traumatic stress disorder, with all those different things, and spent 15 years living a nightmare, wanting to take my own life. All those things had built up, but if we deal with children’s mental health earlier—it is really hard to deal with—there is a way to come through. The way to do that is to grieve at the time, and to talk and discuss it.

I do not think that the weight of that should just fall on the parents. The school should support and work with them, because the children are at school for a long time. It is not just me, John and others who have commented on this. This goes across South Shropshire—the old constituency was Ludlow—as we have almost 2,000 signatures, so I know how important this is locally, and all the credit goes to John, who has been raising awareness of the issue.

As we are here to speak about these experiences, the previous Government launched a review about whether bereavement content is needed in statutory guidance, and pledged to consider the points made in the petition. The consultation ran until 11 July. The general election was called before it finished. I ask the Minister whether her Government can take up the work that was begun and look at putting this into the national curriculum, so that when other children face this—because they will—they have the right support. People will know things from other children in the class and that can teach us how to deal with this. It is not resource intensive—it could run alongside relationship, sex and health education or

something similar—and it is not a financial burden. Investing time in the children, as the hon. Member for Stevenage said, will save far more time by dealing with things that become problems further down the line.

Having personal experience of this, and having been inspired by the work that John has done for all these years as a voice, not just in the UK but internationally on such a hard and difficult subject, I fully support what he is doing to put it in the right context. I urge the Minister to align with me and look at how we can put this back into the national curriculum and honour the work that John has done after losing his mother Maria all those years ago.

4.49 pm

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. It is a privilege to be part of a debate that reflects Parliament and politics at its best, which happens when we see the injustices and the suffering that have befallen those whom we represent, and we seek to make sure that they never happen again.

I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) for eloquently opening the debate, to Mark and John, and to the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson). Time passing does not make it easier for them; it makes it more important that we have not yet dealt with the situation that they are in. I am grateful to have heard about their experiences and to contribute to this debate with those experiences at the centre. We are speaking for thousands of people in this country, of all ages, who have lost a parent.

In my short contribution, I will raise with the Minister some examples that I have dealt with as a constituency MP. They are the cases that nobody ever wants to see. When a young child comes through our door in that position, it takes all our courage not to burst into tears when we hear their heartbreaking story, but that becomes even more of a challenge when we realise that services are not built to wrap around them. It seems so obvious that we must do everything we can for this young person, because an awful thing has happened to them, but that is not a given.

Sadly, I have dealt with several children who, as Mark lost his father, have lost their parents to murder—horrific, public murders in my local community. It seems obvious that those children would be traumatised. One child was there when it happened, but we are still struggling to get them counselling; it is not a given. The school does not have any understanding of what needs to be provided. That does not mean that people at the school do not want to help, but it is so out of their worldview that that could happen, so counselling is not in place. The family have been trying to push for it for some time, but it is still a work in progress. Ironically, we have now discovered that a child can get counselling if they view a murder or are a witness, but not if it has just happened to a member of their family or to a parent.

This petition tells us about the need to recognise that children are traumatised in that way—they are traumatised by the loss of a parent whether they see it or not—so we must get counselling in. That seems so obvious, but it is not consistent. The counselling services are there, so it is a question of joining them up. I hope that the Minister can take that back to her Department.

[Ms Stella Creasy]

I have also seen, for children who have lost parents to terminal illness, that counselling is not an expected part of the conversation about what we can do. It has come up only in relation to whether we can keep the child in school, but that seems too late. I would wager that the hon. Member for South Shropshire feels that, in his experience, one reason he got to that point was that nobody intervened early enough; indeed, they tried to stop the conversation rather than recognise how traumatic it would be for him. It is therefore not just about providing counselling when something horrific has happened, but about recognising how horrific it is to lose a parent at such a young age—full stop. That would make a real difference.

**Stuart Anderson:** The hon. Member makes an excellent point. Even in the Ministry of Defence, the UK armed forces have recognised that an annual MOT of mental health to discuss death, dying and bereavement, and their impact, gets a far better performance out of the soldiers who will face them. Why on earth do we not have that discussion earlier in schools too?

**Ms Creasy:** One of the reasons it is important to have counselling in schools is that, when I think about the partners who I have worked with who have lost somebody, we want to try to take as many burdens off their shoulders as possible and recognise that they are dealing with grief too. This debate focuses on children, but there is a need to join up the welfare system to support families. They have lost somebody—they have lost an income provider—and often, the time that the remaining parent wants to spend with their child is taken away because they have to work to try to make up the loss of income. We should be able to join that up.

I first became involved in many of these issues when I worked with the brilliant Widowed and Young with parents who were not married, where the impact was that families would lose an income provider who was not recognised. The children were clearly suffering, but in those cases the mums, and in one case the dad, were having to think about all the practical things, such as bills and how to keep a roof above their head. They did not have as much time to be with their children, which in itself caused grief and harm to them. We managed to get the allowance for bereaved widows extended to non-married partners, but we did not really look to challenge the idea that somehow, after 18 months, a child and a family should have recovered to the extent that there would be no impact. That affects our ability to help children.

There is another scenario I want to raise with the Minister, which addresses the first petition about data. I recently had a case that really floored me, of two children who lost their mother and then, shortly afterwards, their father—it was just extraordinary. We relied on their family members to help them, but because those family members did not have immigration status here in the UK, the children, who were British citizens, lost all their rights and were living in absolute, abject poverty. My community in Walthamstow brilliantly picked them up to try to help them while we resolved their immigration status, but the children's rights here were gone as soon as their parents died. It got me thinking about how many other families might be in that position.

I asked the Ministry of Justice about children who have legal guardians, because that was what these family members had become for those children. It was sorting out their status that then opened up doors for the children, which took far too long—more than a year. We do not have a record of how many orphans are in this country. Think about the worst thing that could possibly happen: someone loses one parent and then the second, or maybe even loses both together. The state does not know how many of those children there are, so I asked the Ministry of Justice about the numbers of children being allocated a legal guardian because both parents had passed away. The Ministry of Justice told me, in answer to a written question, that while it thought that the information was held in court records, it was not uniformly gathered. That means the Minister's job is doubly difficult, because she will not know how many children have no guaranteed guardian to pick any of these issues up, whether that is counselling or their financial position. It seems obvious that, as corporate parents, we ought to know how many children are in the position of sadly losing both parents.

I make a plea that we make counselling a given. It must not be something to be asked and fought for and sought out, whereby hopefully the local Member of Parliament knows about Victim Support or another charity, even though those charities do brilliant things. We must organise counselling for every child who loses a parent and do that through schools, partly to take some of the weight off the parent who is grieving. We must also start to act as corporate parents and record how many orphans there are. I hope that the number is infinitesimal, but for the two I came across in Walthamstow, I have never felt more impotent as an MP. We were trying to stop them living in horrific circumstances in which they had lost all support, funding and assistance, while we as a community were gathering together school uniforms for them and the foodbanks had to be there every single day.

I would be horrified if there were more children in that position, but since we do not know, we must do more to gather basic data to understand what is happening to some children in this country. We hope that it is a scenario we never have to deal with, but we sadly know that it is not the case. That is why it is so important that the House, as it does at its best, hears the stories and sees the reality of the messiness of human life, and acts. These petitions call on us to act on scenarios that sadly happen more than we might realise, and which we do not know the full extent of. I know the Minister shares my concern and compassion for people in that position and will want to do all she can. We must help her in lobbying her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice for a better dataset of the children in that position. I know that is a view we hold across the House. Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage for introducing the petition so eloquently.

4.58 pm

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) for opening the debate. I would like to acknowledge all the people who have signed the petition, and Mark and John for all their work—it is good to see them in the Public Gallery.



I speak as someone who has, unfortunately, very personal experience of the issue we are debating today. My husband, 22 years ago, was diagnosed with terminal cancer, when my daughter was two and our baby was just five months old. He died a year later, a week before Ellie's fourth birthday, when Laura was just 17 months old. They are now brilliant young women, and I am extremely proud of them. But it has been a long journey, and I can say from the bottom of my heart that grief lasts a lifetime. Bereavement issues come and go and change as the children grow up. The grief is quite strange when you are three; you don't know where daddy has gone. When you are 17 months old, you cannot even speak. I think she could just about say "Daddy"; she was babbling a bit. It is very difficult to explain to a child of that age, so the other parent has to explain again and again, at different stages of life, as the children grow up.

One thing we read about in books, which is true, is that for bereaved children it is an issue that keeps coming back. They will be okay for a few years and then they will move school and suddenly it starts all over again. I remember that when both my girls started secondary school there was a conversation: "What do I say? Do I go in and say on day one, 'Oh, my dad's dead,' or do I keep it quiet?" I remarried many years later, and then there was another question: "Do I call him Stuart or do I just say to my friends that he's dad?" The girls just used to refer to us as "Our parents", because that was easier. They did not want to have to keep explaining.

Retelling the story at school, over and over again, was very difficult. Ellie started school six months after her dad died. I had some brilliant friends who came to the house on day one of school, and we all went together because I knew she would be one of the only kids there who did not have mum and dad at the school gate on day one. It was like that every time: at every school carol concert, every play, every parents' evening, every sports day, for years, there was a feeling that there should have been someone else there. One thing that was really hard was that I felt every year that I had to tell the class teacher; it was not a whole-school experience, so I had to keep retelling and re-explaining. When children go to secondary school and have lots of different classes with lots of different teachers, it is really quite something that, if things are difficult, we have to keep explaining it again and again.

The petition is so important. Perhaps things have changed a bit in the last 21 years, but the fact that no national data is collected is a sign that we still have not got to grips with this issue. The Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that more than 46,000 children in the UK experience the death of a parent every year. That is 127 children who are going through this every single day. We collect data on so many aspects of children's lives, from school performance to health statistics, and even the number of children affected by divorce, but when it comes to bereavement children are invisible in terms of policy, planning and support, and that absolutely has to change. Bereavement is one of the most difficult experiences that any child can face, yet we have no clear plan or pathway to support children.

We know that the impact of bereavement is lifelong and can present emotional and psychological challenges. I remember phoning Winston's Wish more than once as a parent to ask for some advice when things were kicking off and not going very well, and that organisation

was absolutely brilliant. Shortly after—about a year after—Nick died, we joined Widowed and Young, and I eventually went on to chair Widowed and Young for a couple of years. It is an absolutely brilliant organisation and I could not have survived without it.

We used to go away for weekends with WAY. I had lots of friends who all had small kids, and I remember the kids were chattering away in the back of the car one day and one of them said to the other, "What's a brain haemorrhage?", and the other one explained. For them, it was so normal that all their dads had died. They just talked about it. It was so important for them to be able to connect with other children who had experienced the same thing and they felt able to talk to. Yet at school, it was not part of the conversation. Their friends did not know how to talk about it; they did not really understand. My daughters have often said, "Oh, my friends never mention it; they never talk about it." It is just brushed under the carpet because they feel awkward.

Education about this issue should be on the curriculum. We do not talk about death enough in this country. We have talked about it a lot in this House over the last couple of weeks, but Friday's debate was also an indication that we really do not have these conversations in Britain. We feel awkward about it, and it is really important that death becomes a much more normal thing to discuss.

I am going all over the place, but I will go back to the issue of data, which I have written down. If registrars were required to ask about the number of dependent children at the point when a death is registered, we could at least begin to understand the true scale of the issue. Local authorities could then use that data to make informed decisions about the resources required to support grieving families in their area. Nationally, it would help to make the case for a co-ordinated response to childhood bereavement and ensure that bereaved children get the support they need. Registrars could also signpost people to useful organisations if they knew there were children involved. Believe me, a bereaved parent needs all the help they can get, and knowing there are people out there who understand is really important.

The collection of data would also identify children who are not receiving support and would allow local services to monitor whether the services available are meeting the needs of bereaved children, and whether enough children are receiving the help they need. It would also allow us to ask the important question: are our systems reaching these children, and are they getting the right kind of help? Without that data, we cannot ensure that our services meet the scale of the need.

On educating children, we cannot expect them to process such a significant loss on their own. We also cannot expect teachers to navigate these issues without proper training and support. There are organisations out there. As the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) said, a lot of this stuff has already been done, and the resources are there to support teachers. By giving children a space to understand death—what it is, what it means and what it is all about—we provide an opportunity for a bereaved child not to feel quite so alone and different. Children need to be able to express their grief and to be supported in doing so, and teachers need to feel empowered to address this difficult subject, to ensure that grieving children do not feel isolated or misunderstood. If such education were part of the

[Caroline Voaden]

curriculum, we could ensure that teachers and support staff have the tools and knowledge they need to support children at the most difficult time in their lives.

Grieving children need to feel safe, understood and supported. The impact of losing a parent can be devastating; it affects every aspect of a child's life for a lifetime. Without understanding the scale of the issue, and without having the right data and systems in place, we are leaving bereaved children to navigate this experience with little support, and leaving their parents to do a really difficult job on their own, without the wider support network they need. It is time that we recognised the needs of bereaved children. I urge the Minister to see what we can do, as fast as we can do it, so that more children get the support they need.

5.7 pm

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. This is something like the fifth debate on this subject that I have taken part in since I became an MP in 2017, and it is more than two years since I asked the then Leader of the House whether we could have a debate on it. During those two and a half years, I have repeatedly asked the Government to look at a register for bereaved children, because it was suggested to me by Winston's Wish.

I first thought about and became aware of this issue in a conversation with my sister over lunch. My sister, who is now 50, said to me, "Do you remember how when dad died"—when she was eight—"we never really saw anybody from social services? Nobody came to see us and nothing happened." I said, "Yeah, that's right, because we had never been in contact with social services. They didn't think we needed them. Do you know it's still the same?" I think a friend's partner had died and I realised that nothing had changed in 40 years, and I thought that was ridiculous.

I spoke to staff at Winston's Wish and they said, "Yeah, the problem is that we know how many children are bereaved every year. We know they are out there and we have the support networks to help them. We have the facilities. We have peers they can talk to who will appreciate it"—as the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) said—"but the charities and organisations do not know how to get in touch with the children because it is not recorded where they are." The families do not know how to get in touch with the support networks because, when they go to record a death, no one asks, "Do you need help for a child?" It should be simple. That is why I think that a record, as the petition calls for, is the best way forward.

To turn briefly to other subjects, it is vital to teach about bereavement and loss in school—that is the role that schools have played—but, with respect to Members from the previous Government, they seemed to think that only schools should have responsibility. I do not think that is what children or their parents want. Children who have lost a parent, a grandparent, a friend's parent or a sibling need help at times when the school is not available—at night, when they are lonely or upset, or when they are a teenager and do not know who to turn to for advice. That is when they need their peers. Often, they do not want to talk to the school, or they might move school and not know many people.

The idea is to have a register, a simple box-ticking exercise to say, when a death is recorded, that there is a child who may be affected, with paperwork handed out—the leaflets, the contacts—and that would not mean letting that data be public. There would never have to be any publication of the data; it would simply be putting people who need the help in touch with the people who can offer that help. If we do not do that, we face the situation that the hon. Member for Stevenage talked about: adults who went through a traumatic experience as a child never getting the help they need to get over it fully, so that it comes back when they are adults. That can get them involved in crime or drugs, or give them difficulty forming personal relationships.

When I spoke to one of the charities involved with adults bereaved as children, one of its psychologists said to me, "You do realise you could be opening a whole can of worms for yourself. You might not have dealt with this quite as well as you thought you did." I think she is wrong, but we never know—it does come back in later life. It can contribute to the burden on the NHS or problems in the economy. If we will not look only at the huge moral and compassionate case for having this register, we should look at the economic one and see that that backs up the moral and compassionate case.

I thank the hon. Member for Stevenage for how he introduced both petitions, and I say to the Government: please, before my private Member's Bill comes before the House in July, may we come up with a way of saving so many children in this country going through any more long-term pain? The help is there for them—charities such as Winston's Wish want to help them, but they just do not know where those children are.

5.13 pm

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) for opening the debate so eloquently, and for representing the views of many people who are present in the Public Gallery. I thank Mark and John for allowing their experiences to be shared today and for their campaigning on this incredibly important issue.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for speaking so bravely about their personal experiences. It is never easy to talk in this place about personal experience, in particular when talking about the death of a loved one, a parent or spouse. That is incredibly difficult and it was a privilege to hear their stories—I thank them.

It is estimated that in the UK a child loses a parent every 20 minutes or so. In that moment, a child's life is changed forever. The estimate does not include other losses, such as the loss of a sibling or a grandparent, which can be equally painful. I think back to the time of the covid pandemic, when talking to teachers and headteachers in schools in my constituency. They were dealing with an awful lot of grief, with children losing relatives they were close to, and they were having to cope with that grief in the school setting. Little data is collected on children's suffering from such a loss, and I will come back to that in more detail.

Losing a loved one is devastating, no matter what age you are. However, particularly when you are young, still growing and perhaps unable properly to understand the

concept of death, grief can be especially difficult to manage. Bereavement can have an impact on every aspect of a child's life, including their wellbeing, education and overall life outcomes. For this reason, it is critical that children get the practical and emotional support that they desperately need.

Unfortunately, that is not currently the case for all children. There are no official statistics on the number of children who have been bereaved. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) said, we do not know how many children are in that situation or where they live. It is important that both local and national services are aware of the scale of the problem and can identify the children who need our support.

Like those who signed today's petition and the Members who have spoken in the debate, the Liberal Democrats would like to see the establishment of a national register for bereaved children. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West for her campaigning on this issue. So many children slip through the net, and only some schools provide the support that pupils need. As we have been talking, I was reminded that 30 years ago, almost to the month, a girl in my class at school was killed with her family in a car crash. I remember that we came back after the Christmas holidays—they were killed while on holiday—and our class teacher brought us all together to have a conversation about it. I think back on how important that was. The school continued to work wherever possible with the girls who were closest to the girl who lost her life.

As we have heard from the stories that hon. Members have shared, that certainly is not universally the case. It is important that we recognise the schools that do this work, but so many do not. There is no national mandate from the Department for Education for schools to have a bereavement policy in place, nor is there any national policy to support schools with this. That needs to be rectified, and I hope that the schools Minister will take that away to her Department.

A number of national and local charities are trying to fill the gaps and support children and their families through grief, but lots of children are not being matched up with organisations that could provide them with support, and families are left scrambling. It is a difficult time. Other family members and parents are trying to deal with the grief too, so it is a stressful period. That is why my hon. Friend's campaign, through her private Member's Bill, for a legal duty for children to be informed of the support available to them following a loss is so important. I hope that the Minister will take my hon. Friend up on the offer to get this sorted before she has to bring it to the House yet again. The changes would help to improve join-up and ensure that the correct support was available as soon as it was needed.

Even though not every child might choose to take up the support or feel the need to do so, it would still provide a much-needed safety net. Although we do not have the data to know for certain, it is estimated that one in 29 children and young people have lost a parent or sibling. That is almost one child in every classroom. Every child will be affected differently, and we know that many will struggle with their mental health as a result of the loss. Grief is messy and complicated. It does not go away, and it can affect children at different stages of their life. Studies show that some children may

have a seemingly mild reaction following a loss but will struggle in subsequent years as the reality sinks in. That is why it is so important that mental health support is available continuously for bereaved children, not just immediately following their loss.

I agree with what the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) said about ensuring that specialist bereavement counselling is available for children, but one reason why the Liberal Democrats have campaigned for years for a dedicated mental health practitioner in every primary and secondary school is to ensure that all children, including those who have been bereaved, have access to mental health support. There should also be community hubs available for children and young people right up to the age of 25, meaning that they can access support as and when they need it, on their own terms.

After a loss, not only do families face significant emotional challenges, but they may also face a financial one. Overnight, a household income can shrink by half, or potentially even more if the person who died was the main breadwinner in the family. Alongside grieving for their partner, many widowed people suddenly have to pay their household bills and childcare costs, or put food on the table, with a sudden loss of income. Bereavement support payments can be a lifeline for families during that time, providing a source of income that might not be found elsewhere. However, in 2017, the previous Government cut funding for those payments by around 50%. Especially in a cost of living crisis, those cuts have been devastating to many families who have suffered a loss.

According to the Childhood Bereavement Network, more than 75% of families are worse off than they would have been under the previous arrangements, with some going into debt and poverty as a result. That is why for some time, the Liberal Democrats have campaigned to double the funding for bereavement support payments. We would use the extra funding not just to increase the size of the payments, but to extend the period of time for which families receive them, giving those suffering from loss much-needed stability.

I am proud that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who has talked very openly about his own loss—first he lost his father as a child, and then he nursed his mum as she died of cancer in his teenage years—has campaigned so vociferously on this issue. I am pleased that he worked with other hon. Members to pressure the previous Government to extend bereavement support payments to cohabiting couples.

**Caroline Voaden:** I add my voice to the calls to extend bereavement support payments. I was very lucky—well, not lucky—because I was bereaved before those changes were made, and I had bereavement support payments for quite a long time. I want to say a couple of things on that. The reason why someone gets bereavement support payments is that their partner who has died has paid national insurance contributions. My husband spent 20 years paying national insurance contributions, and he would never get a pension. To get some kind of payment as a bereaved parent is only just, because the state will never pay out that pension later on.

As I have previously said, grief does not just stop after 18 months. A bereaved parent of young children is left to pick up the pieces, look after their children and



[Caroline Voaden]

go back to work, because they have lost an income—quite often the main income of the family. It is important for the state of the NHS, our economy and everything else that a bereaved parent is as balanced and stable as possible so that their children can remain balanced and stable. It is good for the family and society as a whole. The more help we can give a parent—perhaps to work part time, so that they can be more available to their bereaved children—the better. Sorry, that was too long; excuse me, Mrs Harris.

**Munira Wilson:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; she put across her points far more powerfully than I could, and I urge the Minister to listen. I hope that she and her fellow Ministers in other Departments will look at increasing the funding for bereavement support. At the very least, I hope they uprate it, because it has depreciated hugely in recent years. They should also increase the time period over which it is paid, because we have heard how important that is. I know that finances are stretched, but we are talking about a small number of children who have experienced the most horrendous loss.

The implications of a loss can be especially complicated for certain families, especially single-parent families where the caring parent dies. The loss of a parent or guardian can often leave children with no one to look after them, and as a result, family members may step up overnight to take care of them. Such a situation accounts for almost one in 10 children living in kinship care. That was the case for my constituent, April—I call her that to anonymise her. She suddenly became a kinship carer for her nephew, who had no one else to look after him after his mum passed away from cancer. His stepfather had left the family shortly after his mum's diagnosis. At the council's request, April stepped up at very short notice to provide a caring and loving home to her nephew, but that came at great personal cost to her and her family.

The Minister will be aware that I have long campaigned to ensure that kinship carers have the right support. Kinship carers such as April do their utmost to look after the children in their care, but they often need additional support because of sudden changes in their living arrangements, and because of the traumatic circumstances. Too many children in such situations simply cannot access the support they need, so we should provide better access to therapeutic support. We should also extend pupil premium plus funding to kinship children so that they are on a par with looked-after children and can access the support and wraparound care that they desperately need, inside and outside school. Unfortunately, too many kinship carers are desperately trying to get their children support, but to no avail.

These problems affect not just the children but the carers. Talking about her family's experience, kinship carer Levette said:

"When my daughter passed away all I could focus on was keeping the children emotionally stable. Losing their mother was a traumatic experience for them and I wanted to make sure they were able to grieve. I wasn't able to find time to grieve myself".

No one should have to feel that way after the loss of a loved one. Although we cannot take away a child's pain and grief, as a society we owe it to them to do all we can

to provide emotional, practical and financial support. That starts with having a register, ensuring that schools have policies for teaching about grief and bereavement in an age-appropriate and sensitive way within the curriculum, and addressing the lack of financial support. It is crucial that we give children in difficult circumstances the best possible chance to overcome their challenges and thrive, so I hope the Government will implement the changes that I and many others have outlined today.

5.26 pm

**Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I too thank Mark and Winston's Wish for their work with bereaved children and all the practical help they provide. I also thank John Adams, who is trying to make something good come out of something absolutely terrible. I am grateful to everyone who signed the petitions that brought about this important and sobering debate.

When we think about these issues, we naturally think about people we know who are either going through or have been through terrible bereavements. I have a family friend with two boys the same age as my children; they are dealing with the loss of a wife and mother, and they all deserve a medal just for getting through the day. We also think about the ways that people overcome the adversity of these situations. I have a friend whose life was shaped by losing his father at a young age, but he has made his life more extraordinary; he has become a wonderful, very strong person as a result of that early terrible experience.

Hon. Members shared similar examples. The hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) was incredibly open and told a compelling story about her experiences. She has been there; she is trying to take those terrible experiences and make something good out of them. My hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) has had an extraordinary life in many ways and is an incredible person; he too has taken a hard thing and made something good of it.

I pay tribute to all other Members who have taken part in this important debate. The hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) did a brilliant job of setting out the situation. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) made some compelling points, particularly about the joining up of data, and the hon. Members for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) made really important speeches.

To give a bit of a sense of hope, I want to mention some of the changes that have happened in recent years. The 2017 Green Paper on children and young people's mental health set in train the provision of more support in schools. That included the offer to every state school in England of a grant for a senior mental health lead to start the process of improving mental health support in our schools. That was then built on in more recent years by the rolling out of mental health support teams in schools and colleges in England, helping more young people access that incredibly important support. When we left office we had got to about 400 mental health support teams in schools and colleges across England. I know the current Government will want to continue to roll out that support more widely.

I remember from my time as a Health Minister the way we were changing the treatment of mental health—first the commitment to give it parity of esteem with physical health and the mental health service standards, and then a 50% increase in the amount of money that we spent on it between 2018 and now. I do not take away from the fact that the demand is ever growing—there is still unmet need out there—but one of the important things that comes from this debate, of course, is that the resource is of no use unless we can connect it to the young people in need. The hon. Member for Walthamstow gave powerful examples of children who have literally seen their parents murdered. It seems the most obvious thing in the world that support would swing into action at that point, but it does not because we do not have that joined-up approach to data.

That was something that the last Government was working on from 2016. There were ongoing efforts to try to build a unique child identifier. I know that the current Government—this is not something we have any ideological disagreement about—want to finish that work and give us a joined-up approach. Through the private Member's Bill sponsored by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West, we have the opportunity. The Department has the exciting opportunity of primary legislation, if it is needed, to make things happen. We can start to bring together the things that it seems so obvious should happen. We can bring together the knowledge that is dispersed through different bits of the public sector in our schools, our coroners and so on into a proper structured approach to help young people going through a hellish situation.

I pay tribute to the people who signed the petition to make this debate happen and to all the people, some of whom are here today, who have worked on this for many years to provide transformative help and who have excellent ideas, which I know the Government will want to take up. We will support them and the Government in doing that.

5.32 pm

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** I thank the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) for introducing this timely debate on an incredibly important subject in National Grief Awareness Week. It really is an honour to respond to my first Petitions Committee debate, a Committee I formerly chaired, from the position of a Government Minister with responsibility for issues that the petition raises. I have great respect for the work of the Petitions Committee and its importance in giving voice to people from across the country and the political spectrum to provide opportunities for important issues to be debated in a respectful way. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate, particularly those who have shared so openly and powerfully their experiences of dealing with bereavement.

I want to state my deep admiration and thanks to Mark Lemon for his tireless work to support children and families going through bereavement, including his work as an ambassador for Winston's Wish, and his tireless efforts to ensure that the difficult conversation on bereavement can be helpful, open and constructive. It has brought about the discussion that we are having today. Bereavement touches everyone, but its impact is unique to everyone. It cannot be avoided—it should

not be. It is crucial that those affected by bereavement receive the support that they need throughout their period of bereavement. It is particularly important for children and young people who lose someone close to them because it can have a profound impact on children and young people, and can affect their long-term health and wellbeing, particularly if left unaddressed.

I have unfortunately seen and experienced the challenge that childhood bereavement can present at first hand. I know how important it can be to have the right support available in a timely way and to be given the space and time to process it, as so passionately and eloquently described by the hon. Members for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and for South Devon (Caroline Voaden). Many would say that it is brave, but I say that it is a real gift to share such powerful, personal testimony. Not only does it give a strong voice to the issues we are debating today, but it will be of immense help to others going through similar experiences to hear from hon. Members in this place in such a powerful way.

I agree that we all have a role to play in supporting bereaved children and young people. There are so many fantastic charities and community groups: the Childhood Bereavement Network, Hope Again, the Anna Freud Centre and the Ruth Strauss Foundation, to name just four. They all play a vital role and I want to put on record our thanks for everything that they do. Government also have a clear role to play and are committed to improving the support that all young children should receive in a variety of difficult and challenging circumstances that they may face.

Given my role as Minister for School Standards, I want to focus my remarks on the support that can be offered through schools to pupils going through a period of bereavement. But responsibility for bereavement and support does not begin and end with the Department for Education. Within England, numerous Whitehall Departments are crucial to that, and many have been mentioned in the debate: the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department of Health and Social Care. Three of those—the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care—continue to work together to address the recommendations in the report from the UK commission on bereavement, "Bereavement is everyone's business".

That report put the spotlight firmly on bereavement and the gaps in support, and the impact that can have on bereaved people. The Department of Health and Social Care continues to lead the work on implementing the report's recommendations and chairs the cross-Government bereavement working group, on which the Department for Education also sits, to improve bereavement support. It is important that they continue to look at the options for how we improve support for bereaved children and young people right across Government, including the issues around data collection and improving it, which has been one of the key asks today.

Going back to schools, they do a brilliant job at supporting their students, including through difficult times, but school staff cannot be expected to be experts in mental health. Teachers do a fantastic job in picking up on the needs of their students and identifying when support might be needed, and that is why the Department for Education provides a list of resources for schools on

*[Catherine McKinnell]*

supporting mental health and wellbeing. That includes support from the Childhood Bereavement Network and Hope Again, and resources hosted on the website of Mentally Healthy Schools for mental health leads, which will include supporting children dealing with loss and bereavement where that is needed.

Our manifesto was clear on the priority we place on improving mental health support for all children and young people, because we know that is key to helping young people achieve and thrive in education. We know we can do more to improve mental health support within schools, and how crucial it is to breaking down the barriers to opportunity. That is why we will provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school. We will also be putting in place new young futures hubs, including access to mental health support workers, and recruiting an additional 8,500 new mental health staff to treat both children and adults. The Department has already offered all state schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead by 2025 to help schools to develop an effective approach to mental health and wellbeing, including for any child going through bereavement.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage for his questions on the curriculum and potential legislation around that. I want to touch on relationships, sex and health education within schools because it has a vital role in supporting children and young people to look after their emotional and physical health and build supportive and successful relationships. What is taught as part of relationships and health education helps children to prepare for a range of experiences that they will have during their lives, both happy and sad, and through love and loss. It is important that children and young people feel comfortable and see school as a safe place to talk about their feelings, for them to be able to identify where they might need support and know how to ask for it, and for schools to know where it can be found. It is vital that difficult issues such as childhood bereavement are not shied away from but are talked about, as the hon. Member for South Shropshire put incredibly powerfully when sharing his own experience. Teachers need to know about common adverse childhood experiences, which can include bereavement, and understand how they might affect pupils both while they are at school and in the longer term, if they go unaddressed.

Through the mental wellbeing topic in health education, pupils are taught about a range of content, including dealing with bereavement. That teaching includes recognising their emotions and accessing how they are feeling. There is a whole range of external expertise and materials, so that teachers can tailor their lessons accordingly. For example, the Anna Freud Centre provides valuable support to children and young people dealing with loss and bereavement.

We continue to look for opportunities to improve the teaching of relationship, sex and health education in schools. We had a consultation, which started under the previous Government, that ended in July, and we are currently reviewing the RSHE guidance, which sets out the content of what children and young people are taught. We want to ensure that children's wellbeing is at the heart of the guidance that the Government offer.

We are looking carefully at responses, consulting relevant evidence and talking to stakeholders. We will set out next steps to take forward the RSHE guidance, and this debate will contribute to the thinking on that.

Beyond schools, the Government are committed to supporting families through the most difficult times. Family hubs do great work, helping families across vital services to improve the health education and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. As has been mentioned a number of times, to support a child or young person is to support their family too. The 75 most deprived local authorities received around £300 million from the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care between 2022 and 2025 to set up family hubs with integrated Start for Life services. Following the October Budget, we confirmed an additional £69 million from the Department for Education to continue the delivery of family hubs in 2025.

Family hubs are important because they offer a single access point for families. They reduce the stigma around accessing services because they provide a whole range of services, including parent and infant mental health. They have a focus on relationships and whole-family working, so they harness the power of networks and bring that together under one roof. They provide thousands of families with access to support when they need it, including potential bereavement support. All 75 of those local authorities have opened at least one family hub in their area, creating a welcoming space for families with children aged 0 to 19—or 25, where they have a special educational need or disability. They are effective in bringing together a wide range of services for families. There are now 400 family hubs across 75 local authorities.

It is important that we consider how to improve access to existing support for bereaved children when they need it, and when their families have made a conscious decision to find that support. The cross-Government bereavement group is looking at how to better improve access to support, as well as options around improving data collection. We are considering whether a legislative solution is the right approach, ensuring that there is an evidence base that it is the best way to support children and families and that it would not have any unintended consequences. We need to consider any potential negative impact of collecting data at such a sensitive time. All those factors need to be considered, which is why the cross-Government bereavement group will consider the existing roles and responsibilities of registrars in signposting support to bereaved children and their families. We will continue to look at whether and how that could be improved, including potential training and guidance for registrars, so many of the issues outlined today are certainly part of the considerations.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage for bringing forward this matter, and I thank all those who have contributed to this debate. It takes great courage to be so candid about experiences of grief and loss. Although we will all experience bereavement in our lives, we will all grieve in our own way. We have a role to play, however, in ensuring that children and young people get access to the support that they need, whether in or outside school, and get it when they need it. I particularly thank all those who work across education, the health and care systems and the charitable sector in the interests of children and young people who experience bereavement and their families and provide them with much-needed support.



5.45 pm

**Kevin Bonavia:** The motion is that we have considered the petitions before us, and I hope everyone will agree that we have considered them well. Let us hope that there will be beneficial progress as a result of today's discussions. I once again thank the petitioners.

I add my thanks to everybody who has spoken in the debate. This issue clearly has resonance across the whole House and across parties, and we have learned a lot from the personal experiences of Members. We heard from the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) about his own experience of child bereavement, from the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) about the experience of a bereaved parent, and from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) about the experience of the friends of children losing their parents. They are all big personal experiences.

I was not going to mention my own personal experience, but hearing from others today reminded me of what happened 26 years ago, when I lost my father to throat cancer when I was 20. At the time, I had a younger brother in his teens and a mother who had to cope for the family. This debate made me think, "What if I had the support that many people have today, and what if that was there for everyone?", so I am grateful to hon. Members for sharing their experiences. How many hundreds of thousands of experiences like those are out there?

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) for sharing the experiences that MPs hear in their surgeries all the time. They were very harrowing, and we must take them as best we can, but we must learn from them and think about how we can join things up. As she said, the state, in all its forms, is a corporate parent.

I also thank the other Members who spoke. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), whose cross-party approach I appreciated.

I thank the Minister for having such an open mind on this issue and for confirming that the Government will take forward what we have heard today in both the cross-departmental working group and her own Department. I will monitor that work and will help the petitioners to do that too.

Finally, I thank the petitioners themselves. They have put this issue on the agenda, and we are all grateful to them for doing so. As Members of Parliament, we will do what we can to keep it there.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petitions 636718 and 624185 relating to children and bereavement.

5.48 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

*Monday 2 December 2024*

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Online Advertising: Taskforce Progress Report

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant):** The online advertising taskforce is publishing today its progress report 2023-24, summarising work carried out since the publication of its action plan last year.

The online advertising taskforce brings Government and industry together to help tackle harms associated with paid-for online advertising and improve transparency, accountability and trust in the online advertising supply chain. Its primary focus has been on tackling illegal advertising and minimising children being served advertising for products and services illegal to sell to them.

The taskforce action plan brought together and built on work that was in progress to strengthen evidence, minimise harm and protect consumers and businesses, including promoting and extending industry initiatives which address in-scope harms associated with paid-for online advertising.

In response to the action plan, six working groups were formed, each with a specific focus on an area identified within the plan. Some focused on pre-existing industry initiatives that could be enhanced, while others focused on particular issues affecting transparency and accountability in online advertising, and the development of responsive strategies. These groups have been key drivers of action, enabling closer collaboration and development of more detailed insight, and there is further work that these groups can take forward to build on the achievements so far.

Alongside this report I am also publishing an online advertising experiences survey commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and carried out by Ipsos. This report covers perceived exposure to illegal and misleading advertising online, including parental perception of child exposure. It provides insight into the type and scale of exposure, impacts, and any follow-up actions taken. It was commissioned to provide a baseline understanding of how people understood the risks online, particularly those associated with online advertising. While this report provides useful evidence and takes us a step further in understanding online advertising behaviours, the research working group, under the taskforce, will assess how we can build on this evidence.

I chaired a further meeting of the taskforce on 4 November, at which we agreed updated terms of reference and a renewed focus for the next year. The continued work of the taskforce and its working groups will be very important to help us understand and address the issues facing the online advertising sector, particularly those around trust and transparency. This will allow for further work in this area, with the work already completed enabling a sharper focus moving forward.

The progress report and research are published on gov.uk today and copies will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS272]

## DEFENCE

### Defence Industrial Development

**The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):** Today I am announcing plans to develop a new defence industrial strategy that will be published in late spring 2025. I have published a statement of intent setting out the focus of the strategy and invitation to consultation on gov.uk.

The UK faces acute and growing threats to our national security: Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the threat of escalation against NATO allies; conflict in the middle east; tensions in the Indo-Pacific region; and rising geopolitical instability.

The deteriorating security environment means we need a new era for defence: to restock our armed forces for today and the future; enact a deep reform of Ministry of Defence procurement; add urgency and co-ordination to our efforts to support Ukraine; and develop a new defence industrial strategy that is aligned to the Government's growth mission, creates new partnerships with industry, innovators and allies, and is matched to the urgency of the situation.

The Government's primary mission is to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7—with good jobs and productivity growth in every region and nation in the UK. Defence has a significant role to play, and the Government have confirmed defence as one of the eight priority growth sectors in its new industrial strategy.

Our aim is to produce a better, more integrated, more innovative and more resilient defence sector: a defence industry that can innovate at speed to help Ukraine defeat Russia; with the resilience to deter aggression by our adversaries; able to seize the opportunity presented by the technologies of the future, while growing our share of today's market through a new focus on exports.

The statement of intent published on gov.uk outlines the proposed framework we will adopt and provides an early signal of our approach. It also sets out the priorities for this strategy which will inform extensive consultation with the defence sector.

I invite all stakeholders to respond to this statement of intent and consultation questions, either publicly or privately, by end of February 2025.

[HCWS273]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner: Annual Report

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today publishing the annual report of the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner. The Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner is an independent statutory role. They are appointed by the Home Secretary under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012. The report covers the exercise of their statutory functions over the reporting year from April 2023 to March 2024.



This was the first and final report by Tony Eastaugh before leaving his post on 18 August 2024. I am grateful for his contribution to this important area of work and will be seeking to appoint a new commissioner to fill this position as soon as possible. The report has been laid before the House and will be available from the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

[HCWS276]

### Emergency Evacuation Consultation and Policy

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** I am today publishing the Government's response to the emergency evacuation information sharing plus consultation, which provides further detail of our new residential personal emergency evacuation plan policy.

This policy, which was previously announced in a written ministerial statement on 2 September 2024 HCWS62, which can be viewed at

: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-09-02/hcws62>

introduces new measures to improve the fire safety for vulnerable residents in high-rise and higher-risk residential blocks of flats, and represents a milestone in addressing the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, a key priority for this Government.

Following publication of this Government response, subject to parliamentary approval, we will move to lay regulations to implement the new policy.

A copy of the Government response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS271]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Building Safety

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** More than seven years after the Grenfell Tower tragedy, too many buildings in England still have unsafe cladding and the speed with which the problem is being addressed is far too slow. Only 30% of buildings identified in England with unsafe cladding have been fixed, with potentially thousands to be identified. As the remediation process drags on, residents continue to face distress, uncertainty and rising costs as they wait for action. This situation is completely unacceptable and must change.

For the first time, we have set firm targets for this important work. By the end of 2029 all buildings 18 metres and above with unsafe cladding in a Government-funded scheme will be remediated, and all buildings 11 metres and above with unsafe cladding will either have been remediated or have a completion date, or the landlords will be liable for severe penalties.

To drive this progress and ensure we meet these targets, I am today publishing our new remediation acceleration plan which sets out decisive measures so that buildings with unsafe cladding are fixed faster, remaining buildings still at risk are identified and residents are supported throughout the process. The remediation acceleration plan will be deposited in the House Libraries.

Many of the highest risk buildings are known to us. We must ensure they are urgently fixed. We intend to introduce new legal obligations on landlords to remediate unsafe cladding, with severe penalties, including criminal and civil sanctions for inaction. We also intend to provide further powers and resources to regulators so that bad actors are held to account.

We recognise the power of collaborative working and will drive co-ordination between regulators including through empowering metro mayors to lead local acceleration plans. Work is already under way with mayors being supported to play a new crucial role in driving remediation progress by leading local remediation acceleration plans alongside partners in local government, and this Government are determined to support and work effectively with mayors and combined authorities, who know their areas best, to deliver for residents.

Our plan sets out measures to accelerate cladding remediation in the social housing sector. From April 2025, we will also increase funding for social landlords applying for Government remediation funding so that remedial works can start sooner. We will work with social housing providers and regulators to agree a long-term strategy for social housing remediation, to be announced in spring 2025.

We are also publishing a joint plan that commits developers for the first time to stretch targets to assess all of their buildings by July 2025, to start or complete remedial works on 80% of their buildings by July 2026, and on all their unsafe buildings by July 2027. To meet these targets, developers will need to more than double the pace at which they have been assessing buildings and starting works so far this year. At least 28 developers have already endorsed the joint plan, covering over 95% of the buildings that developers need to remediate. We welcome the commitment that developers have made.

Developers have also agreed to expedite their work with social landlords to resolve contributions they should make towards works to make social sector buildings safe. This will mean that remedial works on affected social sector buildings will start sooner.

We will also ensure that the burden of paying for fixing historical building safety defects does not fall on leaseholders or further burden taxpayers. We intend that the building safety levy will come into effect in autumn 2025 and will be charged on all new eligible residential buildings in England. The levy will raise around £3.4 billion for remediation and help to ensure that those who are responsible for the building safety crisis help pay to put it right.

There is a long way to go to be confident that all buildings with unsafe cladding have been identified. Those responsible for their buildings' safety are failing to come forward to make their buildings known. There is a requirement to register buildings above 18 metres, but there is currently no single register that records all relevant buildings, and so identifying these buildings is a complex task. Through this plan we intend to introduce new legislation to drive action from those responsible for their buildings' safety by tightening building assessment requirements and to create a comprehensive building register so that all relevant buildings can be more quickly identified.

However, we cannot wait for this change to start to make progress. We expect to have reviewed 175,000 Ordnance Survey building records for potential buildings

at 11 metres in height and above by the end of March 2025. Through this approach, we expect to have reviewed 80% of the 11 metre-plus building stock, contacting responsible entities for those we believe might have a cladding risk concurrently, with plans to increase this to over 95% by late 2025.

We will share data with metro mayors, combined authorities and local regulators so that, when required, they can take action locally to ensure buildings are identified and remediated quickly. Residents who believe that their building may be unsafe can report this to regulators, or directly to us through the “tell us” tool.

This Government are clear that much more needs to be done to better protect blameless residents. All remediation projects should adhere to and evidence their compliance with the code of practice for the remediation of residential buildings.

We will introduce new measures to support residents with the costs they face.

This includes new shared ownership guidance allowing leaseholders to sub-let their properties at market rates so that they are no longer penalised for issues that are no fault of their own and an updated process to limit the number of valuations that shared owners have to pay for when selling their homes. Social landlords continue to have the option to buy back homes where shared owners are unable to sell due to building safety issues.

Buildings insurance premiums are unacceptably high for too many leaseholders in buildings with fire safety issues. The Government will therefore work with insurers to consider whether, for the duration of remediation programmes, Government might support the industry to reduce fire-related liabilities in order to reduce the high insurance bills leaseholders are facing. We are also launching a public consultation on the introduction of a fair and transparent fee for leaseholders to pay to those who manage insurance for their buildings.

This Government have already reopened the waking watch replacement fund which has provided alarms in 346 high-risk buildings. We estimate the fund has saved affected leaseholders on average £172 per calendar month and it has played a role in preventing residents being evacuated from their homes. We are extending the waking watch replacement fund until the end of the next financial year, and will confirm long-term plans at the next stage of the spending review to protect leaseholders from costs while they wait for remediation to take place.

Finally, we are taking several actions that address criticisms the Grenfell inquiry report made of the manufacturers of cladding and insulation products. This includes action towards preventing the most egregious companies, found to be part of the horrific failings that led to the Grenfell Tower tragedy, from being awarded Government contracts. It also commits to system-wide construction products reform, including proposals on liabilities, robust sanctions and penalties against manufacturers.

The remediation acceleration plan marks a pivotal moment in addressing the building safety crisis in England. We are taking decisive steps to fix buildings faster, identify all buildings with unsafe cladding, and ensure residents are safe and protected. We will work tirelessly to this end with resident groups and industry. I will provide an update in summer 2025.

[HCWS274]

## JUSTICE

### Personal Injury Discount Rate

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood):** This morning, I notified the London Stock Exchange Group that I would today lay a statutory instrument to change the discount rate applicable to personal injury lump sum compensation payments in England and Wales to 0.5%. The new rate will come into force on 11 January 2025, in line with the statutory timelines set out in the Damages Act 1996, as amended by the Civil Liability Act 2018.

As Lord Chancellor, it is my statutory duty under the Damages Act to periodically determine the discount rate which courts must consider when awarding compensation for future financial losses in the form of lump sum payments in personal injury cases. This rate is commonly known as the personal injury discount rate.

On 15 July 2024, I met the requirement to review this rate at least every five years when I commenced a review and consulted both HM Treasury and an independent expert panel for their advice. I have now received their advice, for which I am very grateful, and considered it alongside the responses to two recent calls for evidence, as well as further advice, evidence and analysis which has been made available to me. It is on the basis of this evidence, and having followed the review framework set out in the Damages Act, that I have determined that a single rate of 0.5% is the appropriate determination for me to make in this review.

A full statement of reasons, explaining how I have decided upon this rate, will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. It will also be published on gov.uk, alongside the full advisory report that was provided to me by the expert panel.

[HCWS275]

## NORTHERN IRELAND

### Northern Ireland Act 1998: Consent Process

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):** Schedule 6A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and article 18 of the Windsor framework provide Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly with the opportunity to consider whether articles 5 to 10 of the Windsor framework—concerning the trade in goods—should continue to apply.

The upcoming vote is a decision for the Assembly, in accordance with the law. However, under the terms of schedule 6A, where an MLA other than the First Minister and Deputy First Minister tables a motion on democratic consent, I am under a legal duty to take reasonable steps to provide MLAs with such explanatory materials as it is reasonable to provide in order to assist them when deciding the question.

In recognition of the short time window within which the motion would be tabled and the vote held, I have written to the Speaker of the Assembly today and enclosed explanatory materials that would discharge that duty. These materials have been published on gov.uk and I shall ask that a copy be placed in the Library of the House for the record.

More broadly, the Government have also set out our commitment to resetting relations with the EU and negotiating new agreements which can remove unnecessary barriers to trade for businesses in the UK trading with the EU. In the Government's view, only the Windsor framework arrangements in place under articles 5 to 10 provide a credible basis to pursue those negotiations

while also respecting Northern Ireland's unique circumstances and its place in the UK's internal market. The Government will listen carefully to the result of the vote, meet our legal duties flowing from that, engage fully with business, civic society and political leaders in Northern Ireland as that work continues, and update the House in due course.

[HCWS277]



# Petition

*Monday 2 December 2024*

## OBSERVATION

### TREASURY

#### Wealth tax in the Autumn Budget

*The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

Declares that a 2% Wealth Tax on assets over £10 million, a measure to equalise Capital Gains Tax with Income Tax rates, and measures to end state subsidies to fossil fuel giants and to close loopholes in the oil and gas windfall tax should be brought; and further notes that these measures would generate an additional £45 billion per year, providing vast resources to rebuild our public services, boost people's incomes and invest in a higher-wage economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the requests of the petitions and consider the resource benefits of Wealth Taxes when allocating funds in the budget.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Richard Burgon, *Official Report*, 28 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 643.]

[P003016]

*Observations from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):*

The Government thank the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for submitting the petition on behalf of the residents of the United Kingdom regarding the consideration of wealth taxes and oil and gas taxation when allocating funds in the Budget.

The Budget took difficult decisions on tax, spending and welfare to repair the public finances and fix the NHS. By fixing the foundations, we have delivered economic stability, enabling us to increase investment in public services and the economy, and unlocking the long-term growth we need to rebuild Britain.

The Budget announced tax changes worth £41.5 billion in 2029-30. The Government have committed to not increase taxes on working people, and have ensured that the UK is one of the best places to grow a business by capping corporation tax at 25% and announcing reforms to support small businesses and our high street.

The petition specifically raises a question on wealth taxes. The tax changes announced at Budget were underpinned by fairness and included changes to the taxation of wealth by reforming capital gains tax, inheritance tax and stamp duty land tax.

To help repair the public finances, the Government are raising revenue by increasing the main capital gains tax rates to 18% and 24%, while ensuring that the UK tax system remains internationally competitive. The new CGT rates are revenue maximising in the current design of the tax system, and people earning income from selling financial assets will now contribute a greater share of tax on that income. The CGT changes will raise £8.9 billion over the forecast period, revenue which will help the Government to restore economic stability and improve Britain's public services.

The Government are also raising an additional £2 billion in 2029-30 from inheritance tax, including through restrictions on reliefs used by wealthy individuals. Measures include making the inheritance tax system fairer by applying inheritance tax to unspent pensions pots, which removes the opportunity for individuals to use pensions as a vehicle for inheritance tax planning, and restricting the generosity of agricultural property relief and business property relief.

The Budget announced changes to the stamp duty land tax higher rates for additional dwellings surcharge, increasing this by 2 percentage points from 3% to 5% from 31 October 2024. Increasing HRAD ensures that those looking to move home, or purchase their first property, have a greater advantage over second home buyers, landlords and businesses purchasing residential property. This is intended to support the housing market.

Increasing HRAD will raise £310 million a year by 2029-30, which will be used to support the Government's priorities. The Office for Budget Responsibility certified costing estimates that increasing HRAD by 2 percentage points is expected to result in 130,000 additional transactions over the next five years by first-time buyers and other people buying a primary residence.

On the energy profits levy, the Government confirmed at Budget that the rate of the levy will increase by 3 percentage points to 38%, taking the headline rate of tax on the oil and gas sector to 78%. The EPL's sunset date has also been extended by one year to March 2030, and the levy's 29% investment allowance will be removed. These changes will ensure that oil and gas companies contribute more to our clean energy transition.

Changes to the EPL will raise an additional £2.3 billion, supporting the transition to clean energy, enhancing energy security and providing sustainable jobs for the future.



# Written Correction

*Monday 2 December 2024*

## Ministerial Correction

### HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

#### Tobacco and Vapes Bill

*The following extract is from Second Reading of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill on 26 November 2024.*

**Andrew Gwynne:**...We will still encourage adult smokers to switch to vaping through Swap to Stop in England, and I am delighted that localities have asked for over half a million starter kits so far. On advertising regulations,

of course the consultation will take place after Royal Assent, but I hope that I can assure the hon. Member for Harrow East that we will take away his point about ensuring that the NHS can still advertise Swap to Stop under those regulations.

[*Official Report*, 26 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 736.]

*Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne):*

**Andrew Gwynne:**...We will still encourage adult smokers to switch to vaping through Swap to Stop in England, and I am delighted that localities have asked for over half a million starter kits so far. On **vape** regulations, of course the consultation will take place after Royal Assent, but I hope that I can assure the hon. Member for Harrow East that we will take away his point about ensuring that the NHS can still **promote** Swap to Stop under those regulations.







# ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than  
Monday 9 December 2024**

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