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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 9 December 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sixth-form Education: Reform

1. **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): What plans she has to reform the provision of sixth-form education. [901664]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): This Government are focused on enhancing and spreading opportunity and growing our economy. We will ensure that a high quality range of post-16 qualifications is available to sixth forms, through the independent curriculum and assessment review—which is well under way—and through the continued roll-out of T-levels.

Lincoln Jopp: In Spelthorne we have six secondary schools, only two of which provide A-levels; the rest are middle schools taking pupils only up to GCSE level. There have been plans in the past to increase sixth-form provision in Spelthorne, but they have been in abeyance for two years. Will the Minister please agree to meet me, so that we can work out what is causing this blockage and unlock the opportunity to which she has just referred?

Janet Daby: Obviously many things needed attention because of the last Government, and many things were not accomplished, but I am sure that my noble Friend Baroness Smith of Malvern will be willing to meet the hon. Member to discuss his concerns.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): In my constituency there is no A-level provision. Some students have told me that they have to travel for hours just to study, and others consider this a barrier to continuing at school at all. Will my hon. Friend work with me to bring A-levels back to Knowsley?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for her thoughtful question. The Government are committed to ensuring that young people have access to appropriate education and career opportunities, but the focus must be on delivering provision that offers them the best learning experience and opportunities possible. In Knowsley, A-level provision has not been deemed viable owing to a lack of demand, but students there have access to high quality post-16 academic provision in surrounding boroughs.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Staff in non-academised sixth-form colleges are not being offered the same pay increase as staff in academised colleges. It is understood that a sum of money is available for post-16 education, but colleges have been left completely unclear about whether that sum will be enough to offset the national insurance increase or whether they will find, as universities have, that it is entirely eaten up by that increase. Will the Minister agree to publish the cost of the national insurance increase to sixth-form colleges, and if she will not publish it, why on earth not?

Janet Daby: I find it shocking that the shadow Minister has taken no responsibility for the many circumstances in which we have found ourselves having to make decisions that are in the best interests of students and colleges. We are conducting various reviews to try to ensure that we put right the mess that we inherited.

Primary School Breakfast Clubs: Impact

2. **Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of introducing free primary school breakfast clubs on children. [901665]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Breakfast clubs break down barriers to opportunity so that children are ready to learn. They are proven to boost attendance, attainment, wellbeing and behaviour, and they also provide essential childcare options for parents. In only a few days, hundreds of schools have applied to become early adopters because they know that these clubs can improve children's life chances and, crucially, academic standards.

Terry Jermy: As a former youth worker and a former school governor, I know that this initiative will make a huge difference, and I have written to all the schools in my constituency encouraging them to apply. Will the Secretary of State please outline the next steps?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that he is undertaking in making his local schools aware of the opportunities that breakfast clubs present. The early adopters scheme will enable up to 750 participating schools to start providing them from April 2025 onwards. We have tripled investment in breakfast clubs following the Budget. Schools have until 20 December to apply for the scheme, and I would encourage many more to do so.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Thousands of schools are already participating in the national school breakfast club programme, including many special schools and secondary schools, but the clubs actually have a bigger effect on attendance. The Secretary of State has talked a great deal about breakfast clubs in primary schools, but what is the future for the existing clubs in those special and secondary schools?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the interest that I know—from his former roles—he takes in this issue. We are building on the existing programmes, expanding investment and opportunities, but I agree with him that we need to ensure that breakfast clubs are available to all children, including

those with special educational needs and disabilities. To ensure that the roll-out is a success, some of the early adopters will be in special and alternative provision schools.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the decision to introduce breakfast clubs, which will have an amazing impact on pupils in my constituency and everywhere else. Will the Secretary of State tell us a little about the logistics of rolling out the programme throughout the country, and how quickly that can be done?

Bridget Phillipson: As I said, schools have until 20 December to apply to take part in the early adopters scheme. That is because we want to ensure that we establish the scheme, and understand the benefits and challenges, before we roll it out across the country. We are determined to get this right, and we will build on the early adopters to deliver universal free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): While the children's wellbeing Bill proposes statutory breakfast programmes, research from the Food Foundation shows that such clubs are more likely to benefit wealthier families because of the convenience that they offer working parents. By contrast, offering children free school lunches is known to help iron out inequalities. Some 800,000 children in poverty are ineligible for free school meals, and more than 200,000 eligible children are not registered. Does the Secretary of State agree that expanding school lunches, and implementing auto-enrolment for free school meals for all children, would be an effective and equitable approach to tackling food insecurity and supporting our children's health and academic performance?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady is right to identify the importance of ensuring that all our children have healthy, balanced and nutritious diets, including at school. However, she will know that the situation that this Government inherited from the previous Government means that we have had to take some very tough decisions. We will set out more in due course as we set out legislation that we promised in the King's Speech. I slightly take issue with some of the evidence she points to, because the evidence on breakfast clubs demonstrates wider benefits for all children in attainment, wellbeing and overall performance.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Because of the increase in national insurance, the Early Years Alliance is warning of a 20% increase in fees for early years parents, which affects nurseries and things like paid-for breakfast clubs. It says that the Budget will be a "recipe for total disaster", with up to four in 10 early years providers closing unless drastic action is taken. As a first step towards averting that disaster, will the Secretary of State now agree to publish the Department's estimate of how much the national insurance increase will cost early years providers? If she will not publish it, why not? Does the House not deserve to have this information?

Bridget Phillipson: I take the concerns of early years providers very seriously indeed, and we will set out in due course the funding rates and the approach that we are taking. The hon. Gentleman and the Conservative

party are very keen to complain about and criticise the measures that we set out in the Budget, yet the Leader of the Opposition herself said that she would refuse to reverse them. They want all the benefits—the teachers, the breakfast clubs and rising standards—but they are not prepared to take the tough decisions that are necessary. As a former Treasury Minister, the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), should know better, because she saw the scale of the fiscal inheritance that this Government inherited from her party.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

3. **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve teacher recruitment and retention in Portsmouth North constituency. [901666]

13. **Bambos Charalambous** (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve teacher recruitment and retention. [901676]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): As the first step towards our opportunity mission, we have begun the critical work of recruiting 6,500 new expert teachers. We have fully funded a 5.5% pay award, begun Ofsted reform, and taken steps to make teachers' work more flexible and ensure that workloads are more manageable. I am determined to reset the relationship between Government and the workforce to drive high and rising standards for all our children.

Amanda Martin: At a recent local public meeting in Paulsgrove, Portsmouth, parents raised concerns about school provision and the learning environment. As a local authority, we sit in the bottom three in the league tables. What steps is the Secretary of State taking not only to improve recruitment and retention in specialist subjects, but to ensure that there are key staff in specialist areas, where different learning environments are needed in our classrooms?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the challenges that we face in particular parts of the country, and there are no greater champions of Portsmouth than her and the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan). We are taking steps to ensure that teaching is the go-to profession for our best graduates, as well as ensuring that we keep experienced, well-qualified professionals in teaching. On specialist support, we have set out measures around SEND reform and additional investment to address the challenges that my hon. Friend identifies.

Bambos Charalambous: I begin by thanking all the teachers, support staff and senior leaders in my constituency of Southgate and Wood Green, and across the country, for their hard work ensuring that our children receive the high quality education they deserve. Teachers' pay, their workload and the environment in which they work have been highlighted as reasons why they leave the profession. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House what steps she is taking to address the reasons for teachers quitting the profession?

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in praising the amazing teachers and support staff in his constituency and across our country for the vital work that they do. I want to ensure not only that we keep teachers in the profession but that they thrive in it, which is why I was pleased to agree to the recommendation of a 5.5% pay award, but we know that there is much more to do to keep experienced, dedicated staff in the profession. I know from speaking to many of them that many of the challenges they face go way beyond the school gate. That is why I am proud to lead the work on child poverty, together with the Work and Pensions Secretary, to address some of the drivers of workload and pressures that many of our school staff are facing.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Some 9,000 women in their 30s left teaching in 2022-23. This is the single biggest age group leaving teaching in Bath and across the country. Will the Government improve maternity pay for teachers and teaching assistants?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady is right to identify that challenge, and I have used that statistic many times myself. I am really concerned about the big numbers of experienced women, particularly those in their 30s, who leave teaching because they find it too difficult to combine work with family life. That is why, as part of what we have set out to the School Teachers Review Body process, we have asked it to look specifically at some of those challenges. As part of our wider work across Government to make work pay, we are ensuring better rights at work and that maternity protections are rolled out for workers across our country.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which shows that I am in the 19th year of being a proud primary school governor. The Secretary of State will know that schools are led by teachers but also that many volunteers go towards making our schools the brilliant places of learning that they are. Too many of the schools in my constituency have vacancies for governors. Will the Secretary of State tell us what she is doing to increase the recruitment and retention of school governors?

Bridget Phillipson: I congratulate the hon. Lady on the important work that she does as a school governor. They are the unsung heroes across our communities in terms of the support they provide to our schools. I recognise the increasing challenge that she sets out around how we can ensure that people come forward to take on those important roles. That is why we have been working with the bodies representing governors to ensure that we attract more people into those important roles to drive forward standards in our schools.

Primary School Breakfast Clubs

4. **Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to increase the availability of breakfast clubs in primary schools. [901667]

5. **David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to increase the availability of breakfast clubs in primary schools. [901668]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): Schools with primary age pupils can now apply to become early adopters of the universal free breakfast club programme starting from April 2025. Up to 750 participating schools will be funded to provide access to a free universal breakfast club lasting at least 30 minutes that includes food.

Matt Turmaine: In my constituency, parents speak to me about their worries and concerns regarding education provision and support. These range from being able to get their children into a good local school to how they will be able to continue to work while parenting. Will my hon. Friend outline further the benefits that breakfast clubs will bring to parents and pupils in constituencies such as mine?

Stephen Morgan: This Government are committed to making quick progress to deliver on our commitment to offer a free breakfast club in every primary school to ensure that children are ready to learn at the start of the school day. The Chancellor has announced a tripling of investment in breakfast clubs, driving improvements to behaviour, attendance and attainment and, for parents, more choices over childcare.

David Burton-Sampson: I have contacted all the primary schools in my constituency to encourage them to become early adopters. Child poverty in my constituency stands at 12.1%, and food bank use has risen by 433% over the last five years. Does my hon. Friend agree that breakfast clubs will be part of the solution by helping to lift children out of poverty, giving them food in their belly to start the school day and encouraging their parents back into part-time employment?

Stephen Morgan: Parents and carers up and down the country are still struggling with the cost of living. As part of our mission to bring down barriers to opportunity, breakfast clubs give parents and carers the confidence that their child can access a breakfast, should they need one, and we are supporting families to work with the cost of childcare. It is a pity that the Conservatives cannot say whether they back our plan to deliver better life chances for all children in all parts of the country.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Nurseries and the small businesses that provide before and after-school clubs are being whacked by national insurance increases, and there is little clarity from the Government about how these breakfast clubs will work, which has the potential to undermine another part of their business model. What representations has the Education Secretary made to the Chancellor to deal with the massive hole that she has blown in her plans?

Stephen Morgan: We take no lectures from the Conservative party on how it failed children over the last 14 years. I have heard providers' concerns about early years funding, and I recognise the importance of local authorities and providers planning ahead for the pivotal expansion year. We will be updating the House very soon on that issue.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Recently I met my constituent Farhan Adam, a winner of headmaster of the year, who lamented the fact that he spends more

time addressing issues such as food insecurity than doing what he loves, which is teaching. This is not surprising as, according to the Food Foundation, approximately 18% of households with children are experiencing food insecurity. Does the Secretary of State agree that, in addition to breakfast clubs, lifting the two-child cap would help to alleviate this problem?

Stephen Morgan: Breakfast clubs offer a huge amount, including food and club provision. I encourage the hon. Member to consider that for roll-out in his constituency. More broadly, he will be aware of the ministerial taskforce focused on child poverty, which will report in the new year.

SEN Provision: Funding

6. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that SEN provision is adequately funded. [901669]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): The Government recognise that breaking down barriers to opportunity for children with special educational needs and disabilities will take a cross-Government approach. To that end, I recently met the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), to discuss how we can work together to solve some of the challenges. The Department for Education is committed to ensuring adequate support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and recently announced £740 million of capital funding to support children with SEN to learn and thrive in mainstream settings.

Sarah Green: A recent National Audit Office report makes it clear that, without reform, the SEN system is financially unsustainable. The Minister will know that, since 2020, local authorities such as Buckinghamshire council have been able to exclude their dedicated school grant deficits from their main revenue budgets. That statutory override means that local authorities do not breach their duty to set a balanced budget, but it is due to end in March 2026, and there is currently no identified solution. Can the Minister share more on what urgent conversations she is having with colleagues to ensure that local authorities get the certainty they need?

Catherine McKinnell: The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government regulations, which ringfence dedicated support grant deficits from councils' wider financial position, were amended. The statutory override goes up to March 2026, when it expires, and we are currently considering how best to continue support for local authorities with deficits. Fundamentally, this is about reforming the system to ensure that more children can be educated within a mainstream setting, and that we have special school places available for those with the most complex needs.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Perranporth academy in my constituency plans to provide significant SEN provision, but it is one of 44 schools currently under a value-for-money review. As of last week, the head of Perranporth primary school had not been consulted on this. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the plight of Perranporth academy?

Catherine McKinnell: I appreciate my hon. Friend's concerns, and we recognise the unprecedented pressures that local authorities are under. High needs funding, which we recently increased, will benefit both mainstream schools and special schools because we will ensure the funding reaches children who need it. However, I recognise the issues and concerns that he raises, and will be happy to arrange a meeting to discuss this further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Last week's announcement of capital funding to ensure that mainstream schools are more inclusive for children with special needs is, of course, welcome, but the Minister will know that, for many children with additional needs, even the most inclusive mainstream schools simply are not appropriate. With two in three special schools at or over capacity, can she provide a timeline for when the 67 planned special free schools will be delivered? Will she commit to looking favourably on local authority applications for such schools?

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Lady for her recognition of the additional funding. We expect the funding to create thousands of new places, particularly in mainstream schools but also in special schools and other specialist settings. We will confirm the allocations for individual local authorities in the spring, as they know best how to invest in their local area. We are keeping the free schools programme under review and will provide that confirmation in due course.

Support for Kinship Carers

7. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to improve support for kinship carers. [901670]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Supporting kinship placements is critical to deliver our opportunity mission to ensure that children grow up in safe and loving homes. We have recently announced a £40 million package to trial a kinship allowance. The trial will test whether an allowance can support more children to settle with family and friends.

Alice Macdonald: I recently met kinship carers in Norwich, who do an amazing job in very difficult circumstances. One of the biggest challenges they face is financial support. Kinship's recent "Forgotten" report found that children in kinship care are struggling because of an inaccessible and complicated picture of support. Has the Minister made an assessment of extending relevant financial support, such as pupil premium plus, to all children in kinship care?

Janet Daby: This Government acknowledge and appreciate the crucial role that kinship carers play. I am pleased that the virtual school heads scheme has been expanded to support kinship children. I encourage kinship carers and schools to work together to support kinship children and those with identified needs. The Department will continue to review the matter, to ensure that children get the right support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's response about kinship carers. What progress has been made on offering kinship carers respite provision, so that they can be given short-term breaks to ease the pressures facing kinship families?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very good question. It is important that kinship carers, as well as the children they are looking after, have the support they need. Through the process of family group decision making, families will come together to have conversations about how best to support children in kinship care. Respite and other related matters will be discussed to ensure that the right provision is in place. This Government are committed to getting it right for children, especially where the previous Government failed.

Skills Training

8. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform skills training. [901671]

10. **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform skills training. [901673]

11. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform skills training. [901674]

15. **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reform skills training. [901678]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The previous Government left behind a skills system that was fragmented and failing: falling numbers of apprenticeships for young people; adults unable to find the training courses they need; businesses confused; and no plans to equip people with the skills for the economy and opportunities of tomorrow. We are turning the page by establishing Skills England to unify that fragmented landscape, and bringing forward a plan for post-16 education and skills, which will deliver the education and training pathways that our economy, employers and learners need.

Anna Dixon: Some 3.8 million people aged 19 and over benefit from skills education in England every year. I pay tribute to all the hard-working professionals employed in further education, including at Shipley college in my constituency. However, businesses in Saltaire tell me that they struggle to recruit people with the digital and tech skills that they need locally. I welcome steps taken by the Government to address skills shortage vacancies. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the benefits of Skills England will be felt by businesses in Shipley?

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the staff at Shipley college. She is right that it is time that we, as a country, took skills much more seriously. We were left with skills shortages in many key areas, including those she identified. We will be giving businesses the flexibility they have been asking for, to unlock growth and drive opportunity through the reformed growth and skills levy.

Joe Morris: When I speak to small businesses in my constituency of Hexham, they regularly decry an inability to recruit young people from the area, who want to remain in the area where they grew up. Will the Secretary of State assure me that we will be working with small and medium-sized businesses to ensure that young people can remain where they grew up, should they wish to do so, which sadly was very hard under the previous Government?

Bridget Phillipson: Following on from small business Saturday, we all recognise that small employers are the backbone of our economy. My hon. Friend is right that it should not be the case that young people in places such as Hexham should have to get out in order to get on. We are creating Skills England to fill the skills gaps we see across our country. Skills England will also work with our regional mayors to ensure that we address some of the regional inequalities we see, as well as some of the opportunity areas, because we know that particular parts of the country have a real ability to drive forward growth, jobs and opportunities.

Dave Robertson: South Staffordshire college's creative arts faculty is based at Lichfield college in my constituency. In January, it will open a new state-of-the-art recording studio and rehearsal space that will allow students to develop skills in both music performance and music production, ensuring that they are well prepared for careers in the creative arts for their entire future. Does the Secretary of State agree that such investments are essential for the UK to maintain its role as a global leader in the creative arts, and that the Government should support them wherever they can?

Bridget Phillipson: Absolutely. That is why we set out in the Budget an additional £300 million of capital investment for our colleges. I am sure that the opportunities that my hon. Friend sets out are just the kind that we need to see across our country. The creative industries have a crucial role to play in driving growth in communities right across our country, and through our curriculum and assessment review we will ensure that all young people have the chance to study a wide range of subjects.

Jen Craft: This morning I had the pleasure of visiting South Essex college in my constituency, which offers a significant variety of post-16 skills-based courses, from theatre and music production through to digital skills, robotics and hospitality. The college is keen to raise the aspirations of local young people, matching their ambitions with the needs of employers in the region. What role does the Secretary of State see the further education sector playing in delivering the Government's skills agenda?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that our further education colleges have a crucial role to play in providing opportunities for our young people and for adult returners to education. Colleges have a strong impact on regional economic growth. We think that they have a bigger role to play still, which is why they will be a central part of what we take forward through Skills England.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): At the general election, the Government said that they would specifically target technical training in areas such as construction, engineering and digital, in order to

take pressure off immigration into key roles, so why are they failing to act on the pay gap between further education teaching posts and those in schools?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that there is a very big pay gap for further education; I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that it took place over the last 14 years, during which his party was in power. I absolutely accept the challenge that more is required, because our further education colleges have a crucial role to play, but that is the situation we inherited from the Conservative party.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Secretary of State will be aware that all analyses of the supply of green skills, such as the recent global climate talent stocktake, show a massive undersupply of such skills. Demand is growing at double the rate of supply. What are the Government's plans to address that important shortfall, and will the Secretary of State or her officials meet me to discuss how such plans might include unblocking the approval of new qualifications—for example, the currently blocked natural history GCSE?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that there are lots of job opportunities in the years to come in clean technology, green jobs and much more besides. That is why we have started work very quickly to begin the process of legislating to establish Skills England, which already exists in shadow form. It has already undertaken an audit of what more is required. I know that there are lots of fantastic new jobs out there connected to construction and engineering that align very much with our drive towards net zero. I am more than happy to ensure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting on the topic.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): There has never been greater urgency for us to equip our young people with the skills they need to enter a career in farming, yet only half of those who took level 3 agricultural apprenticeships in Cumbria last year completed them, and no level 4 apprenticeships were available. Will the Secretary of State look at this worrying situation, pay personal attention to it, and provide the funding necessary for us to have agricultural apprenticeships in Britain's leading agricultural county?

Bridget Phillipson: I am more than happy to look personally at the issue that the hon. Gentleman sets out, to ensure that we do more in this area. He will be aware that we have a review under way of level 3 qualifications, but we know that as a country we need to do much more on level 4 and 5 qualifications as well. If he will share further information with me, I will happily look into the matter.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Lytchett Minster school in my constituency is proud of its record in delivering level 3 BTecs; in fact, its sixth form would not survive without BTecs. What assurance can the Secretary of State give me about the continuation of these really important qualifications, which suit less academically able children?

Bridget Phillipson: We are making good progress on our post-16 qualifications reform review, which will report by the end of the year, so the hon. Lady does not have long to wait to hear the outcomes of that review.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Before the election, Labour promised to let businesses spend 50% of their apprenticeship levy money on non-apprenticeships, but now Ministers say the commitment is under review. Ministers are taking away the flexibility of businesses to spend their own money on level 7 apprenticeships—a big change to the principles of the levy. Will the Secretary of State confirm when the review of her own policy will conclude, and will she rule out doing to level 6 apprenticeships what she is doing to level 7 apprenticeships?

Bridget Phillipson: We remain committed to reforming the failing apprenticeship levy and turning it into a growth and skills levy with up to 50% flexibility for employers, driving new opportunities in growth areas across our country, alongside ensuring that we deliver many more apprenticeship starts for our young people. We inherited a situation where apprenticeship starts were falling at a time when we urgently need to invest in the skills of the next generation. We will work with business through Skills England to drive forward what is required for adult learners as well as young people.

Creative Education: Schools

9. **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support creative education in schools. [901672]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): All children deserve a rich and broad education so that they do not miss out on subjects, such as music, art and drama. As part of our opportunity mission, we have launched an independent, expert-led curriculum and assessment review, and we are committed to ensuring that young people are supported to study creative subjects.

Dr Opher: Over the past 14 years, the amount of creative education, particularly at primary level, has been reducing and reducing, so I welcome what the Minister said. There is evidence that doing creative things and learning creative subjects improves our wellbeing, mental health and academic learning. Would the Minister support my campaign to bring musical instrument teaching to every primary school in the country, not just the more well-off ones?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend speaks with great wisdom. We have confirmed £79 million of funding for a national network of music hubs to give children and young people the opportunity to learn to sing or play an instrument, to create music and to progress their musical interests and talents. We have also launched the music opportunities pilot, with £5.8 million of funding over four years to support students with special educational needs and disabilities and those with less means to access the opportunities to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): The Secretary of State has made it clear that she would like more time spent on creative subjects, but she must ensure that does not come at the expense of an academic education. Last week's international education stats found that English

children are the best at maths in the western world. That is brilliant news and testament to the hard work of teachers and pupils. It is also down to a world-class curriculum put in place by the previous Government. Will she finally celebrate those results and instruct her curriculum review that it must not dilute academic standards and put that progress at risk?

Catherine McKinnell: From their shameless sense of pride, we would never know that the Conservative Government left England's school standards getting worse. Conservative Members may be happy that half of disadvantaged pupils in state schools did not meet the requirements in reading, writing or maths at the end of primary school, but we do not think their record is anything to be proud of. Standards is the watchword for this Labour Government, and not just for some of our children but for all of them.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Harms

12. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): If she will take steps to educate children about the harms of commercial sexual exploitation. [901675]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): Secondary schools are required to teach about sexual exploitation, and this Labour Government are committed to halving violence against women and girls within a decade. Education has a key role to play in addressing that.

Catherine Fookes: I agree entirely. As we near the end of the 16 days of activism, it is really important that we continue to talk about commercial sexual exploitation, which is the exchange of money, accommodation, services or goods for sex acts. It has an impact on all young people's lives, including in my constituency of Monmouthshire, particularly through exposure to violent online pornography, as well as via the damaging message conveyed by the fact that there is legal impunity for running pimping websites. Does the Minister agree that schools should be supported in addressing these issues through a whole-school approach to combating sexism and sexual harassment, as advocated by organisations such as UK Feminista?

Catherine McKinnell: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend that taking a whole-school approach to tackling sexual abuse and violence is incredibly important. The statutory guidance is very clear that relationship and sexual health education should be delivered through a whole-school approach. Through our safer streets and opportunities missions, the Government are considering how best to support schools in tackling this issue.

Applied General Qualifications: Review

14. **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress her Department has made on its review of applied general qualifications. [901677]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): We are making good progress with the review of qualifications reform, which has focused on the level 3 qualifications that are scheduled to have their funding removed on 31 July 2025. We are working

quickly to provide certainty to the sector, and will publish the outcomes of the review before the end of the year.

Gareth Snell: I draw the House's attention to my declared interests: I am the governor of a sixth-form college. I thank the Minister for that answer, but she will know that the certainty that she hopes to give is simply not there. Colleges have had to put off printing prospectuses. They have had open evenings and assemblies for schools at which they have not been able to confirm what they will teach. There are staff allocation issues, and they have even been asked to make projections about T-level funding for T-levels that they are not sure they will have the pupil numbers for, because they do not know which equivalent BTecs will be stood down. They will enter 2025 not knowing what they can teach. Does she think that is acceptable? What support will there be for colleges that will have to turn things around very quickly, whatever the outcome of the review?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for really pushing me on this issue, and for explaining the situation so well. I acknowledge to him and the sector the uncertainty and difficulties in this area. Following the election, we moved quickly to pause the defunding that was scheduled for 31 July 2024. I fully appreciate that colleges need time to plan their provision, and that students need time to plan what courses they will take. We are working as quickly as possible to conclude the review, and we will publish the outcomes before the end of the year.

Child Poverty

16. **Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reduce levels of child poverty. [901679]

23. **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reduce levels of child poverty. [901688]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Tackling child poverty is at the heart of our opportunity mission. After a decade of Conservative Government, far too many children are growing up in poverty. It is a scar on our society, a blight on young lives, and the centrepiece of the Conservatives' shameful legacy. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and I are getting on with the job of chairing the child poverty taskforce, which has started the urgent work needed ahead of the publication of our child poverty strategy in spring 2025.

Chris McDonald: During the summer, I visited the holiday activities and food programme run by Stockton borough council, which provides a healthy meal for low-income families in my constituency. Can my right hon. Friend provide some assurance that funding for that programme will continue into next year?

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend by extending my thanks to the staff at Stockton borough council for their hard work on the holiday activities and food programme over the past year. We are working through our budget settlement to agree measures to support families during the holidays, and in due course we will

set out what further steps we can take. He will know, as I do, that while talent is spread across our country, opportunity is not. His constituency is full of children whom the Conservatives let down. This Labour Government will break down barriers.

Michelle Welsh: We know that children growing up in poverty on average do less well in education, with many children also having to miss out on other enriching school activities such as days out because they simply cannot afford them. Does the Secretary of State agree that every child, including the almost 7,000 children living in poverty in my Sherwood Forest constituency, should have the same opportunities to thrive at school, and that tackling child poverty is essential in ensuring that every child can succeed?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree; it is absolutely right that children in my hon. Friend's constituency deserve every chance to achieve and thrive, and that is the ultimate goal of our child poverty taskforce. As the Prime Minister set out just last week through our plan for change, we want to give every child the best start in life, and that is just not possible if millions of children across our country are growing up in poverty.

SEND Pupils: Support

17. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [901681]

22. **Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [901687]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): The Government's ambition is that all children with special educational needs receive the right support to succeed, where possible in mainstream schools. We will strengthen accountability and improve inclusivity through Ofsted, and we will support professionals to develop their SEND expertise. High needs funding will increase by almost £1 billion in the next spending year.

Helen Morgan: Children with special educational needs and disabilities in Shropshire are relatively poorly funded compared with those in the rest of the country. Top-up funding for those with the highest level of needs is just £7,000, meaning that the schools that support them cannot even afford a full-time teaching assistant to help them progress. Can the Minister describe what she is doing to ensure that funding is fairly distributed across the country, so that children with special educational needs can get the help they need wherever they live?

Catherine McKinnell: We know that local authorities have been significantly impacted by increased demand for education, health and care plans, as well as challenges in workforce capacity. We expect the £740 million of additional investment to create thousands of new places in both mainstream and special schools and in specialist settings. We will confirm the allocations to specific local authorities, which know how best to invest in their local areas to increase capacity as needed, in the spring.

Dr Pinkerton: Across Surrey last year, more than 1,800 children with special educational needs were absent from school for more than a third of the time. Special educational needs co-ordinators are incredibly frustrated that EHCPs are coming back from our local council with the wrong names, describing the wrong conditions and offering the wrong packages of care. Teachers are stretched, headteachers cannot stretch their budgets any further, and one or both parents are having to give up employment to look after their children, yet the leadership of Surrey county council has said that there is not a problem with special educational needs, but that there are parents who are too articulate. Would the Minister please meet me and SENCOs to discuss this very serious—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to the hon. Gentleman that it is much easier if he gets to the question, instead of having all the preamble? I cannot get other people in. I think the question was clear.

Catherine McKinnell: Following the most recent local area SEND inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in September 2023, the Department—working alongside NHS England—continues to track the progress that the Surrey partnership is making against the areas for improvement that were identified, offering support and advice to the local authority. I appreciate the significant concerns that the hon. Gentleman outlines, and we will continue to keep the situation under review.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Bradstow special school in my constituency supports some of the most vulnerable children across the south-east. More than half of those children are from families in Kent, yet Tory-led Kent county council has refused to pay £2 million in fees, contributing to that school now facing closure. Kent has been offered the school for free, including all of its land, yet it is refusing to keep the school open. Will the Minister join me in urging Kent county council to take responsibility and work with the governing body, staff and children's families to ensure that we can keep this vital school open?

Catherine McKinnell: If we are to improve the situation that far too many children face in relation to special educational needs and disabilities, and to meet demand, which we know is outstripping supply, it is vital that areas work together in partnership. That is why we very much recommend that local authorities work together with health partners and local schools to solve some of those challenges together. The Department for Education will work closely with them to make sure that every child gets the education they deserve.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): A National Audit Office report published in October highlights that special educational needs places in independent schools can cost two and a half times as much as in state schools. Does the Minister agree that if we are to ensure that children get the support they need in future, we will have to assist local authorities in expanding their number of special needs places?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We know that the situation needs reform, and that we need much greater capacity within mainstream

schools so that children with special educational needs and disabilities can be educated alongside their peers where that is the appropriate place for them to be, but also so that special school places are available where needed. That is why we have put in £740 million of additional investment to support mainstream schools to expand their specialist provision.

Topical Questions

T1. [901704] **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

Children growing up in our country deserve the best start in life, and nothing less. That is why, last week, the Prime Minister published his plan for change, including an ambitious target to ensure that, by the end of the Parliament, a record proportion of children are ready for school. We will do this by transforming the early years, creating and expanding nurseries, rolling out childcare, strengthening family services and focusing on early intervention.

Mr Speaker, as we approach the end of the term, I wish you and all the staff of the House a very merry Christmas, and send my thanks to all the staff working across education.

Esther McVey: I have met private schools in and around Tatton that are attended by my constituents' children, and they have all me told that, despite having applied for a VAT number, not one of them has received it. Will the Secretary of State explain to me what discussions she is having with the Chancellor to put this right, particularly in the light of the rushed implementation of this misguided ideological policy in January?

Bridget Phillipson: I would be happy to make sure that the point the right hon. Lady raises is looked into, but on the wider policy priority, I say to her that this party and this Government are determined to expand opportunity right across our country for the vast majority of children, who go to state schools. The Opposition may be happy to defend the indefensible, but should they wish to oppose what we are setting out, they need to say how they are going to pay for it.

T3. [901706] **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): I have been contacted by many parents who are desperate to secure a place in a special school for their child, but in Nottingham there is a severe lack of availability. While I wholeheartedly support efforts to improve SEND support in mainstream schools and to deliver an education system that is truly inclusive, it seems clear that we also desperately need an increase in the number of special school places. What steps are the Government taking in this area?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I appreciate my hon. Friend's concern. As she will know, this Government inherited a broken system from the previous Government. We want to make sure that all children with SEND receive the support they need to achieve and thrive. We have announced £740 million of high needs capital funding for next year for additional places, which will support our ambition to improve inclusivity in mainstream schools.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 was passed by Parliament prior to the election. By the end of its passage through both Houses, the Labour party had agreed in principle with the need for the Act. However, just after the election, Government sources said the Act was a Tory "hate speech charter". Now I read in the papers that the Department may commence the legislation without the tort. Can I ask the Secretary of State to clear up this mess and to tell the House what her plan is for the freedom of speech Act?

Bridget Phillipson: This Government are absolutely committed to freedom of speech and academic freedom. We want to make sure that our universities are places of intellectual challenge and rigour, where people will be exposed to views with which they may disagree. We paused commencement of the previous Government's legislation because of the serious concerns raised by very many people, including from minority groups, about how the Act would apply. We are consulting with stakeholders, and we intend to set out our position in due course.

Laura Trott: Since the Secretary of State decided to pause this legislation, gender-critical women, among others, have racked up enormous legal fees, which have caused some to remortgage their houses. Professor Jo Phoenix has said publicly that if it had been in force, the Act would have saved her that precise ordeal. Inaction has consequences, and this delay is causing harm. Will the Secretary of State accept that, and get on with implementing the legislation?

Bridget Phillipson: I do accept that academics should be free to express a wide range of views, and there will be views that people sometimes find challenging, but it also matters that we have legislation that is workable. I am afraid that the legislation the right hon. Lady's party set out just did not achieve that, and we have had to consider so many challenges raised by minority groups. The former Universities Minister herself said that she was concerned about what it would mean for Holocaust denial on campus. We need to get this right.

T4. [901707] **Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): For 14 years, Governments have criticised teachers, and this has had a dreadful effect on recruitment and retention. Will the Minister please update the House on the measures she is taking to tackle this serious problem?

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): May I, too, take this opportunity to wish a merry Christmas to all of our teachers and school support staff when they finally get to the Christmas break?

We are working at pace to recruit 6,500 new teachers. We have fully funded the 5.5% pay award, we have removed reductive headline Ofsted judgments, and we are working to reduce workloads and ensure more flexibility. We have announced a £233 million package of recruitment incentives, and we are very committed to supporting our teaching workforce.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): A new report from the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that the most deprived areas have a third fewer childcare places than the most affluent. If the Government are serious about improving school readiness among our children, will the Secretary of State look at the Liberal Democrat proposal to triple the early years pupil premium so that we can tackle the disadvantage gap when it matters most?

Bridget Phillipson: I do recognise the challenge the hon. Lady sets out and the very real challenge the Government have inherited in the provision of places. Our approach of rolling out nursery space within primary schools is crucial to creating the places that are required. There is more that we need to do. The system and sector overall require reform, and we will set out more in this area before long.

T6. [901709] **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Alison Duxbury is unable to finalise her divorce because of the delays to assessments in the teachers' pension scheme, which her husband is part of. Alison is not alone; many others are suffering serious stress and unacceptable delays. Will the Minister meet me to unlock this bureaucratic logjam?

Catherine McKinnell: I recognise the difficulties my hon. Friend has outlined. Changes to pension entitlement have caused the significant backlog in processing that we have inherited, but good progress is now being made. The Department and the administrator are focused on speeding it up. I appreciate the concerns he has raised and he might want to write to me with more detail, or a meeting could certainly be arranged.

T2. [901705] **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On a recent visit, I saw the benefit of the SEN unit in All Saints school in Sidley. Does the Minister think that SEN units have a bigger role to play, and will Ministers meet me to discuss the funding challenges such units face?

Catherine McKinnell: I recognise the issue the hon. Gentleman raises. It is important that we have the right balance between mainstream inclusion and specialist provision where it is needed. If it would be helpful for him to have a meeting to discuss specific concerns in his area, I would more than happy to arrange it.

T8. [901711] **Maya Ellis** (Ribble Valley) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on babies, I am delighted that the announcements on Thursday included a one-year continuation of the Start for Life programme, which provides funding for 75 local authorities. We would, however, very much like all authorities to be able to access this funding in future so that every child is guaranteed the best start. Is the Secretary of State willing to meet the APPG in the new year to outline her long-term vision for supporting child development at the youngest ages?

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of early support for babies. The plan for change sets out that we will improve support through pregnancy and early childhood. The Start for Life programme is the responsibility of Department of

Health and Social Care Ministers, but officials would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this important issue.

T5. [901708] **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps are under way to recruit and retain more educational psychologists so that children, including in Chesham and Amersham, do not have to wait as long as they currently are for the assessment they need?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We are working at pace to ensure that we have more professionals, along with the Department of Health and Social Care, which is also ensuring that we have the right workforce to support all children with special educational needs. I will write to the hon. Lady with specific details of the steps being taken.

T9. [901712] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): After years of failure by West Sussex county council to plan properly for secondary school places, parents in Shoreham face another year of waiting to find out if their children will have to travel a long distance for their education. Will the Minister meet me to discuss their concerns?

Catherine McKinnell: Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that there are sufficient secondary school places and that children can go to school, and travel should not be a barrier to their getting to school. I know how important this issue is for parents, and I would be happy to arrange a meeting for my hon. Friend to discuss it further.

T7. [901710] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): My constituent, 14-year-old Lewis, has been out of school for two years and his education has been disrupted for four. He is yet another child whose parents have been told by Kent county council that he must attend a particular school despite the school saying that it is unable to meet his specific educational needs. This is typical of the battle that many families I see have to go through for years, costing them time and money and causing infinite stress. Will the Minister meet me and the parents to ensure that he is one of the last children to suffer from Kent county council's continual neglect of SEN children?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady raises an important matter, which far too many people are having to raise. I would be happy to meet her not only to discuss this matter further, but to reiterate the steps we are taking to fix this broken SEND system.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): We know that good quality early years education can play a significant role in closing the disadvantage gap, yet the Government have inherited a situation in which families who live in disadvantaged areas are the least likely to be able to access good quality childcare. How will the Secretary of State ensure that access to good quality childcare and early years education is at the heart of the Government's child poverty strategy?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree strongly, and that is why, alongside additional investment, there must be reform. We will make sure that the areas that my hon. Friend identifies are addressed. I look forward to discussing them in front of the Select Committee before too long.

T10. [901713] **Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): I recently visited the excellent Haven SEND unit at Budehaven community school in North Cornwall, and I invite the Minister to visit so that it can be replicated elsewhere. Does she plan to extend the unit's funding beyond February's cliff edge, given that Cornwall council's SEND deficit is currently £12 million and counting?

Catherine McKinnell: Local authorities normally support special units in schools with funding from their high needs budget, but officials would be happy to investigate the funding arrangements for this school. Cornwall county council is being allocated a provisional amount of more than £86.6 million in the 2025-26 financial year through the high needs national funding formula, but we are happy to take away the particular issue that the hon. Gentleman raises.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Parents, teachers and students in my constituency were horrified to find out that the University of Brighton Academies Trust has been taking a whopping 20% of the Government grant meant for our local schools and education. What is the Minister doing to resolve these issues and make sure that every child in Hastings and Rye gets the best quality education?

Catherine McKinnell: I agree with my hon. Friend. Outcomes in some schools in Hastings are just not good enough. We are all determined to drive up standards. Department officials continue to work with the University of Brighton Academies Trust on that. We are committed to ending its current financial model and to collaborating with school leaders on future budget setting to ensure we can drive high and rising standards in every school, including in Hastings.¹

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Research shows that money habits are instilled in young people from the age of seven. What are the Government doing to improve financial education in schools, particularly in England, where that is not currently on the national curriculum?

Bridget Phillipson: We have launched our curriculum and assessment review to make sure that issues such as the one that the hon. Gentleman identifies are taken into account. It is a shame that we seem to hear nothing from the Opposition but negativity about the curriculum and assessment review. We are determined to make sure that all our children get a brilliant education, with high standards and strong academic outcomes, as well as the kind of life skills that he is right to identify.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): We are all keenly aware of the significant challenges that further education colleges continue to face, such as difficulties around repair agreements and funding, which

are not helped by the opportunism from the Opposition, who are responsible for the mess those colleges are in in the first place. Can the Minister tell us more about the steps she is taking to ensure that these engines for opportunity for our young people, such as Leyton sixth-form college, have the support they need to thrive?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): This Government recognise the vital role that FE teachers play in equipping learners with the skills they need to drive growth in our economy. We are totally committed, and we are keeping our eye and our finger on it. We have provided an additional £300 million for further education to ensure that young people develop the skills that this country so desperately needs.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Over the weekend, Immanuel prep in my constituency announced it was closing, citing VAT on school fees and other damaging Labour policies. Does the Secretary of State share my concern about the damage that will do to Jewish children growing up in my constituency and the surrounding area, who will be deprived of access to a Jewish education, which they richly deserve?

Stephen Morgan: The Government's fiscal inheritance is so dire that we have to take tough, but necessary decisions and take them quickly. Removing VAT exemptions from January is the right thing to do to deliver for every child across our country.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I was delighted to spend Friday afternoon with Cats Whiskers day nursery and earlier this year, I visited Tops day nursery, which is ranked ninth in the Department's top 100 apprenticeship employees. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to increase the number and quality of childcare apprenticeships?

Bridget Phillipson: I pay tribute to the providers in my hon. Friend's constituency for their work. We want to see great careers right across the early years sector from apprenticeships all the way up to graduate level. I will happily meet him to discuss that further.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reconfirm her commitment to academies and to the policy of academisation?

Bridget Phillipson: We want all schools to do well for our children and to drive high and rising standards regardless of the name above the door.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Academisation has created fragmentation in lines of accountability, leaving local authorities carrying much risk, not least when it comes to SEND provision. Will my hon. Friend look at academy governance structures to ensure that local authorities can carry that responsibility and be able to deliver for children with SEN?

1.[Official Report, 10 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 8WC.] Correction)

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Rather than obsessing about structures and names over doors, we are determined to ensure that every child in every community has a good school and that schools work together in communities with their local authorities to co-operate on place planning and admissions, with every child getting the best education and every school having high and rising standards.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): At just £952, the East Riding of Yorkshire has the lowest high needs block funding of any local authority in the country. Ministers have committed themselves to looking again at the formula so that we can have the right one. Will they please commit to doing everything they can to bring it in for the next financial year so that we do not have another year of grossly unfair and disproportionate distributions of funding?

Bridget Phillipson: The right hon. Gentleman will know that this is a complex area. It would not have been possible to make any changes to the funding formula this year, but we will look in the future at what changes might be required. I am sure that as part of that process he will make representations on behalf of his constituents.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I talk to special educational needs co-ordinators across Harlow and Essex on a regular basis, partly because my best friend is one. He tells me that a number of special educational needs co-ordinators—easy for me to say—are leaving the profession because of their high workload and the stress that it causes. What support will the Government give to ensure that special educational needs co-ordinators get the support, including mental health support, that they need?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for special educational needs in his community. We know that SENCOs perform a vital function in making sure that children and their families get the support they need to access the education they deserve. He is right that they deserve support as well. We need to encourage more people to be trained up in and understand the needs of children with special educational needs so that everybody can play their part in creating an inclusive education system.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Businesses report that cyber-attacks are increasing, as is the amount of time they have to wait to employ someone to deal with those cyber-attacks. What is the Department doing to fill that skills gap?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Member is right that there are skills gaps in cyber, digital and tech overall. That is why Skills England will drive forward our work in addressing those skills gaps as well as in ensuring that our young people have great careers in the years to come. That is one area in particular where I know there is lots of opportunity for young people to enjoy a fantastic career.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Itchen sixth-form college in my constituency was recently judged to be “outstanding” by Ofsted. Will the Secretary of

State join me in congratulating the college? Does she agree that future success requires us to sort out financial inconsistencies such as lecturers’ pay and VAT liabilities?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend identifies a number of the challenges that we have inherited as a new Government. We are working as quickly as we can to address them. We want to ensure that teachers right across the sector, whether in our schools, the FE sector or colleges, get the support, the pay and the recognition that they deserve.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): In Brighton’s non-academy sixth-form colleges, the current teacher strike action stems largely from the Government not providing the same funding to cover pay uplifts as they do for schools and academies. Will the Secretary of State urgently correct that unjustified funding anomaly?

Bridget Phillipson: At the Budget, we set out an additional £300 million for further education. The hon. Lady will know that the Government are not responsible for and play no role in setting or making recommendations about teacher pay in FE colleges. We are looking closely at sixth-form colleges too as part of this, which again is part of the challenge that we inherited from the last Government.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): I welcome this Government’s ambition to ensure that 40,000 extra children are school ready every year. However, at schools such as West End school in Oswaldtwistle in my constituency, there are no extra classrooms to make extra nursery provision available. Will the Minister consider capital funding to ensure that lots of primary schools have the opportunity to extend high quality nursery provision?

Stephen Morgan: The Government are committed to rolling out school-based nurseries. I would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those issues further.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I assure the Education Secretary that we are very positive about schooling in this country. I am sure that she will want to thank all school leaders for their work to help English schools to soar up the rankings for the programme for international student assessment and programme for international student assessment rankings—PISA and TIMMS—but will she join me in sending personal congratulations to Katharine Birbalsingh, whose approach to discipline, the curriculum and teacher-led instruction makes her school Michaela the best in the country?

Bridget Phillipson: I will always celebrate the fantastic work of our school leaders and teachers, because they are how we will drive high and rising standards across our school system. The hon. Gentleman and I probably have more in common than he realises. He might recognise these words:

“The greatest injustice in Britain today is that your life is still largely determined not by your efforts and talents but by where you come from, who your parents are and what schools you attend. This is wrong.”

They are taken from the 2017 Conservative manifesto, which he was involved in writing. This Government will right those wrongs and break the link between background—

Mr Speaker: Order. It might be easier if I say it. One side says, “It’s all their fault,” and the other says, “They’ve been in power.” That is the answer to every question.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I recently visited Heasandford primary school in my constituency, which

is in a dire state. Will the Minister meet me and Lancashire county council to see what we can do to repair the school—the biggest in Lancashire by class number—and make sure that it is fit for children’s ambitions in Burnley?

Stephen Morgan: We are committed to improving the condition of the estate through the annual funding programme. I will happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss those issues further.

Planning Committees: Reform

3.42 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on plans for the reform of planning committees.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): As the House will be aware, in our first King's Speech in July the Government announced their intention to introduce a planning and infrastructure Bill, designed to streamline the delivery of essential housing and infrastructure across the country and support sustained economic growth. We made clear at the time that an important component of that Bill would be measures to modernise the operation of planning committees.

Planning committees play a vital role in providing local democratic oversight of planning decisions. However, if we are to undo the damage that the previous Government did to housing supply in this country and deliver homes in the places that our communities need, we must ensure that they are operating as effectively as possible. As we look to develop Government policy in this area, we are determined to avoid the mistakes of previous Conservative Administrations, who were rightly criticised for bringing forward planning legislation without sufficient engagement or consultation.

We also want to ensure that the changes to the operation of planning committees that we ultimately take forward are as robust as possible, drawing on feedback from those who navigate England's planning system on a daily basis. That is why today we have published a working paper that sets out our initial thinking for modernising planning committees. This is just the latest in a series of working papers on planning reform, and it is explicitly designed to kick-start engagement before we launch a formal Government consultation on a more detailed proposition. As such, I assure Members across the House that there will be plenty of opportunity to engage with and debate these matters in the months ahead.

The working paper seeks views on three potential changes: first, a national scheme of delegation, setting out which types of planning applications should be determined at committee and which by expert planning officers. We believe that that would bring clarity and consistency to both applicants and communities about how applications are determined. Secondly, the introduction of dedicated committees for strategic development would allow members of those committees to dedicate energy to the most significant projects. Thirdly, the introduction of mandatory planning training for committee members would enable applicants to be confident in the knowledge of those making these decisions. Taken together, the changes are designed to help streamline local planning decision making, maximise the use of professional skills and judgment of trained planners, and focus the time of elected councillors on the most significant or controversial applications.

As I said a moment ago, the working paper published today is merely the start of our engagement with the sector on this important issue. It is not a firm set of confirmed proposals, and we will use discussions in the new year to

refine our approach. We will then prepare final policy proposals, on which we will launch a consultation in the usual way.

Let me finish by making it clear that the proposals that we are testing through the publication of this working paper are merely one part of a much wider set of reforms to the ailing planning system that we inherited from the previous Government. I look forward to updating hon. Members as we proceed to deliver on other aspects of the Government's ambitious housing and planning agenda.

David Simmonds: Many of us were surprised to hear the Secretary of State tell us over the weekend that there are enough homes in this country. The planning system is an area of interest to all Members and to our constituents; I know it is to you in particular, Mr Speaker, and to your constituency. Planning matters, because it impacts the look and feel of our communities. It has been the subject of numerous parliamentary questions, both at the Dispatch Box and in writing. In response to all those questions, we have been told to await the national planning policy framework. It therefore seems a discourtesy to us to hear so much about the proposed reforms to the planning system in a series of media interviews over the weekend.

Some questions emerge from this. It is clear from the Department's figures that 96% of planning applications are decided on by officers using delegated powers. That is up from 75% in 2000. It is that 4% to which the local democratic voice is so relevant. On the planning reform working paper, first, what assessment has been made of the impact on local democracy—for example, on the ability of ward councillors to call in a controversial application, or on cases in which reserved matters are approved, but then there is a breach by the developer, so the application needs to come back before a committee for further consideration and enforcement?

Given that 89% of major applications are decided within either 13 weeks or the agreed deadlines, will the full council still be able to call in major strategic applications that will have a significant impact on their area? Already, 87% of applications are granted by local authorities; will neighbourhood plans retain the legal status that enables the communities that write them to have a say on what goes on in their area? Given that 83% of minor applications are already agreed within timescale, who in the local authority will decide whether a matter is to be referred to a committee? Given the huge increase in housing planning permissions granted under the previous Government, when do the Government intend to start work on getting developers developing and builders building, rather than tinkering with a democratic system that has already delivered more than 1 million homes with consent in England?

Matthew Pennycook: I have to say, it is quite rich hearing the hon. Gentleman crow about planning permissions in the system. We are experiencing the lowest number of planning permissions and completions for a decade, as a result of the Conservatives' changes to the national planning policy framework, made in December 2023, which torpedoed supply and hit growth across this country.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the NPPF. We fully intend to bring forward a revised NPPF before the end of the year. These changes do not relate to the NPPF,

as I made clear in my initial response. We are consulting, in an initial sense, on the changes before bringing forward formal proposals for consultation alongside the planning and infrastructure Bill—another part of the Government's reform agenda.

The hon. Gentleman rightly made it clear that 96% of decisions are already made by planning officers. The other 4% of decisions, though, are incredibly important; they represent a substantial portion of total units in the planning process, because many major applications go to a planning committee for consideration. While we know that there is good practice out there, the number and type of applications that committees consider still varies widely between local planning authorities. Some committee decisions are not made in accordance with material planning considerations, and some committees repeatedly revisit or relitigate developments that have already been considered by elected members through the local plan process. We need to streamline the local planning system in order to provide the homes and places that we need, and to empower trained planning professionals to get the best use out of the system.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about neighbourhood plans. I have been very clear on several occasions in the House that the protections for neighbourhood plans in the NPPF will remain. As well as firm proposals on this proposition around modernising planning committees, we will bring forward further details about changes to the national planning policy framework in due course.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that I am passionately committed to local councils and local democracy, but does he understand the frustration that many of us feel when a planning authority democratically approves a local plan after consulting the community, but then, when an application is made to build homes, the same councillors turn down the application, despite it being consistent with the local plan? Is the Minister's main objective to try to remove that sort of decision making, which holds up the whole process, and to ensure, in consultation with the Local Government Association and others in local government, that we can find a better way forward, so that we can get the permissions to build the homes that the country badly needs?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He has huge expertise in this area from his time as Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and he is absolutely right. We have been clear that the best way for local communities to shape the decisions about what to build, where, is through local plans. It is appalling that we have inherited a situation in which less than a third of places are covered by up-to-date local plans. We need to boost that, and—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) will allow me, what we are looking at, in the changes that we are consulting on, in a soft form, through the working paper, is how we can ensure that planning committees make decisions on the most significant and controversial applications, including those that are not in line with local plans, rather than spending their time poring over decisions that have been made in an allocation framework through the local plan process. Hon. Members will see in the working paper that one of our proposals, for a national scheme for delegation, would require all applications that are in accordance with the development plan to be determined by officers.

That will free up committees to focus on controversial development that is out of step with the local plan that elected members and officers put forward after consultation with their communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): As there are 8.5 million people in England with unmet housing need, the Liberal Democrats welcome the plans for further house building. For us, the priority has to be the delivery of social homes. We need 150,000 annually, and we need housing that local people can genuinely afford. On the topic of social housing, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Let us be clear: when Whitehall takes planning decisions out of the hands of local councillors, it is taking decisions out of the hands of local people. That is undemocratic, and we would reverse that. Instead, Government should unblock the thousands of permitted homes that are not being built—for example, through “use it or lose it” permissions, by having more than just one extra planning officer per local authority, and by allowing councils to set their fees and to ringfence that income for planning departments. Will the Minister allow councils to set their application fees, and ensure that that funding is ringfenced for planning departments?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that set of questions, and I am glad that he personally welcomes housing. When it comes to his party, on this issue, as on so many others, the view you get depends on what part of the country you are in. We are absolutely committed to increasing the delivery of social and affordable homes. We have taken decisive early steps to bring that forward, including by securing an additional £500 million in the Budget for the affordable homes programme.

Until the Liberal Democrats set out how they will pay for 150,000 social rented homes a year, I find the hon. Gentleman's ambition in that area a little lacking in credibility. We are taking steps to get serious on build out—that is part of our planning agenda—but on these changes, we think it is right that planning committees should operate as effectively as possible in exercising democratic oversight, not revisit or relitigate the same decisions, and focus on applications that require planning committee member input. He is absolutely right that we need more planning capacity in the system. That is why we are making changes through the NPPF to support that, and why at the Budget the Chancellor announced a £46 million package of investment to support capacity and capability in local planning authorities.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): When I was leader of Manchester city council, I spent a large percentage of my time trying to right the wrongs of Labour and Conservative Governments in the '60s and '70s who had made a similar dash to build many, many houses. I spent my time finding ways to fund the demolition of deck-access housing. As a result, I became convinced that the solution to every problem is not more power to the centre. The people in Chorley know what is best for Chorley, Mr Speaker, just as the people in Manchester know what is best for Manchester. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he will look at the mistakes that were made in the '60s and '70s in the dash

[Graham Stringer]

for building, and ensure that we do not have really bad decisions made from the centre, or the exclusion of local councils?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is right about some of the bad decisions that were made in the past. I am a keen student of history and am well aware of some of them, and we definitely take them into account when making our own decisions. On what he said about seizing power from the centre, this is absolutely nothing of the sort. We are proposing a national scheme of delegation to provide consistency in how councils make these important decisions. That involves a national scheme of delegation, which balances vital local democratic oversight with ensuring that planning committees operate as effectively as possible. In instances where local councillors are not making the decisions and applications can be dealt with by trained local planning officers—not by me, or by officials in Whitehall—we think that is the right thing to do, in order to streamline the delivery of essential housing in parts of the country that are crying out for those homes.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There is nothing more controversial than Governments seeking to bypass local democracy. I saw that with the desire of the last Government to bypass local democracy by imposing a special development order on RAF Scampton, and I see it now with the many applications to build solar farms that are ostensibly national infrastructure projects. The present planning system was largely created by the Labour Government, and has stood the test of time. Can the Minister assure me that whatever he decides finally, we will not degrade local democracy? It is essential that people join a council, and join a planning committee, knowing that they have real powers and are not under the cosh of Government, or plans imposed by Government.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. We have to take steps to fix the ailing planning system that we have inherited. It is failing on a number of fronts, and trust and confidence in it is at a record low. As for the assertion that we have heard, for all the hyperbole from Conservative Members, we are not seizing power from the centre. We are saying to local communities, “Put an up-to-date local plan in place, and when sites are allocated through that local plan, you can be confident that they will be built out in the manner that you have specified. It is through local plans that you get your control.” However, when it comes to the decisions on specific sites, let us ensure, if we can, that elected members are directed towards the most significant and controversial applications, as opposed to some of the minor applications that involve technical reserved matters questions. I have sat on a planning committee; I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman has. In the case of those applications, the initial decision can be re-litigated and revisited, rather than the technical issues being put to us. Let us ensure that those decisions sit in the hands of trained planning professionals, and get planning committee member time focused on the applications that deserve it.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): It is good to see the Government’s recommitment to the importance of local plans. In July this year, Milton Keynes city council went through the important process of developing a local plan. During the election campaign, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), visited my home town and described the development of a local plan as “reckless”. Will the Minister reassure us that this Government do not believe that local plans are reckless, but consider them necessary for the sustainable delivery of the homes that the country needs?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I absolutely agree with him. We have a local-plan-led planning system, in which fewer than a third of areas have an up-to-date local plan, and that is unsustainable. We are absolutely determined to drive towards universal local plan coverage. The measures on which we are consulting—and I emphasise that this is a working paper; we are seeking views, and hon. Members are more than welcome to submit theirs as we refine our proposals—will reinforce and support the plan-led system by ensuring that officer and member time is focused on the applications where that is most needed. Communities can have confidence that once they have an up-to-date local plan, it can be decided what to build, and where, in accordance with the wishes of local communities and the wider national planning policy framework.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): As the Housing and Planning Minister will be aware, both Dacorum borough council and Three Rivers district council in my constituency are Lib Dem-controlled; Three Rivers has been for over 20 years. Both councils do not have an up-to-date local plan. Can the Minister advise the House about what would happen if the Government imposed a local plan on an authority? Would those decisions be delegated to officers? If so, the process would have no democratic mandate at all.

Matthew Pennycook: We have not outlined any proposals in the working paper that relate to call-ins or the takeover of local plans from the centre. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, though, that Ministers already have powers to take over a local plan in extremis; they have not been used before. We are more than willing to use all the powers at our disposal to ensure that we have up-to-date local plan coverage. If there are local authorities out there—I say this very candidly and openly to the House—that resist the changes that we are trying to make and take no steps towards putting an up-to-date local plan in place, we will consider using all the powers at our disposal. It is through local plans that we will drive sustainable housing supply in the years to come.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I welcome the mandatory training. As a former chair of a planning committee, I know that training was part of the process that we implemented, so it is good to see that it will be delivered across the board. We approved some developments multiple times on the same site, such as a maternity block in my constituency, which was then flipped and sold on to another developer. Could the Minister please tell us what steps are being taken to account for land banking or flipping sites via developers?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are good examples of training across the country. Hon. Members seemed to indicate earlier that they thought that mandatory training for councillors was in place. It is not in place. We know there are good examples out there, but provision is inconsistent, and we think that we need to take forward mandatory training to ensure that all councillors have the necessary knowledge to make the best decisions on individual applications.

On my hon. Friend's point about trading of land, she is absolutely right. There is far too much speculative development in this country. We have a dysfunctional land market. Again, I come back to the importance of up-to-date local plans. It is through up-to-date local plans that communities have the ability to shape development in their area in the best possible way in accordance with their wishes. On build-out more generally, we are considering what options might be available to us to ensure that the build-out of consented sites goes forward, alongside our new homes accelerator, which was announced a few months back.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Until September this year, I was a proud elected member of Stockport council. I made decisions on planning, because in Stockport we decide at ward level what is appropriate for each ward. If I understand the Government's suggestions correctly, the power to decide for ourselves has been taken away from Stockport council. Could the Minister confirm my understanding?

Matthew Pennycook: I am afraid to say that the hon. Lady's understanding is not correct. I encourage her to read the working paper. It is a working paper, and we are seeking initial views on a national scheme of delegation. There are three options in the working paper. I look forward to her submitting her views in full, and I will happily consider them.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I welcome the Government's new ambition on homes and note that the stated aim is to ensure that

"skilled planning officers in local authorities are given the appropriate amount of trust and empowerment."

Unfortunately, that is not the case in Middlesbrough, because the last Tory Government handed over power to the unwanted Middlesbrough Development Corporation, which totally undermined the council's planning department and instead used a private planning consultancy, at a significantly higher cost to the public purse and with a considerable loss of democratic authority. What assurances can the Minister give me that Middlesbrough will get the trust, the empowerment and, indeed, the affordable housing that it needs, and that local democratic legitimacy will be restored?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of local empowerment and of local communities shaping development in their areas—most importantly, as I have made clear in answer to several questions, through up-to-date local plans.

My hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not comment on the specifics of the development corporation in his area, but on planning officers more generally, the Government want to make sure—this is what we are

testing through the proposals in the working paper—that skilled planning officers in local authorities have the right level of trust and empowerment to resolve select applications more quickly in the service of residents and business. We also want to ensure that planning professionals are fully supported in their roles, and that their experience and skills are put to best use, which will allow members to focus on the most significant and most controversial applications, including those out of line with up-to-date local plans.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): There are a remarkable number of contradictions. The Minister says that he wants more democratic oversight while removing the democratic local voice of councillors. He said he is being decisive while also saying he has existing powers that he has not used and that this is not a firm set of proposals. He is not proposing anything around tech and improvements, while the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is giving a big speech this week on exactly that, as the centrepiece of Government change. Why does the Minister think that the way to bring clarity to the transport system and local plan is to tell people to engage with the local plan, then at the same time tell them that if they do so, the people most engaged with that, the democratically elected councillors, will be ignored if they then follow that local plan?

Matthew Pennycook: I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that, for a start, he has clearly not read the working paper. His question was a mess of contradictions. What we are clearly saying to local communities is, "Get an up-to-date local plan in place; you can then have confidence that that local plan will be delivered; you can have confidence that applications in line with that local plan will be delivered; and you can have confidence that elected planning members will be focused on the most significant and the most controversial applications, and that local planning officers in those authorities can ensure that other applications that need not go before members are determined in accordance with the local plan as well as the national planning policy framework."

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): We have had trouble with house building because the speed with which houses are built has been dictated by developers. What we need to see, when planning permission is granted, is that the developer must either use it or lose it. We cannot allow those companies to continue to land bank and use their land only when they are confident that house prices are continuing to rise. Does my hon. Friend intend to deal with those aspects of the housing market?

Matthew Pennycook: On many sites across the country there are genuine reasons, including those of viability, why sites are not built out. It is not as simple as saying that every consented site that is not being built out is being sat on deliberately by developers, but we know that land is traded speculatively. I want to reassure my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour that, as I have made clear in answer to previous questions, there are existing powers that we can consider bringing into force, and there are measures that we took forward in the consultation on the national planning policy framework that we think will help build-out, particularly on proposals around

[Matthew Pennycook]

mixed-use sites, but there is potentially more that we can do in this area and we are keeping the matter under close review.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Speaking as—until recently—the leader of a district council and a long-term member of our planning committee, I do not recognise the issues that the Minister is citing. A lot of the things he says relate to the absence of a local plan. I fully agree with that. My council has just put in place a new local plan, which is hopefully being approved right now. A better way to get more affordable housing would be to look at the way local authorities can finance the building of those houses and fix that. It would be better to allow local authorities to charge appropriate amounts to cover the costs of the planning, so that they can get the necessary planning officers, and far better to look at how many councils already do mandatory training. I hear from Liberal Democrat colleagues that they all had to do mandatory training, as I did in my council, so that is in place. I would like to see a list of how many councils do not do that. We also need to make water companies statutory consultees so that we do not hit flooding problems. Those changes will help. The problem is not in the planning process. More than 1 million applications have been allowed but not built—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we could have built a whole estate by now.

Matthew Pennycook: Indeed, Mr Speaker, and I get a strong sense that an Adjournment debate application will be coming your way on several of those issues. Let me address a number of them. The hon. Gentleman says that training is in place in most parts of the country, in which case local authorities should have no problem with mandatory training being requested by the centre, and only a small number of authorities—if it is a small number—would have to put such training in place.

The hon. Gentleman makes points on capacity and planning fees. I hope he will have seen in the recent consultation on proposed reforms to the national planning policy framework that the Government set out proposed changes to planning application fees and also sought views on the localisation of such fees.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's specific question, I would encourage him to read the working paper. Most planning committees make well considered and fair decisions most of the time, but we know that there is practice out there of planning committees making decisions that are not in accordance with material planning considerations, repeatedly revisiting and re-litigating the planning answers. We have to look at how we can streamline that process, and I encourage him to engage with that work.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): So much of the success of a local plan seems to hinge on co-production with local communities. Will the Minister describe effective models of that?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the problems we have in our planning system is that not enough people engage with applications or, in particular, with the local plan process. We need to

ensure that more people are engaged upstream in the production of local plans because, as I said, they are the best way to shape development in a particular local community. There are a number of things we can do, not least through some of the innovations coming forward as a result of the previous Government's Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which has a huge amount of potential in terms of digital planning and how it can allow communities to see spatially the type of development that might come forward in their area.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): This working paper smacks of having been thought up after a request for options to streamline the planning process. What is the evidence that what planning committees decide is the fundamental obstacle in the planning system? There is no evidence to suggest that these decisions are the problem. The problems are far wider.

The reason why the Government will not succeed in building 1.5 million homes in England and Wales between now and the general election is a far bigger problem. Will the Government produce a comprehensive assessment of all the things that delay house building in this country? We would then see how significant, or insignificant, this figure is.

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman gives the impression that I stood up today and said, "This is our solution to all the flaws of the planning system in England." This is one small part of a much wider planning reform agenda. He will know that, in our first month in office, we brought forward very significant changes to the national planning policy framework. We are committed to introducing a planning and infrastructure Bill early next year. This working paper is one small part of a larger agenda, but it is an important part, because we know that planning applications are taking far too long in particular. We need to streamline the process to ensure that we get the homes and places coming forward that our communities need.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Unlike other colleagues, I have never been on a planning committee. However, I know the effects of the current system and its failings. I know that only 19% of major decisions are made within the 13-week statutory framework, and I know that we have an absolute housing crisis in this country. I know the impact of the delay, prevarication and rampant nimbyism we saw over the past 14 years. Does the Minister agree that it is finally time to grasp these issues head-on?

Matthew Pennycook: In a word, yes. In some ways, I feel quite envious of my hon. Friend having not sat on a planning committee. It is an experience that I think everyone in the House should undergo at one point in their career. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These proposals are to test some of the measures that we are considering bringing forward in the planning and infrastructure Bill, the objective of which is to encourage better quality development that is aligned with local development plans, to facilitate the speedy delivery of the quality homes and places that our communities need, and to give applicants the certainty they need that their applications will be determined in a timely manner.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): In advance of these proposals, has the Minister made any assessment of the number of senior local authority planning officers who move on to work directly for, or as private planning consultants to, large developers? Will he consider something I would like to see done anyway, which is registers of interests, gifts and hospitality, and bringing senior planners under the wing of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, or a similar independent body, so that we can have the transparency we really need?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Lady for her suggestion. Proposals in that area are not considered as part of this working paper, but she is more than welcome to submit her views in detail on that point.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Crewe FC, a fantastic community football club in my constituency, has plans for over £1 million of investment in grassroots football facilities, but that is at risk because of delays in the Cheshire East planning department. Does the Minister agree that the Government's drive to reform planning should ensure speedier decision making, in order to deliver the crucial facilities that our communities need?

Matthew Pennycook: As I said in response to a previous question, part of the objective of the proposals set out in the working paper is to test whether they will facilitate the speedy delivery of homes and places that our communities need. My hon. Friend is right that speed is part of the challenge, but there is also a big challenge around the capacity and capability of local planning departments. We consulted on changes to application fees and localisation of such fees in the recent consultation on the NPPF. The Department has a dedicated planning capacity and capability programme that directs support at local authorities, but we hope the £46 million package of investment secured in the Budget will go some way to supporting local planning authorities with the help they need on capacity and capability. That is a hugely important part of the system, and we need to support those who want to do the right thing.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In an exchange a few moments ago, the Minister seemed to agree that this measure is designed to fight nimbyism. I understand what nimbyism means when it relates to an individual objector or a group of objectors, but when it relates to the members of a planning committee, that suggests that the Minister regards an elected body of specialist councillors as people who are saying "not in my back yard", when in fact they are considering the welfare of their communities. Would he like to think about that point again?

Matthew Pennycook: In general terms, I find the yimby versus nimby debate incredibly reductive; it does not get to heart of some of the challenges that we face with our planning system. We are not accusing elected councillors across the country of acting in a knee-jerk, nimby way. We are saying to them that there is a way to streamline the process, where we can focus their time and energy on those applications that are significant or controversial, and allow trained planning officers to make decisions in other areas, in accordance with up-to-date local plans, which are the best ways that communities have to shape development in their area.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): We are in a housing crisis. Last year, the number of planning permissions granted was the lowest in a decade. What work is the Minister undertaking to turn the page on the failure of the last Government, so that we can build the social housing that is desperately needed in places such as Portsmouth, where viability and cost pose difficulties and barriers? Will he meet me to discuss the Portsmouth local plan?

Matthew Pennycook: The evidence speaks for itself. Partly as a result of the change that the previous Government made to the national planning policy framework in December 2023, housing supply in this country has nose-dived. Permissions and completions are at their lowest in a decade—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): That is not true.

Matthew Pennycook: It is true. The Office for Budget Responsibility is projecting that supply will dip below 200,000 homes this year, and the affordable homes programme is on course to deliver between 110,000 and 130,000 affordable homes, not the original 180,000 that were allotted to it. We are taking steps to increase the supply of social and affordable homes, including using the £500 million in additional funding secured for the affordable homes programme in the recent Budget.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Labour-led Basildon borough council's new draft plan is at the regulation 18 stage, but it proposes a completely unsustainable 27,000 new properties across the borough, including 4,300 in Wickford, in my constituency, which is completely unsustainable and would involve concreting over whole swathes of our local green belt. As well as reimposing mandatory housing targets, which are an insult to local democracy, why is Labour now trying to neuter local planning committees of democratically elected councillors, taking away the say of local people, when it is desperately difficult to persuade people to vote in local elections as it is?

Matthew Pennycook: Mr Speaker, you will forgive me if I do not comment on the specifics of the local planning question, due to the quasi-judicial nature of the role of the Secretary of State in planning applications. We set out transitional arrangements in the NPPF consultation in July for how local plans at regulation 18 and 19 stage will proceed through the system, to ensure that we get up-to-date local plans through where appropriate and meet housing need in terms of the revised standard method that we have put forward.

We are determined to get these homes built. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) says that those levels of housing are unsustainable. It will be for the Planning Inspectorate to decide whether the local plan is sound, but I do not take issue in any way with the ambition that the local authority is showing. We have an acute and entrenched housing crisis in this country. Every week in my advice surgery—I am sure that his is the same—people come to me who are desperately in need of houses. The 1 million homes that the previous Government built in the last Parliament are not enough. We will build 1.5 million homes over the next five years.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Two weekends ago, while knocking on doors, I met a mother who lives with her two adult children. Both those children have professional jobs and earn decent salaries, yet cannot afford their own home, so they are stuck living back in the family home while they save up the money that they need. The housing crisis that the Government inherited has ended the dream of home ownership for too many young people. Will the Minister set out what more we can do to ensure that the dream of home ownership is open to everyone in my constituency?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I say, we inherited an acute and entrenched housing crisis, with 1.3 million people languishing on social housing waiting lists and a generation locked out of home ownership. To their shame, the Conservative Government passed on a situation where 150,000 homeless children are in temporary accommodation as we speak. We have to build the homes that our people need, and we are determined to do so.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on flooding and flooded communities, and the MP for a constituency that suffers from surface water flooding as well as river flooding, I am concerned that the proposals will divert decision making away from those with the greatest local knowledge. When a flooding area is drained, the water has to go somewhere else, and where it goes is critical to the people living in the surrounding area. Can the Minister reassure me that the proposals will not dilute the importance of local knowledge in making critical decisions about draining and flooding when we build?

Matthew Pennycook: I can reassure the hon. Lady on that point. The proposals will operate within the context of a national planning policy framework that has very clear requirements in relation to flooding. We are in no way removing local expertise and knowledge from the system; either experienced and trained local planning officers or locally elected authority members should make the decisions, but we have to ensure that they are making the right ones, and that their energy is focused in the right way, to streamline the decisions that we need. We heard the statistics on how planning applications are not progressing through the system at a timely pace. We need to turn things around.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald), on ensuring that the planning authority for Middlesbrough sits within Middlesbrough. Young families in Teesside are desperate to get on the housing ladder, yet last year the number of new homes given planning permission fell to a 10-year low. Can the Minister reassure the House of the steps that he will take to ensure that homes are built and that we get Britain building again?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: permissions have fallen sharply, in part because of changes that the previous Government made to the national planning policy framework, which gave local authorities myriad excuses to bring forward plans that were below their nominal target, although it remained in place. We have got to oversupply permissions into the system,

which is precisely why the proposed changes in our consultation on the NPPF would make 370,000 the standard method total envelope. That is how we will build 1.5 million homes over the next five years.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister said that this country has plenty of houses. If that is true, can the Minister explain why the Government are imposing an 82% increase in the housing target for Bromsgrove district?

Matthew Pennycook: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we consulted on a revised standard method that we think meets the scale of the ambition required to build the homes that our people need across the country. We realise that it will put pressure on those areas that need to increase their targets. We have put forward proposals on how support will be put in place, but that is the level of ambition that we need to meet an acute and entrenched housing crisis, the consequences of which I have set out.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister was at pains to say this weekend that nature recovery could happen hand in hand with the ambitious planning target she set. The Environmental Audit Committee is looking at the matter. Our opening inquiry is into the environmental impact of the plans being set out by the Minister. Will the training of planning committee members cover matters such as renewable energy, floodplains and renewable transport to ensure that new planning applications do not negatively impact the environment?

Matthew Pennycook: On mandatory training, we are considering a wide range of implementation options. We are keen to work with all stakeholders. I encourage my hon. Friend in his capacity as Committee Chair to put his views into the consultation—we want to determine the best way forward. On nature more generally, we are clear that there is a win-win to be had. The status quo is not working. Nature recovery is not proceeding in the strategic way that is possible. Development is not coming forward; it is being held up and deterred. If there is a win-win that does not involve a reduction in environmental protections, we want to bring it forward, and that is what we are looking to do in the planning and infrastructure Bill next year.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The reform represents a loss of control when local communities such as mine in the lakes and the dales are desperate for more control. With over 90% of the homes in some of our villages being second homes, we are crying out for the Minister to bring in a change of use for planning for second homes so that we can limit the numbers in those communities. Will he look at doing that in the coming days?

Matthew Pennycook: I refute entirely the hon. Gentleman's claim that the changes represent a loss of control. I encourage him to read the paper, which is about ensuring that decisions are taken by the right local, experienced—professional or elected—members as is appropriate. He and I have had this conversation about second homes many times before. He knows that we are looking and are interested in what additional powers we can give local communities to bear down on

the negative impacts of excessive concentrations of short-term lets and second homes. We want to give local communities more power to tackle some of those problems, not less. The proposals in the working paper are in line with that general sentiment.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his work on this and other areas to boost growth across the country for families in my constituency and elsewhere. I note that this weekend the Leader of the Opposition met her Canadian Conservative counterpart—a Conservative who has embraced planning reform and pro-growth measures and who is gaining rapidly in the polls, as far as I can see. Does he agree that it is interesting to see Conservative Members taking an entirely different approach, opposing sensible changes that would support growth in this country and sticking with chaos in the planning system, rather than stability, which is the foundation for economic growth?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is right. These are sensible, proportionate changes to streamline the delivery of housing across the country—housing that we desperately need. If the Conservatives want to put their heads in the sand and resist reform in this area, all they will be doing is digging their long-term electoral grave. The people of this country want good homes and good neighbourhoods to live in. That is what we are determined to bring forward.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Minister speaks of mandatory training for councillors, but it has been tried before. It sounds like an effort by central Government to make councillors think more like planning officers, rather than be representatives of their local community. Those of us who have served on local authorities know full well that there are frequently recommendations from officers to approve major schemes, which, in the wider context—infrastructure, schools, GPs and so on—planning committees have refused. Can the Minister assure us that they would still have discretion to turn down applications, even if the recommendation from officers was to approve them?

Matthew Pennycook: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to engage with the proposals set out in the working paper. Nothing is definite, nothing is finite; these are our initial views, which we want to test, and I welcome his contribution to that. We are saying in particular that, yes, elected members should be taking decisions on the most significant and controversial applications, but for minor reserved matters and technical issues on which skilled local planning officers can come forward and make decisions, that is helpful and appropriate to streamline the planning system locally.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): Residents in towns and villages across my constituency want an efficient and accountable planning system. Could the Minister set out in more detail how he sees these plans interacting with processes around master planning and the negotiation of planning conditions?

Matthew Pennycook: I encourage my hon. Friend to read the working paper. He is welcome to submit his views on the potential interaction of these proposals with master planning and planning conditions. We have

not set out specific proposals for those areas in the working paper, but I am more than happy to take his views into account.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I was never brave enough to serve on a planning committee during my 10 years as a local councillor—there are just not enough hours in the day. There are a range of views on this. I have some sympathy with the notion that we need to speed up the delivery of new homes—we have a housing crisis, and it is important that we do that—but does the Minister accept that, with the streamlining he is talking about, one new planning authority simply will not cut it?

Matthew Pennycook: The 300 planning officers that we are working to bring through the system with apprenticeships and training are just one part of the solution to address the real capacity and capability constraints that local planning departments face. I have already outlined, as I hope the hon. Gentleman heard, the £46 million of investment allocated in the Budget to help local authorities with planning capacity and capability. As I said, we have also consulted on proposals for the potential localisation of fees. The 300 planners are one element of how we want to support local planning authorities to get capacity in the system, so that they can make decisions at pace and in a timely manner.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government are consulting on the creation of smaller targeted planning committees specifically for strategic development. Ebbsfleet Garden City in my constituency shows the value of strategic development. The new settlement is expected to grow from 5,000 to 15,000 homes over the next decade. Notwithstanding key challenges—including the need for better access to decent bus services and, in my view, for the Elizabeth line to be extended to Ebbsfleet—the way that the community is being developed shows the importance of planning for place rather than for individual developments. Will the Minister consider joining me on a visit to see how the Government could, for their plans for a generation of new towns, learn from Ebbsfleet's lessons?

Matthew Pennycook: I think I am owed a visit to Ebbsfleet at some point, so I will happily take that up with my hon. Friend outside the Chamber. I am glad that he mentions strategic planning committees—one of the changes that we have put forward in the working paper and would like views on. We think that they should cover, in theory, large-scale allocated regeneration or industrial sites, including urban extensions or opportunity areas—large sites in local communities that could benefit from a more streamlined process. A smaller group of elected councillors with the expertise and knowledge about a specific site could make decisions about it, rather than all such proposals being taken to wider planning committees.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Is it not the case that the Government have realised that the mandatory top-down targets they came up with are now unachievable, and that, in their panic, they have come up with a policy that will undermine local democratic voices and take people away from, not closer to, the democratic process?

Matthew Pennycook: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman's definition of "panic" is, but these are proposals that we set out in the King's Speech and said we would bring forward—that was in July. I am not sure how that constitutes panic, but he might give me a lesson in that.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Some 47% of all the casework my office processed last week was regarding housing, or lack thereof. We absolutely must build 1.5 million new homes in this country if we are to solve the housing crisis and restore the dream of home ownership. I have certainly known councillors to oppose housing developments because they worry that the necessary infrastructure—the schools, roads, GP appointments and so on—will not come with it. What reassurances can my hon. Friend give that, either as part of these smaller reforms around committees or as part of the broader reforms we are bringing in, we will absolutely make sure that we build the necessary infrastructure alongside the necessary houses?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. To return to an earlier question, there are a small number of people out there who are out-and-out nimbys—as we might put it—who will resist development of any kind in their area. There is a much wider group of people in our communities across the country who want to see better, infrastructure-led development. That is something we are taking forward, not least through changes consulted on in the NPPF, but we know there is more work to do in this area. I would be more than happy to speak to my hon. Friend about what more we can do.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is not local planning authorities that stop house building, but land supplies and land banking, as we have already heard this afternoon. In Bath and north-east Somerset alone, something like 2,000 homes have received planning permission but have not been built yet. Should the Government not concentrate on land banking rather than threatening to destroy a vital part of local democracy, and why is land banking not part of the Minister's consultation paper?

Matthew Pennycook: It is not either/or. We have to have more permissions going into the system and more timely planning decisions made in accordance with material planning considerations and in a consistent way, not relitigating or revisiting decisions that have been made in outline. However, we also absolutely have to take action on land supply and build-out, and I have made clear in answer to previous questions that we are giving the matter further thought.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents often complain about the amount of time it takes for a plan to go from paper to the end product. In fact, it is a conversation I often have with my best hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft). [HON. MEMBERS: "Aww!"] I need some brownie points back.

Can you tell me—[*Interruption.*] Can the Minister tell me how these plans can speed up that process for my constituents in Harlow?

Matthew Pennycook: It is progress, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We do need to speed up the process of local plan development. In a way that the previous Government never did, we are going to adhere to the timelines we are setting for local plan development—for new-style local plans to come forward—and we need to ensure that individual planning applications are made in a timely manner, within the set timelines, to give certainty to the sector that what they bring forward can be built out if they put an application in.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May I say gently to the Minister that he has been passed a bit of a dud here? I think that experienced Labour Members know that, which is why not a single long-standing Member on the Minister's Benches has stood up to defend this specific policy this afternoon. Is that because Labour Members, like most MPs, know that the local planning committees they have been involved in and seen make important decisions on a regular basis? They cannot be replaced by planning officers, because those officers are not embedded in local communities. Does the Minister really think that planning officers can replace local councillors on important matters such as this?

Matthew Pennycook: I say to the hon. Gentleman that 96% of planning application decisions are already made by planning officers. What we are saying is that there is a way to streamline the system that we want to test views on, which will ensure that the most significant and controversial applications still come to elected members, but that we get the full use out of trained planning officers, who are embedded in their local communities and are cognisant of what a local plan requires.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I, too, am happy to speak with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) concerning my planning issues, but I am hoping that the Minister can answer the question too. Tory-led Tonbridge and Malling borough council has allowed predatory development in Burham, Eccles and Wouldham, precisely because it has not delivered a local plan over many years. Does the Minister agree that we need firm timetables for the delivery of local plans that are robust and listen to local concerns, but also that training should be put in place for appeals so that taxpayers in those local areas are not burdened with fines?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. At the moment, the system incentivises allowing speculative development to come forward and go to the Planning Inspectorate on appeal, because then the local authority or local council members are not responsible for the decision. We have to ensure that we have better, up-to-date local plan coverage, which is the best way to shape development in the area. Less speculative development on unallocated sites will therefore come forward, with more allocated and planned development through the local plans system, but with streamlined and timely decisions. That is what we are aiming for, and this working paper is but a small aspect of that wider agenda we are taking forward.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Some 57% of East Devon is made up of national landscapes, previously known as areas of outstanding natural beauty. I welcome the fact that these areas are protected from

housing and industrial development, but for planning committees that have to meet the Minister's targets, national landscapes compress the area that remains, which can be devastating for flood-prone villages such as Feniton. How are these reforms going to help people who are seeing housing targets concentrated on their village because they live near a national landscape?

Matthew Pennycook: I hope the hon. Gentleman is aware that in those areas—he highlights very real problems about the unavailability of data to shape local targets across areas where there are such protected places—the Planning Inspectorate will test whether a local plan is sound, and will make a judgment about whether such hard constraints make a difference to the allocations the local area needs to bring forward. I am more than happy to have a conversation with the hon. Gentleman about the specifics of development in his area if he would find that helpful.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers. He has put forward some very positive ideas to advance housing development, and that must not be ignored by anybody in this House. Has he had the opportunity to have any discussions with the devolved Administrations, bearing in mind the UK-wide need for reform of planning, no matter where it is, to allow for affordable housing, business premises, expansion and, vitally, the need to increase and attract manufacturing production capabilities for our economic growth and community standards, and to restore confidence for home ownership?

Matthew Pennycook: Can I say that I always welcome a question from the hon. Member, not least because it signals the end of an urgent question?

I would say to the hon. Member that my ministerial colleagues in the Department and I regularly meet our counterparts from the devolved authorities to learn lessons about what is different, but also about what is similar and about some of the challenges we face in a shared way across this United Kingdom.

Syria

4.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on Syria. Over less than a fortnight there has been an extraordinary change. What began as an opposition offensive in north-western Syria quickly became a headlong retreat by pro-Assad forces and, over the weekend, the fall of his murderous regime. On 30 November, the regime withdrew from Aleppo; on 5 December, Hama; on 6 December, Daraa and Homs; and on 7 December, Damascus.

As this Government came into office, some in the international community and some in this House asked whether we would re-engage with Assad. His Russian and Iranian allies have long championed him, last year he returned to the Arab League, and increasingly other Governments were also starting to step up their presence in Damascus. This Government choose not to re-engage. We said no because Assad is a monster. We said no because Assad was a dictator whose sole interest was his wealth and his power. We said no because Assad is a criminal who defied all laws and norms to use chemical weapons against the Syrian people. We said no because Assad is a butcher with the blood of countless innocents on his hands. We said no because Assad was a drug dealer, funding his regime through Captagon and illicit finance, and we said no because he was never ever going to change.

There were those who used to call Assad “the lion of Damascus.” Now we see the reality: Assad is the rat of Damascus, fleeing to Moscow with his tail between his legs. How fitting he should end up there. We see streets of Syrians cheering his demise, tearing down his statutes and re-uniting with loved ones who had been disappeared. We have long hoped to see him gone and welcome the opportunity this brings for the people of Syria.

Assad's demise is not just a humiliation for him and his henchman; it is a humiliation for Russia and Iran. Iran's so-called axis of resistance is crumbling before our eyes and all Vladimir Putin has got from his attempt to prop up Assad for more than a decade is a fallen dictator filing for asylum in Moscow. He says he wants to return Russia to its imperial glory, but after more than 1,000 days he has not subjugated Ukraine. Putin's fake empire stops short just a few miles outside Donetsk. I have no fear of it, only disgust.

Of course, our revulsion at Assad, his henchmen and those who propped him up must not blind us to the risks of this moment. Assad's demise brings no guarantee of peace. This is a moment of danger as well as opportunity for Syrians and for the region. The humanitarian situation in Syria is dire, with almost 17 million people in need. Millions are refugees still, largely in neighbouring Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan. Seeing so many start to return to Syria is a positive sign of their hopes for a better future now that Assad is gone, but a lot depends on what happens now. This flow into Syria could quickly become a flow back out, which would potentially increase the numbers using dangerous, illegal migration routes to continental Europe and the United Kingdom.

Syria has proven to be a hotbed of extremism. The House will know that the group whose offensive first pushed back the regime, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—or HTS, as it

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is now being called—are a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK as an alias of al-Qaeda. That should rightly make us cautious. Thus far, HTS have offered reassurances to minorities in Aleppo, Hama and Damascus. They have also committed to co-operating with the international community over monitoring chemical weapons. We will judge HTS by their actions, monitoring closely how they and other parties to this conflict treat all civilians in areas they control.

The UK and our allies have spent over a decade combating terrorism in Syria. Daesh remains one of the most significant terrorist threats to the UK, our allies and our interests overseas. We take seriously our duty as a Government to protect the public from this and other terrorist threats.

Amid this uncertainty, the Government have three priorities, first and foremost of which is protecting all civilians, including, of course, minorities. For more than a decade, Syria has been racked by terrible sectarian violence. We continue to do what we can to provide humanitarian support wherever we can. The UK has spent over £4 billion on the Syrian crisis to date. UK-funded mobile medical units already provide emergency services across northern Syria. Last week, we gave a further £300,000 to the White Helmets and today the Prime Minister has announced an additional £11 million of humanitarian support for Syrians.

The second priority is securing an inclusive, negotiated political settlement, as I discussed with the UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, yesterday. This is how the Syrian people can begin to chart a path to a united and peaceful Syria.

The final priority is preventing escalation into the wider region. For more than a year, the middle east has been in the grip of a series of interlocking conflicts, which threatened to become an even more catastrophic war; and in Syria itself, Russia and Iran have kept Assad's regime on life support. If we are to achieve a better future for Syrians, we should let Syrians themselves determine their future.

We must learn another lesson from this crisis, too. Illicit finance was a fundamental part of Assad's playbook, and it is part of Putin's playbook and the playbook of dictators and criminals around the world. This hurts ordinary people in our own country and people in Syria. It drives up crime and drives up house prices here in the UK. That is why today I am announcing £36 million in new funding for the National Crime Agency on anti-corruption, a new anti-corruption champion in Margaret Hodge and new sanctions on those using the illicit gold trade. Previous Governments have neglected that fight; for this Government, it is a mission-critical issue.

With events moving so quickly, the Government have been taking every available opportunity to underline our priorities. Today, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister is in the region visiting the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Over the weekend, I have discussed the situation with my Turkish, Israeli, Emirati and Jordanian counterparts, as well as the UN envoy. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has also just come back from the region, having attended the Doha forum and the Manama

dialogue. Whatever the coming days bring, I reassure the House that our intense diplomatic engagement will continue.

Assad's victims can be found all over the world. Many have found sanctuary here in the UK over the years, including film-maker Waad al-Kateab. As she said,

“we have hope to get our country back”.

The UK stands by Syrians like Waad and by Assad's victims across the world. In the face of uncertainty and new dangers, we will secure the UK against terrorism and illegal migration, while helping Syrians to achieve a better future. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

4.51 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his statement. The Conservative Government called for President Assad to go more than a decade ago, and few will shed any tears at this vile tyrant's removal from office. He bears responsibility for countless deaths, the torture of his opponents, the use of chemical weapons and repression on a horrendous scale. Half a million people have died as a result of his abhorrent actions and this conflict. We all remember the shocking images, day after day, of the barbaric impact of this conflict, and the debates in this House, including the indecision of the west in responding to chemical weapon attacks, which should weigh heavily on our conscience.

While Assad may have sought sanctuary in Russia, we look to the Foreign Secretary to explain what steps will be taken to gather evidence of the crimes his reprehensible regime is responsible for and the actions being taken to bring him to face justice. In view of the situation in Syria, what is the Government's assessment of the implications for the Syrian resettlement programme? Can he confirm that despite Assad fleeing to Russia to claim asylum, there will be no asylum claims from former members of the Assad regime in this country, many of whom will be associated with human rights abuses?

As the Foreign Secretary said, what happens next is critically important for the civilians of Syria, who have endured so much trauma and tragedy, and for the wider region. Syrians need to be protected by those now controlling territory. That means the protection of all communities, groups and minorities. The House must speak with one voice on that, and some will ask what the UK can do and what we should or should not do. There are no easy answers in the days ahead, but it is profoundly in our national interest that we take whatever action we can, including with our partners, to counter any further instability in Syria.

Like Ministers, I was in the region this weekend discussing the situation with some of our key and crucial partners. Given the large porous borders, violence, insurgency and flow of weapons in the region, can the Foreign Secretary give details of the work being undertaken to strengthen and secure the borders of neighbouring countries? There is a significant risk of a power vacuum in Syria, which could lead to a breakdown of law and order and a proliferation of criminal activities, including the smuggling of weapons and drug production on an

industrial scale. Will the Foreign Secretary give an update on the actions being taken to monitor and respond to those criminal activities? Will he also comment on the risk to our security from foreign terrorist fighters being freed from prisons? Will he give his assessment of the risk of the state's weapons, including potential chemical weapons, falling into the control of those who would cause us harm and threaten our security?

Instability can fuel a rise in extremism, and not only in Syria. There is a risk that ISIS will seek to exploit the present situation; this is also an issue at home. Will the Foreign Secretary inform us whether a cross-Government review of security and defence implications, including terrorism risks, is under way? To what level can he share—I appreciate that he might not be able to do so fully in the House—what discussions are under way with our intelligence partners to counter extremists and security threats from the region?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's historical links to al-Qaeda and their ideology are well known, so they have been proscribed for good reason. Will the Foreign Secretary give a timetable for the reported review of HTS and share the details of the legal mechanism that he will use for that review? Will he give assurances that the Government, with their partners, will be considering the potential threat that HTS pose immediately both to Syria and the region, as well as to our own interests? Security should always be the No. 1 consideration for us all, and we should not forget where this group originally came from. We need to be looking not just at their words but at their actions.

For years, the Assad regime was bailed out by the Russians, the Iranians and Hezbollah, but with Russia now focused on its illegal invasion in Ukraine and with Iran's presence in the region depleted, will the Foreign Secretary give the Government's assessment of how this change in Syria will affect the dynamics in the time ahead? What is the strategy for dealing with Iran, which still wants a foothold in Syria to exploit and funnel the misery that we have seen for too long? While we must work towards a better future for Syria, I hope that the Foreign Secretary will agree that the Government must remain alert and prepared for the risks and threats that could still emerge.

Mr Lammy: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her remarks. Last week, she was in touch with her concerns about what was taking place, and we were able to correspond. I am grateful for the manner in which we have been able to engage on this very serious issue.

The shadow Foreign Secretary rightly raised the terrible human rights records of Russia and Iran in backing this grim, brutal regime. She is absolutely right that they should be held to account for their actions. She will know that we do not have a diplomatic presence in Syria at this time, and indeed the Syrians do not have a diplomatic presence here in the UK, so recording these actions is not straightforward. However, as she would expect, we continue to work with non-governmental organisations and civil society to support them in their efforts. We will see over the coming days and weeks how they can both record and hold to account those who kept Syria under this brutal regime not just for the last 13 years, but in the years before that under the regime of Assad's father.

The shadow Foreign Secretary raised Syrian resettlement. Let me say that that is premature. The House has sought on a cross-party basis to support the humanitarian needs of Syrians; indeed, she would have seen that in her previous role in government. We recognise the displacement next door in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and neighbouring countries, and we will continue to support people in those refugee camps and through the humanitarian aid that we support in-country at this time.

The shadow Foreign Secretary raised the tremendous issues on the ground. We are all rightly concerned about increased terrorism that might engulf the country, which has different sections, communities, minorities and regions—not just HTS, as has been reported in the papers. Against that backdrop, a Cobra has been convened to fully understand these issues across Government. It would not be right to comment on intelligence matters at this time, but she will understand that the Government are active, as she would expect us to be.

The shadow Foreign Secretary is right about the threat not just of terrorism but of illicit drugs. Having just come back from the region, I am sure that she will have heard Gulf allies raise the issue of Captagon and illegal drugs that also propped up Assad's regime and flooded into Gulf countries. We continue to monitor that. None of us wants Syria to become like Libya next door—fractured and vulnerable to different terrorist groups. We will do all we can. That is why I spoke to the UN envoy yesterday—I will continue to stay in close dialogue with him—and to Jordan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and others. The UK will do all it can to support this new representative process that has the people of Syria at its heart. We want the jubilation to continue, and not be replaced by another bloody and brutal regime.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Across the House we all celebrate the end of this terrible regime, but the very last thing that the Syrian people want, as my right hon. Friend said, is for one tyrant to be replaced by another, but with an Islamic flag. There is another way, but it will not be easy.

I am glad to hear that my right hon. Friend has begun talking to the UN special representative, because Syrians have been working on other plans—other constitutions and laws—over a long period, under the auspices of the United Nations. What is desperately needed now is to ensure that inclusive transitional arrangements are put in place that can take Syria into a brighter world, with the political system that the long-suffering Syrian people need and deserve, to give them an extraordinary, multi-ethnic, multi-background country. I hope that that is our priority and that we do not simply step back and say, "Oh well, what can we do?"

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to ensure that Druze, Alawites, Christians, as well as Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and Kurds, have a place in this vast, ancient and important country, and that civilian life is protected. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for

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Lincoln (Mr Falconer) spoke to representatives of civil society just yesterday, and why I was discussing what happens now. For example, Iran supplied the oil to Syria. Who will supply that oil now? We must find ways in which public officials in Syria can be paid so that they can do that job. Over the coming hours we desperately need to get policing back in Syria, so that there is not widespread disorder. For all of those reasons, my right hon. Friend is right that we must work with civil society and local partners.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for early sight of his statement. The fall of the Assad regime is momentous for the millions of Syrians who have suffered under his brutal rule. The al-Assad dynasty were despots, who used chemical weapons against their own people. The images emerging today from Saydnaya prison illustrate the lengths that the regime took to murder, torture and silence its opponents. What steps are being taken to ensure that both Bashar and his brother Maher al-Assad face justice for the crimes that they have committed?

These developments create immediate strategic challenges for the UK. Will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that the UK is taking urgent action with our allies to identify, locate and secure the stockpiles of chemical weapons in Syria? What assessment can he offer of how this change will impact Russian military capabilities, particularly in respect of its bases at Latakia and Tartus?

There is joy for many liberated Syrians today. This has been a national process of liberation—it is not that of just one group. The international community must learn the lessons of other regime changes and seek to support a process of reconciliation and transition that is led by the Syrian people, and not imposed from outside. Will the Foreign Secretary say in a little more detail how the UK will support an inclusive national process that leads to a fresh constitution, and, in due course, free and fair elections? Will he reassure the House that any recognition of a new Government in Syria will depend on sustained evidence that political, minority and human rights are being protected?

The Foreign Secretary is right that the displacement of civilians from Syria under Assad has deepened the need for humanitarian support in the region. He mentions £11 million in emergency funding, but the drop in humanitarian and other aid to Syria from the UK from 2016 to 2022 was £289 million. Does he therefore agree that there is an urgent need to restore the UK's aid budget to help displaced people in their home countries, so they have less need to flee overseas?

Assad has fallen. We should act swiftly to support the UK's strategic interests in the region, and we must do all we can to ensure that what rises in his place represents all the Syrians who yearn to live peacefully, side by side with their neighbours.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that Russia and Iran must be held to account for the way they propped up this regime and supported a man who

used chemical weapons on his own population. I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomes the further sanctions that I announced, and the appointment of Baroness Hodge to lead across Government on issues of illicit finance. We will, of course, work with others, including the French, on the actions they have brought.

The hon. Gentleman raises, importantly, the issue of stockpiles of chemical weapons. He will have seen that Julani has been clear that he will not use chemical weapons, and that he will work with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons on that issue, and we will monitor that very closely. Any use of chemical weapons would be grievous, and the international community would have to come together to do all we could to support the Syrian people.

The hon. Gentleman also asks what more can we do. At this point in time, the important thing is to work with the key countries in the region, particularly neighbours and Arab partners, and work closely with our E3 partners and the current and incoming US Governments. That is the key combination to doing all we can to support Syria at this time.

I mentioned the real concerns about disorder and energy supply and oil, and how we support the public sector to move forward in the appropriate manner, ensuring they are paid so that people can do their job. The hon. Gentleman raises the point about aid, and I think we should reflect on something: were the British people and this Parliament, and Parliaments before it, not united in supporting Syria with a record amount of sums—more than any other country in the world—just imagine where Syria would be today, notwithstanding the number of displaced peoples and the challenges that currently exist.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Since 28 November, almost a million Syrians, most of them women and children, have been displaced internally due to the recent violence. More than 7.2 million Syrians are internally displaced and around 6.2 million are long-term refugees, mostly in neighbouring countries. The Foreign Secretary is right to say that Assad's fall could allow millions of refugees to finally return home, but what comes next could also escalate the country's displacement crisis. Will he tell us more about what steps he is taking with our partners on the worst-case scenario, and will he commit to continuing, and indeed increasing, our support for host refugee countries, for example, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises these issues with tremendous experience. She will know that Syria faces the highest number of displaced people internally, and that results in various pressures. Of course, if chaos or further violence were to ensue over the coming days, there would be further displacement within the country. She rightly raises the issues for neighbouring countries, all of which have been very keen to speak to me and this Government about the pressures that they would face from further displacement. I reassure her that I have discussed that, particularly with Turkey and Jordan at this time, and they want to work with us to make what is coming in Syria work as best it can for the local population.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Syria now presents a toxic mix. It is a large, heavily armoured but now ungoverned country. There are a range of militia groups affiliated to both state and non-state actors. It has a number of fragile neighbours, and we are at a fork-in-the-road moment. Rather than discuss talking about Syria with neighbours, what specific action will the UK Government take to ensure that we maximise the chance of success and minimise the chance of failure? For example, will we re-establish a diplomatic presence in Damascus, and if so, on what timescale? In the period before the inauguration of President-elect Trump, what action will we take with the American Administration to make sure that there is not a hiatus before the Trump Administration take formal office?

Mr Lammy: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that, of course, we are talking to the American Administration. I know that when he was Foreign Secretary, he tried to move quickly, but announcing within 24 hours that we are reopening an embassy in Syria would be hasty. The pressing issue at this time is humanitarian aid and working with partners on the issues around energy and order that all are raising with us. We will continue to reflect on our ongoing diplomatic relations with Syria. He will recognise, too, from his time in office, that we have particular concerns about the north-eastern corridor in Syria and real concerns relating to counter-terrorism and Daesh, which is of course No. 1 in the UK's considerations.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I welcome everything in the Foreign Secretary's statement, and he is right that we must not be blind to the risks of this moment. I want to ask him about two groups. First, what is his hope in the future process for the millions of Syrians who have fled Syria over the past decades? Also, the Kurdish community is one of the largest ethnic communities without a state, and I wonder what hope he has of engaging them in this process for the future.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to raise the displaced people, many of whom are beginning that journey back home. The important thing is that they go home to a country that continues to fuel the hope in their hearts and that can cope with the new increased population that will no doubt demand public services.

My hon. Friend raised the subject of the Kurdish minority group who are also in the country. As I have said, and as the United Nations envoy has said, it has to be an inclusive country with a place for everyone. However, my hon. Friend will recognise that in that north-eastern corridor we work with all partners, but keep a careful eye on anything that comes anywhere close to terrorism.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we should not be surprised that one war criminal, President Putin, is now sheltering another, Assad? He will be aware that substantial assets owned by Assad or those linked to him are frozen in this country. Will he consider, in due course, whether we might use those for the benefit of the people of Syria?

Mr Lammy: Yes, absolutely. The right hon. Gentleman is right. We look at some of the horrors in the world—Syria, of course, but also Sudan, not far away, and Ukraine—and we see behind them the hand of Putin. That is why we must do all that we can to hold him to account for the tyranny that he is raining across the world.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): A few days ago I met Sawsan Abou Zainedin of Madaniya, a Syrian non-governmental organisation. She speaks powerfully of the shared responsibility of Syrians to build an inclusive state governed by law and citizenship. As they do that, will the Foreign Secretary commit himself to increasing UK support for Syrian civil society? Will he also increase support for human rights experts, including the UN, as they document the horrific crimes that have been committed against Syrian civilians and work to bring to justice those responsible?

Mr Lammy: The £11 million that I announced earlier does, of course, include further support for civil society, which is vital at this time.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Today my thoughts are with Bashar Helmi and Mounzer Darsani and their families, and with all the other Syrian refugees who escaped Assad's brutality and resettled on the Isle of Bute. Their hope, and the hope of all the people of Syria, will be that Syrians are now able to secure the peaceful future that they want, rather than Syria becoming a battlefield in another's proxy war. How would the Foreign Secretary explain and legally justify the fact that the Syrians whom he mentioned, who were on the street cheering the demise of Assad, having waited five decades to be free of him, were, on day one, on the receiving end of a massive Israeli airstrike?

Mr Lammy: I spoke to my Israeli counterpart yesterday, and it is right to understand that there are legitimate security concerns for Israel, particularly in the context of a country that has housed ISIS, Daesh, and al-Qaeda. I wish it were as simple as the hon. Gentleman seems to think it is. For all the reasons that I have given, we want an exclusive society that supports everyone, but none of us can have any truck with terrorist groups.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On the demise of Assad's regime in Syria, my thoughts are with the Syrian people, who have been left to pick up the pieces after his barbaric actions, including his use of chemical weapons. No doubt, having propped up his brutal rule for more than a decade, both Putin and the Iranian leadership are now nursing their bloody noses.

Peace and stability will be foremost in everyone's mind, and I understand that the Government are urgently reviewing the lifting of the terrorism proscription of Syrian rebel groups, but surely there must be an undertaking beforehand that the rights of women and minorities will be secured. Following the recent reports of Israeli strikes against chemical weapons depots in Syria, what measures are being taken, in collaboration with our international partners, to ensure that those are made secure and do not cause harm to civilians?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the Chair of the Defence Committee. He is right to mention the importance of women, and I reassure him that the funds that we are making available will absolutely support women. He mentions proscription. The situation on the ground in Syria is very fluid. Our priority at this time is the safety of Syrian civilians, but let me be absolutely clear: we do not comment on proscription, for good reason, but we should recognise that al-Qaeda has killed hundreds of British citizens in barbaric attacks spanning decades. That was the original reason why HTS were proscribed.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I have never regretted my vote in favour of military action in 2013, and I certainly welcome the fact that President Assad has been brought down. I welcome what the Foreign Secretary has to say on humanitarian aid, but there are myriad UN Security Council resolutions in place on humanitarian aid, and on rebuilding Syria in all its forms. What role does the Foreign Secretary see the UN—and indeed those Security Council resolutions—playing?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is right to mention the importance of the UN, and resolution 2254 is particularly relevant to Syria. If he reviews that resolution, he will see that it largely assumes that the Assad regime is in place, so it is important to support the UN special representative at this time. If Syria is to succeed, there must be a greater role for the UN, and I intend to discuss these issues with the Secretary-General and others in the coming days and weeks.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I share the delight of my Syrian friends that Assad has gone. I only wish that the world had acted to support the Syrian people sooner, and that our dear friend Jo Cox was around to see this. I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), for meeting the Syrian British Consortium in Doha over the weekend, and I look forward to a further meeting with him and the group in due course.

Despite the denial and downplaying of Assad's crimes over the years, including by some Members of this House, it is undeniable that hundreds of thousands of people have been imprisoned by Assad, including in Saydnaya prison. There is an urgent need to release those prisoners. Some of them are several storeys down, and there are reports on the ground that people are unable to free them at the moment, such as the electronic locks that have been put on the gates. The White Helmets are on the ground, trying to unlock the gates so that people can be freed, but there is a real worry that they will not get to them in time, and that people will starve, or even run out of oxygen. What can the British Government and the international community do to ensure that, in the next 24 hours, more is done to get technical support on the ground, so that we can unlock the doors and free the political prisoners?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue. So grim was the Assad regime that I saw a young child—a toddler, effectively—walking out of a prison. This issue has commanded a lot of attention in the last few hours. We will continue to support civil society and public services as best we can in getting individuals out, but he will recognise that that is against a backdrop of some constraints. We do not have a diplomatic presence in Syria—we have not had one for a very long time. He mentions prisoners; we should never forget the 100,000 or more people who have simply disappeared. We hope and pray that many of those people will come out from underground.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I gently remind the House that one should never idealise the oppositions in these scenarios? Some of what I have heard today reminds me very much of what I heard in

this House after the downfall of Saddam Hussein and of Muammar Gaddafi. The truth is that in Syria, it is a choice between monsters and maniacs. I do not regret my votes either, in 2013 and 2015, when the coalition wanted to bomb first one side and then the other in the same civil war. Can the Foreign Secretary throw some light on what he expects Turkey to do, having supported the Islamist opposition, now that it will be face to face with its Kurdish enemies?

Mr Lammy: The Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee is right—

Sir Julian Lewis: Ex-Chair.

Mr Lammy: Forgive me. The ex-Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee is right to highlight the complexity of these issues. He will recognise that Turkey has the most complex of relationships with HTS. In fact, many have forgotten that HTS are a proscribed organisation in Turkey. Turkey also has legitimate terrorist concerns, which it has raised with this country on a number of occasions. Notwithstanding the complexity of the situation, we have to work with all groups in an inclusive manner, but I will be really clear that in the UK, we remain concerned about Daesh, and about extremism in camps that we know exist in the north-east. We are vigilant about those issues, and we are happy to—we have to—work with Kurdish minority groups, who will assist us in that enterprise.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Could my right hon. Friend share his assessment of the impact of events in Syria on the stability of the wider middle east, particularly Palestine, Israel and Lebanon? Is there a particular role for UN blue helmets beyond the buffer zones, given what has happened around the Golan heights?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. On the one hand, some of what we see in Syria is a consequence of a diminished Hezbollah and a diminished Iran. On the other hand, we do not want further friction between Syria, its neighbours and others in the region. I saw the tanks that moved into the Golan heights, and I spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister yesterday. He said that he believed that that was temporary, and that it was in response to what Israel sees as a breach of the agreement struck in the 1970s between the two parties, given that the Syrian regime has now fled from that border. I hope that the situation is temporary, but I recognise the security concerns.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The situation in Syria will inevitably lead to changes and increased pressure on migration routes. What steps have the Government taken so far on asylum claims from Syrian nationals? Can he commit to making sure that the Home Affairs Committee is kept updated on any changes?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Lady is right to raise these issues. That is why I mentioned them in my statement, and why we are working in-country, both in Syria and with neighbours, to ensure that we do not have new migration routes open up. We want a safe and secure Syria that is inclusive of all communities; we have to be mindful of that.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Like many cities, Exeter is home to a Syrian refugee community, and it is frankly delighted by the demise of Assad's appalling regime. What efforts can the Government make to support an inclusive political settlement that includes all Syria's ethnic and religious groups—including, of course, the Kurdish community—potentially on the federal model, which has proven successful elsewhere in the region?

Mr Lammy: We recognise that many Syrians who have found a home in the United Kingdom are here specifically because Syria was not an inclusive place. As we hold out for that inclusive place, our intent is to work with partners to try to bring it about, but the truth is that this has to come from the Syrian people. The best we can do is to support public services and civil society. Long gone are the days when a P5 member such as ourselves could seek to construct the terms under which freedom is achieved. We have to work with partners on the ground.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): We welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement on this fast-evolving situation. He has referred to the opportunities and risks for the many displaced Syrians who are looking to return to Syria. Will the Government be providing assistance to those Syrians in this country who wish to return to their homeland? Will the Government look to follow the example of European nations such as Germany, which has suspended asylum applications?

Mr Lammy: I have to say that that has not been put to me in the last few hours. The issue that has been put to me is the humanitarian need in Syria and the humanitarian support for its neighbours. I think the consensus in this House and the significant funds with which we have supported Syria should reassure people of our content to support people on the ground in the region.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Thirty-five years ago, as the evil regime of Erich Honecker collapsed and the Berlin wall came down, the threat of chaos in East Germany was countered, and that country reintegrated into western Europe only with the investment of \$2 trillion. The Foreign Secretary rightly speaks of the dangers to the UK that continuing chaos in Syria could cause. If Syria is not to sink further into despair, and if the UK and other democracies are not to feel the repercussions, where will the necessary investment for Syria's reconstruction come from?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, looking ahead. He will recognise that there is a real bandwidth problem as we look across the world, and particularly across the middle east. Many would like to see a ceasefire in Gaza—I certainly would—and the road to reconstruction begin. Many of us want to see Putin exit his troops from Ukraine and face justice, and there will be the necessary reconstruction there. Of course reconstruction is necessary in Syria, but I remind the House that, under both the last Government and this Government, this country has provided £4 billion-worth of aid. UK taxpayers have played their part in supporting Syria. We have announced a further £11 million today, and we continue to play our part, but no one would suggest that we could do it all on our own.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): The situation in the middle east is extremely volatile, and the situation that has played out in Syria over recent days only adds to that instability. Has the Foreign Secretary had conversations in recent days with Ministry of Defence colleagues about the potential need to reinforce and bolster security at our sovereign base areas in Cyprus?

Mr Lammy: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that those discussions are ongoing, as he would expect given the extent of the challenges in the middle east, and particularly the challenges previously in Lebanon.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): The fall of Assad's regime marks a pivotal moment for Syria, offering a chance to end over a decade of brutal conflict and suffering at the hands of a man content with using chemical weapons against his fellow citizens. What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure that Britain works with international partners to secure a stable and inclusive future for Syria, so that all Syrian people can finally live in peace and rebuild their lives?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the opportunity to repeat that it is very important for me to talk to Emirati, Turkish and Jordanian colleagues at this time, and for the Foreign Office operation to be engaged with the United States and others to ensure that we see a transition to genuine representation that is inclusive.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In 2013, this House voted against UK military action following the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad's Government. One effect of that vote was to deter the British Government from taking action, but another effect was to have influenced the US Government into taking no action at that time. Will the Foreign Secretary support Parliament debating and voting on any future UK military action, even if we have learned from 2013 that there may be times when such scrutiny should happen after military action takes place?

Mr Lammy: Drawing on my 24 years of experience in this House, I would say that all Members take the subject of military action with a seriousness and sobriety we do not see with any other issue that comes to the Chamber. I do not think there is any disagreement in the House about Assad. It is important to remember that the person responsible for the crimes against the Syrian people is Assad, and his brutal regime.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The joy on the faces of Syrians and the horrors of the Saydnaya prison emphasise both the evil of the Assad regime and the hope for Syria's future, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has said. However, the complexity of the ethnic, religious, political and military groupings within Syria and the wider region makes the pathway to a stable, peaceful and inclusive Syria challenging, to say the least. What practical steps can the UK take to support the bringing together of the appropriate Syrian representatives, to help enable them to build the peaceful, stable Syria that we all wish to see?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right, and she is drawing on years of experience of the issues of cohesion and the bringing together of different communities. Over the coming days, I hope to see that inclusivity in

[Mr Lammy]

action. I have said to the UN special representative that the UK stands ready to support him in whatever way he deems necessary. Clearly, the UN will play an important role over the coming days. It is important that the regional actors, along with partners here in Europe and in the United States, are able to convene to ensure that the new rising tide in Syria is able to keep the hope that the people are demonstrating on the streets alive.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Syrian Democratic Forces are managing detention facilities holding 9,000 Daesh fighters in Syria. What is the Foreign Secretary's assessment of the likelihood of ensuring the continued management of those facilities, keeping people who threaten our security imprisoned? What action is he taking with allies to achieve that outcome?

Mr Lammy: As I have said, this is the No. 1 issue for the UK Government. We will continue to work closely with in-country partners and those in neighbouring countries to ensure that safety for our population. This is a very serious issue and the UK Government are fully engaged across all channels.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to appoint Dame Margaret Hodge as the anti-corruption champion. She will do important work on illicit trading, not least in relation to drugs in Syria. We must not allow those routes to be a source of resource for violent terrorist groups. On the night when it became clear that the Assad regime was about to crumble, many of my constituents in Barking from Syrian backgrounds watched minute by minute—it was a highly emotional night for them. Along with the rest of the world, they saw the regime fall and, with it, decades of brutal rule that had destroyed lives. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that not only is this a moment of hope for the Syrian people, but it is a critical moment as we see the Russian and Iranian influence in the region pushed back, which is better for British national security?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for paying tribute to Baroness Hodge, who has been a doughty champion on issues of illicit finance. I am so pleased that she accepted this appointment. I was with her this morning at the National Crime Agency. My hon. Friend talks of the joy and hope in the hearts of members of the Syrian community in her constituency. We are seeing that right across our country and across the global community. We have to do all we can to support it, and hope and pray that Syria moves into a brighter future, understanding that it is one of the most ancient of countries. It has been a home for so many communities, and is one of the centres of the birth of civilisation.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I think we all welcome the fall of the Assad regime, but it is important that he and his henchmen are eventually brought to justice. As we have seen in Iraq and Libya, the swift fall of a dictator leads to a dysfunctional state, with potential for illegal immigration, terrorism and many other problems. What can the Foreign Secretary say about Britain's role in ensuring that Syria does not become a dysfunctional

regime, how we can prevent terrorism from moving from Syria into other parts of the world and, importantly, how we can deal on the ground with those who will genuinely have to seek asylum, rather than pushing them into the hands of people smugglers?

Mr Lammy: At the heart of what the right hon. Gentleman says is justice. He is absolutely right that the joy will quickly turn into accountability for what went before. We may see it coming out of the prisons, as people begin to interrogate what happened to the 100,000 who disappeared. People will want to hold those responsible accountable, and that is understandable. The right hon. Gentleman also raises important counter-terrorism issues. Daesh's ability to direct, enable and inspire attacks within our country is significant; we have seen it behind a lot of global events. That is why we are proud of the part that we play in the global coalition against Daesh, and the work that we do in north-eastern Syria in particular.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): What discussions are taking place with Turkey, because the SDF in the north and the east of Syria is doing an important job in containing Daesh fighters, and it is essential that it is able to continue to do that? Does the Foreign Secretary fear that Turkey's actions may have a detrimental effect on the job that the SDF is doing?

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that I have a good working relationship with the Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan. I spoke to him yesterday, and last week in Malta. I fully expect Turkey, as a member of NATO and a close friend of our country, to continue to work with us on those pressing issues, recognising the threats to itself as well as to the United Kingdom.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement on what I know is a fast-evolving situation. In the coming days and weeks, he will have to think about the issue of diplomatic relations with Syria. Does he agree that one prerequisite of that relationship must be the handing over of any chemical weaponry that Assad has left behind, and will he work with international partners to ensure that that chemical weaponry is taken off the hands of anyone who wants to retain it, so that it is destroyed and does not fall into dangerous hands?

Mr Lammy: In so many ways, this horrid story, or at least the global attention on this horrid story, began with the use of chemical weapons. It would be fitting to see them taken away and absolutely destroyed so that they can never be used again. It has been important to seek the clarification that those who have led this rebellion are working with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and have set themselves against any use of chemical weapons and the preservation of those stockpiles.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for the diligent and hard work of his Ministers, in particular the Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), in keeping the House apprised of the ongoing issues, as he did last week and in the background over prior weeks.

Last week, I urged greater awareness of how the developments in Syria are interconnected, particularly with regard to Russia's distraction and weakness. We all welcome the Foreign Secretary's remarks on the escalation of the matter to a Cobra secretariat and the broad coalition we see on the Front Bench, in particular noting the security implications, the Home Office on migration flows, and his Department and the Ministry of Defence's role in any stabilisation work. Will the Secretary of State provide his view on his Department's ability to support such a significant piece of stabilisation activity alongside other work, following the disbandment of a Department for which that was the sole role?

As we know, the Russians have used their presence in Syria to expand their brutal security presence in other parts of the world, in particular Africa. What steps are we taking to assess how the developments will impact African states that have learned to rely on Russia for their security? Have we extended our hand of friendship to those states so they have the opportunity to avoid the manifestation of such situations? Finally—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Members have to keep their questions short.

Mr Lammy: I could listen to my hon. Friend all afternoon, but let me set about answering his questions. I am grateful that he mentioned my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, because it enables me to thank him for the way he is pursuing his role at this time, getting right across the region and the issue and drawing on his own experience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) is right to raise the aid question and how, indeed, that aid is spent. In the context of Syria, sadly, we are talking about a civil society and non-governmental organisations that have been on the ground for many years, so he can draw some confidence from the accountability in the way we work with them. That was, for example, why we have made a further £300,000 available to the White Helmets, which has such a tremendous record. He is also right to talk about Africa and the way in which Russia has used Syria as a staging post for its actions there. Of course, we are making the necessary assessments of that capability now that Russia has retreated.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement. I welcome his confirmation of the continuation of UK humanitarian aid to the people of Syria. I also welcome his commitment that the future governance of Syria must be decided by the Syrian people and not by foreign actors. Does he agree that a safe, secure, stable and prosperous Syria is in the interests of not only the Syrian people but Britain? Will he commit the UK to taking all possible steps to support the peaceful transition to such a Syria?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I can confirm that.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I welcome the long-overdue fall of Assad's murderous regime and recognise the joy and hope and also trepidation that many Syrians are feeling. It is disgraceful that the first thought of some has been to call for Syrian refugees to

be forced to return, while the hard-right Austrian Government have suspended family reunification and talked of resuming deportations. Will the Government pledge their continued support of those who have fled Syria and made their home in the UK and for their freedom to choose whether they return or remain here?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to raise those issues. It is important to remember that Syrians have now been in this country for many years indeed. Their lives are here; their children were born here. Those are just not the first issues that come to mind. It is also important to recognise that Syria's neighbouring countries—Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan—bear the biggest number of displaced people who have had to flee Syria. We can see from the scenes in the region that Syrians want to go back—they are desperate to go back—and we should support them to do that with the public services that they will no doubt need.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): No one should grieve the demise of Assad, who was propped up for far too long by Russia and Iran. However, the links of HTS to al-Qaeda mean that the future is far from certain or secure. With that in mind, what steps have the Government taken to promote the rule of law in Syria?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. Twenty-one years ago, al-Qaeda drove a truck-bomb into our consulate in Istanbul, killing 16 British and Turkish members of staff, and we should never, ever forget that. It was in the serious context of HTS being an alias of al-Qaeda back in 2017 that it was proscribed in the United Kingdom. I will not comment on issues of proscription, but one would expect any responsible Government to consider the detail of these issues very soberly and carefully, with partners such as the United States, for which that organisation remains proscribed.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Syrian diaspora in York will welcome the fall of the Assad regime, but what follows really matters. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with the International Criminal Court about the crucial gathering of evidence at this time of transition to build the case for justice, which is the Court's responsibility?

Mr Lammy: I assure my hon. Friend that we will of course do all we can to ensure that Assad is held to account. He is now huddled in Russia with that other war criminal, Putin, who must also be held to account for his monstrous crimes.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I do not think that anybody could deny Syrians their moment of joy over the weekend after their 13 years of devastating civil war and over half a century of being brutalised by the Assad regimes. However, a Syria whose future is decided by Syrians needs long-term stability. In the medium term, what work is being undertaken by the office for conflict, stabilisation and mediation to analyse the situation, and will it be made available to the House? In the shorter term, we have seen what can happen in other places after such a moment of joy, so in his immediate response, what lessons will the Foreign Secretary take from Iraq and Libya?

Mr Lammy: What happened in Iraq and Libya—the vacuum that engulfed those countries when a dictator left, leading to sectarian violence from group upon group and to those places becoming havens for terrorism—is deeply worrying. That is why, despite the joy, we remain cautious. We are keen to work with partners on the ground, keen to support civil society, and keen to encourage an inclusive society, as has been indicated by the UN special representative. We will continue to do all we can to avoid the quagmire that could replace the fallen dictator.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): It has been deeply moving to see Syrian families reunited after years in Assad's prisons. On the wider situation, it is important that we learn the lessons from the past—not least from Iraq and Libya, where years of even greater chaos and disaster replaced the dictatorships. Many countries are militarily involved in Syria, but people do not want our military resources or troops dragged into more wars in the middle east. Can the Foreign Secretary assure us that—as distinct from humanitarian aid, which is welcome—no military resources or personnel will be sent to Syria?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Gentleman has outlined the dangers after a dictator falls. He will understand that it would be wrong of me to comment on operational issues, but I find the scenario that he raises highly, highly, highly unlikely.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): As the people of Syria come out of the horrors of war, torture and imprisonment, and many go into asylum, can the Foreign Secretary assure us that the foreign troops in Syria at the present time—particularly the Turkish troops in the north—will leave; that they will respect the right of the Kurdish people to live safely in their own area; and that any incoming Government in Damascus will also respect the diversity of the country and all the minorities, particularly the Kurdish minority? From his discussions with the Israeli Foreign Minister, is the Foreign Secretary satisfied that Israel will withdraw immediately from the area that it has illegally occupied over the past couple of days, just north of the already illegally occupied Golan heights?

Mr Lammy: We are in the early days of a fluid situation, so it is not for me to give the right hon. Gentleman the assurances that he seeks, except to say that of course I continue to talk to our closest allies in the region about their security concerns and the issues facing Syria. In relation to the conversation that I had with the Israeli Foreign Minister, there is an arrangement in place—it was put in place in 1970s. It has worked and has sustained an arrangement in the Golan heights. The Israelis' assessment was that the withdrawal of the regime over the past few days—and the potential for chaos, which has been discussed in this House and was indicated in the right hon. Gentleman's question—has required them to protect that buffer zone. As I have said, I hope that that situation is temporary.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): As we have just heard, Israel seized more territory in the Syrian-controlled Golan heights yesterday. The Foreign Secretary just mentioned that Israel said that would be temporary, but the occupation is recognised as illegal under international law, so what will happen if the Israelis decide that it is not temporary?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend rightly says that that territory is illegally occupied. I confirm from the Dispatch Box that, as has been the case under successive Governments, the UK assessment is that it is occupied land.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): May I bring the Foreign Secretary back to a point raised by the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), which I do not think he fully addressed? Will he assure the House that the Government will block any asylum applications from Assad's acolytes in the years ahead?

Mr Lammy: I have seen it mentioned in the past few days that Asma al-Assad, as someone with UK citizenship, might attempt to come to our country. I confirm that she is a sanctioned individual and is not welcome here in the UK. Having appointed Margaret Hodge to her role this morning, and having introduced in the past five months more sanctions than ever before in that space of time, I assure the House that I will do everything in my power to ensure that no one from that family finds a place in the UK.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I declare an interest, in that several years ago I advised the moderate Syrian opposition coalition and other moderates. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in order to ensure that the Syrian people are at the heart of the new Syria and to strengthen stability, it is important that the new political structures are democratic and pluralistic; that the moderate opposition, who have dedicated themselves to planning for this day ever since the horrors of 2011, are closely involved; and that engagement with our allies and the United Nations—which I know is ongoing—is prioritised, particularly given UN Security Council resolution 2254?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and for his work on, experience of and dedication to these issues over many years. There has been a lot of focus on HTS, but he will recognise that those who freed Damascus contain many groups. Many groups make up the opposition, coming from different positions, and the inclusive Syria that we talk about has to be a place that includes all of them. My hon. Friend is right to put on the record those groups that our own country has been able to work with over many years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement. The downfall of the Assad regime and the liberation of Damascus are to be lauded. The same Damascus, of course, is one of the earliest places where Christianity was taught and preached, as the Bible mentions—Damascus is often mentioned in the good book.

The free world has failed in the protection of minority groups and religious beliefs. We need to be mindful that Turkey and Turkish-led terrorists are currently attacking Kurds in northern Syria. It is estimated that Turkey has killed some 300,000 Kurds in northern Syria since 2018, with another 300,000 facing the same fate today. Furthermore, with Damascus having gained its freedom, minorities in Syria must be protected against the brutal, violent and evil HTS. Will the Secretary of State ensure that this transitional peace Government will engage to protect all religious minorities in Syria?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right to remind the House of the ancient nature of Syria, and the many religious communities that have found a home there and made it up over thousands of years. We will continue to work with all such groups, and the hon. Gentleman's question underlines the complexity of the issue and the challenges for Syria as we look ahead.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): Members from across the House, including the Secretary of State, have talked about the religious and ethnic complexities of Syria. What does the Secretary of State make of those who are calling for a federal-type system in Syria? Should the Government be giving capacity and voice to those views and approaches?

Mr Lammy: There have been a number of propositions in the last few days, all of which merit further scrutiny and understanding. I am not going to back any single suggestion on behalf of the UK—I think it is important that those suggestions should come from organisations on the ground, and that we continue to work with regional partners. I stand by what I said before at the Dispatch Box: long gone are the days in which a plan is drawn up in the UK Foreign Office and presented as if it is the plan. That cannot be the way; we have to work with the grain of Syrian society, as complex and diverse as my hon. Friend rightly suggests it is.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Like Minister Falconer, I was at the Doha forum this weekend, and there was palpable relief among the vast majority of delegates that the brutal murderer Assad had finally fallen. However, Sergey Lavrov also attended the Doha forum, and although I boycotted his session, the readout was that he was deeply uncomfortable in answering questions about Syria—rightly so, as he has so much Syrian blood on his hands, alongside his boss Vladimir Putin. Does my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary agree that it is unacceptable for Russia to retain its two military bases in Syria, and that those bases must be closed down for the stability of the region?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend makes a very strong point about Russian capability and desire. The two bases that exist also run operations into Africa and support militia groups on the African continent, and Russia's long-standing, cynical desire to have a deep sea port in the region is what sat behind Putin's support for Assad in the first place. We see Vladimir Putin in this Parliament.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I quickly remind Members that I am going to run this statement to the end. I think the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley referred to Minister Falconer by name, which of course he should not have done.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): In his statement, the Foreign Secretary referred to HTS co-operating with the international community on the monitoring of chemical weapons. Given the situation on the ground in Syria and the ongoing chaos, what confidence does he have that there is the capacity for

HTS to conduct that work? Is there anything the UK Government can do to support the capacity in the region to keep those weapons safe?

Mr Lammy: Working with the OPCW on the ground is hugely important, and the work of the UN envoy is also essential. We will do all that we can to ensure those stockpiles are properly protected.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): There will be great jubilation at seeing the back of Assad. I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, including his reference to illicit finance, which is critically important, and what he said about building an inclusive society that protects minorities. This is a great moment of hope, but it comes with trepidation as well. The Foreign Secretary spoke of a new hope for Syrians getting their country back, and I am grateful for his clarification regarding the Golan heights. Whatever emerges from this transition, I know he shares the desire to seek a reliable partner and a supporter of democracy to replace this dreadful regime, but can he say something about the urgency of establishing that partnership and the timescale for it? What work is going on with partners to make sure that it happens quickly?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful for the interest in these issues and in the region that my hon. Friend has shown over many, many years. He will understand that we are in the foothills here, and that a lot has to be done to stabilise Syria at this time. In that context, it is a little premature to give a timetable. I understand why he wants one—he wants to guarantee that things will not go south over the coming months—but the issues that I raised relating to oil, fuel and energy and support for public services are pressing on our minds. We have to ensure that disorder does not set in, and that is what we will be working closely on with partners over the coming days.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, and the detailed and nuanced answers he has given to what have been some complex questions are extremely welcome. One thing that is not complex is the fact that Assad is a murderer who has taken 500,000 people's lives, and my right hon. Friend was absolutely right to resist calls to reopen channels and negotiate with him.

I have two questions: one simple, one not so simple. First, does my right hon. Friend agree that every single Member of this House should welcome the downfall of Assad? Secondly, does he have thoughts on what this means for Russia? Will its catastrophic failure in Syria change its behaviour in other conflicts, including in Ukraine?

Mr Lammy: I think my hon. Friend can feel the united position on Assad in this Chamber. We are one of the great democratic Chambers of the world, and this is why we know a dictator when we see one, and we call that out across the House. On the other point my hon. Friend makes about Putin, I am always reassured in these moments that in the end dictators fall because they never attend to all of their population. They always suppress the will of minority groups and opposition, and in the end they have to run their countries with a horrible, horrendous iron rod, because they know—as

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we saw with those statues coming down—that there is a target on their back. That is where I take heart about the future of Vladimir Putin.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I want to echo the calls welcoming the downfall of the brutal and evil Assad regime, and just to press the Foreign Secretary a little. What steps will the Government take to preserve all the humanitarian routes available, and to ensure that a moderate, prosperous and, indeed, multi-polar Syria emerges from the present situation?

Mr Lammy: There is the £11 million I have announced in further aid to support the civil groups. As I have said, I have had conversations today with regional partners to ensure that those routes are available, and it is good to see people feeling able to return home.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My right hon. Friend was right in his statement to emphasise the effects of global instability on illegal immigration into the UK. Not only is supporting displaced Syrians as they return home the right thing to do—although it is the right thing to do—but it supports the security of the UK. Can he assure the House that Syrians returning home will have ongoing humanitarian support from this Government?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I am very pleased to say that at the Dispatch Box.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I join the Foreign Secretary, the shadow Foreign Secretary and everyone across this House in welcoming the demise of Assad's brutal regime. Unlike my predecessor in Rochdale, Mr George Galloway, who tweeted his support for Assad this weekend, much to the disdain of many in my constituency, I do not mourn Assad's demise. We should not be surprised by Mr Galloway, given that he has long been a friend of dictators across the planet. I remind the Foreign Secretary that Assad was no friend of the Palestinian people—he bombed, tortured and murdered Palestinians who stood up to him. Does my right hon. Friend also recognise their bravery today?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to remind the House that our own democracy has demagogues and charlatans who can prey on individuals. He is also right to remind us that so few were safe under Assad's brutal regime, which saw the murder of hundreds of thousands of people, people disappearing on a scale that certainly the 21st century had not seen and the use of chemical weapons. That he has found safety and comfort in Russia is, frankly, appalling. He should be rotting in a jail for all that he has done.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Like many in this House, I have campaigned and worked with Syrian friends in their struggle over much of the last decade, and I welcome the demise of Assad. The Secretary of State is absolutely correct that it is for the Syrian people to decide what happens next, although I greatly fear that the voices of many Syrian people will not be heard unless they are given strong international support to be heard. There is a strong pro-democracy and pro-human rights movement in Syria, particularly among women and youth-led organisations. What are the Government doing to ensure that the voices of women and youth are heard?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the importance of women and youth. Women have been mentioned, but youth not so much this afternoon. I have been aware of youth groups in Syria over many years, and we will do all we can to amplify those voices at this time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the statement.

BILL PRESENTED

DOMESTIC ABUSE (AGGRAVATED OFFENCES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Josh Babarinde, supported by Caroline Voaden, Alex Brewer, Lisa Smart, Liz Jarvis, Anna Sabine, Calum Miller, Ben Maguire, Alison Bennett, Charlotte Cane, Helen Maguire and Dr Danny Chambers, presented a Bill to create certain domestic abuse aggravated offences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January 2025, and to be printed (Bill 145).

Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1**REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF THE REGULATOR IN OVERSIGHT
OF PUBLIC PROTECTION REQUIREMENTS**

“(1) Within 18 months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must lay before each House of Parliament a report reviewing the role of the Security Industry Authority as the regulator.

(2) The report must include a cost-benefit analysis comparing the respective situation for each of the matters listed in subsection (3) on how—

- (a) these have been carried out by the Security Industry Authority; and
- (b) they might be carried out by local authority teams if the regulatory duties were transferred to them.

(3) The issues which must be included in the analysis contained in the report laid under subsection (1) are—

- (a) effectiveness in performing investigation and enforcement functions;
- (b) relationship with other locally-based enforcement regimes;
- (c) relationship and interaction with existing statutory licensing regimes; and
- (d) effectiveness of provision of guidance as part of oversight, adherence and awareness of the new public protection requirements.”—(*Matt Vickers.*)

This new clause would require a report reviewing the role of the Security Industry Authority, including a comparative cost-benefit analysis of the regulatory functions being carried out by the Security Industry Authority with those functions being provided alternatively at a local authority level.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.15 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—Developing and implementing training on public protection procedures—

“(1) The Secretary of State must take steps as the Secretary of State considers appropriate to ensure that—

- (a) adequate training provision is made available for persons responsible for qualifying premises or qualifying events in respect of public protection procedures that includes—
 - (i) the monitoring of premises or events and the immediate vicinity of premises or events;
 - (ii) evacuation procedures and the movement of individuals into, out of and within a premises or event;
 - (iii) physical safety and security of occupants in a premises;
 - (iv) provision of security information to individuals on a premises or at an event; and
 - (v) other measures related to terrorism protection training;
- (b) a training implementation plan is put in place to ensure all organisations and persons to which the provisions of this Act apply are encouraged to undertake training related to public protection procedures.

(2) Functions of the Secretary of State under this section may be exercised by any organisation or persons authorised to do so by the Secretary of State.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay before both Houses of Parliament a report setting out the steps they have taken in relation to subsection (1).”

This new clause, together with Amendment 28, would require the Secretary of State to develop and implement a training plan in respect of qualifying premises and events before Parts 1 and 2 of the Act are commenced.

Government amendments 1 and 2.

Amendment 27, in clause 19, page 15, line 5, leave out “different” and insert “lower”.

This amendment restricts the Secretary of State to lowering the daily penalties rate for non-compliance by regulation.

Government amendments 3 and 4.

Amendment 25, in clause 32, page 22, line 35, leave out “100” and insert “200”.

This amendment sets the floor for standard duty at 200 individuals.

Amendment 26, page 22, line 38, leave out “500” and insert “799”.

This amendment sets the floor for enhanced duty premises and qualifying events at 799 individuals.

Amendment 28, in clause 37, page 25, line 31, leave out from “force” to end of line 36 and insert

“on the day after the Secretary of State has laid before Parliament a report on developing and implementing training on public protection procedures contained within this Act.” *This amendment is consequential on NC2.*

Government amendments 5 to 24.

Matt Vickers: I pay tribute to everyone who has contributed to the Martyn’s law campaign, the incredible group of individuals who are the Survivors Against Terror, and all the businesses, charities, local authorities, civil servants and security partners that have helped to shape the Bill. Most importantly, I thank the tireless campaigner Figen Murray, and her son Martyn in whose name this Bill has been devised. I would like to reflect for a moment on Martyn and the 21 other innocent victims who were killed in the heinous attack in the Manchester Arena in 2017. The loss of their lives and the pain of their families and friends must never be forgotten.

I pass on the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), who is unable to be present today to speak on behalf of the official Opposition.

Martyn’s law was a manifesto pledge for the Conservative party, and we published a version of the legislation in draft during the last Parliament. We took the issue of public protection very seriously when in office. We delivered £1 billion of counter-terrorism funding for 2024-25, so our forces can mount a swift and effective response to any terrorist attack. Funding will total at least £1 billion in 2024-25 as we provided essential support for counter-terrorism policing and ensured the police had the resources they needed to meet and deal with the threat of terrorism. We enshrined our Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021 in law, introducing tougher sentences and ending the automatic release of potential terrorist offenders. Those found guilty of serious terror offences will now be handed a minimum 14-year prison term and up to 25 years on licence.

Part of the reason for publishing this legislation in draft was a concern to get the balance right for the different premises to which it applies—their responsibilities, and how feasible it is for them to effectively comply with those responsibilities and with public safety. We are grateful to the Home Affairs Committee, which undertook pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill and made valuable recommendations, and to all those who responded to

[*Matt Vickers*]

the Home Office consultation. It is because Martyn's law is so important that it is imperative we get it right in this place. It is in that spirit of support, co-operation and openness that we have suggested small amendments to the Bill.

New clause 1 would require the Secretary of State to produce a report on the effectiveness of the Security Industry Authority as the regulator of these new provisions for both this House and other places within 18 months of the passing of the Bill. This is in recognition of the challenges inherent in extending new regulatory powers to an existing body. The report would include a comparative cost-benefit analysis of the SIA's regulatory functions and an analysis of the implications if those functions were alternatively carried out at the local authority level.

The SIA's role in this Bill is extensive, and it is our view that a review after the roll-out of the new provisions will provide the Government with the opportunity to take stock and decide whether the existing arrangements are the most effective regulatory framework. If they are a success, that is fantastic, but if there are issues, it is surely best to address them early and, if necessary, make changes then and there. I know there has been some anxiety from organisations about a perceived lack of clarity in how the SIA will approach regulation and whether it has the institutional dexterity to understand such a diverse range of venues.

From my discussions with relevant representative groups, businesses and venue operators around the country, I know there is wide-ranging support for the changes in our amendment from the industry. They want to ensure their venues are as safe as they can be. Indeed, many have already taken steps unilaterally to improve security and are eager to work with the Government on further progress. However, there is a feeling that current advice and guidance is limited, and this lack of information is leading to anxiety, particularly at a time when business confidence is falling and new taxes are incoming. Therefore I ask the Government to ensure that affected venues and industries are given full advice on how to comply with the incoming regulations as soon as possible. By agreeing to a future review of the SIA's regulatory effectiveness now, the Government can ease those anxieties and ensure that everyone is focused on the most important objectives: delivering the provisions in the Bill and bolstering our collective security. For that reason, I ask the Government to support new clause 1.

We have tabled amendment 27 in a similar spirit of openness and co-operation. It would prevent the Secretary of State from increasing by regulations the daily amount venues can be fined under this legislation. As the Bill stands, places that are classified as standard duty venues can be fined up to £500 a day for violation. For those classed as enhanced duty venues, the fine is £50,000 a day for violation. I know the Minister will have met many of the organisations that are required to make changes under the Bill, and I am sure that he, like me, found them to be actively supportive of the changes and genuinely interested in working collaboratively towards better safety regulations.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Without the regulations and guidelines being set out clearly, there is a risk that businesses will worry about being fined

quite heavily just because they do not quite know what they should be doing. Does my hon. Friend agree that this amendment and new clause 1 will help cement that clarity in place?

Matt Vickers: All the people in the industry are genuinely and wholeheartedly committed to improving the safety of their venues, but there are anxieties and concerns about what that means. The review of who is in charge and who is responsible for ensuring compliance will get rid of those anxieties and foster confidence in the industry and let us move forward together with the industry.

We would like reassurance about how the Government intend to use the powers to increase the rate of daily penalties. The Bill allows the SIA to levy large fines for non-compliance with the requirements of this legislation in addition to the daily penalties. For a sector recovering from covid, those could be difficult to meet, as could a daily penalty of £500 levied on a small organisation run by volunteers.

We have heard from several trade associations about the potential impact. Neil Sharpley, policy chair of the Federation of Small Businesses, said the FSB is "broadly supportive" of the Bill but added that

"we are concerned about the administrative impact of the burden that will be imposed on smaller businesses, and we are concerned about the costs."

Michael Kill, CEO of the Night Time Industries Association, said that

"it is crucial to address the proportionality of the proposed measures, within all settings. We must ensure that the balance between heightened security and practical implementation is carefully considered."

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I piloted the measure as shadow Minister on Second Reading. I welcome the Minister to his place and thank him for his usual courtesy.

This is genuinely not a political point, but does my hon. Friend agree that, with other measures currently burdening small business such as increases in taxation, business rates and national insurance contributions, this amendment helps because it allows venues to plan and make sure that not too much money is going out? That applies particularly to charities and smaller venues. That is why the remit of the SIA must be checked, and why this amendment should be backed.

Matt Vickers: I could not agree more. There is huge anxiety among businesses about challenges and pressures—whether the national insurance contribution increases on employers or the huge change to small business rate relief affecting small businesses in leisure, hospitality and retail, slashing it from 75% to 40%. These are challenging times, including for very small family businesses, and also, as my hon. Friend points out, for the voluntary sector and many organisations that prop up our communities and play a central role. By perfecting this Bill, we can relieve those anxieties and allow those organisations to follow on with confidence and comply with the measures in the Bill.

I would appreciate some reassurance from the Minister about how he expects to use the powers to change daily penalties. I hope he will demonstrate that the ethos of the Bill is collaboration between the state and private organisations, not the establishment of an increasingly

costly financial penalisation system. We believe that would help to settle any underlying anxieties and allow both the Government and venues to focus on working together to ensure that the roll-out of this Bill is the very best it can be.

Amendments 25 and 26 stop the Secretary of State changing qualifying tier amounts by regulation. They are simply designed to provide future certainty to organisations as they work to become compliant with the Bill. They would remove the power of the Secretary of State to lower the threshold for the standard duty premises and enhanced duty premises from 200 and 799 individuals respectively. The current qualification levels have been determined after consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny. These are significant policy choices and I believe the Government have reached this position after listening to that feedback. As I have set out today, the industry and venues are actively supportive of the Bill and actively want to play their part in improving venue security. We worry about the uncertainty caused by the potential of the Secretary of State to change the thresholds for the standard and enhanced duty premises in future. How is that power compatible with allowing the industry to plan long term, in the knowledge that the qualifying criteria for each tier will not change?

We want to ensure that venues have the confidence to commit the required resources to adopting the provisions of the Bill, knowing that the rules will not change suddenly. Impact assessments have shown the challenges that face different types of venues. Smaller venues and lower capacity premises such as places of worship, village halls and community centres showed particular concern about the impact on fellow smaller businesses and their ability to meet the revised requirements within the small resources available to them.

About four in 10—or 39%—of respondents from premises with a capacity of 100 to 299 agreed that those responsible for premises within the standard tier should have a legal obligation to be prepared for a terrorist attack. Nearly half—46%—disagreed and said that only larger premises should have a legal obligation. About half—51%—reported that revised requirements would be difficult to take forward. Six in 10, or 58%, were at least somewhat concerned that the cost of meeting the standard tier requirements would affect their organisation's financial ability to continue operating. Among those from places of worship or village halls, only around three in 10 agreed that those responsible for premises within the standard tier should have a legal obligation to be prepared for a terrorist attack.

More than 54% of those from village halls and community centres, which typically have a smaller capacity than premises across other sectors—72% had a capacity of 100 to 299—disagreed and said only larger premises should have a legal obligation. Over half of those from places of worship and village halls felt the revised requirement would be difficult to take forward, mainly due to the perceived burden in time and effort. I therefore ask the Minister in what circumstances he would envisage needing to lower the floor for either standard or enhanced duty premises and what consultation would take place before the Government did so.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that proportionality is particularly important? While clearly venues like the Manchester Arena should

have a properly worked out plan, it is inappropriate for village halls and church halls to worry about the cost and bureaucracy involved. Can we have the lightest possible touch for those small community venues?

Matt Vickers: That is right. The community organisations that are affected, whether parish halls, village halls, churches, or small businesses such as the local pub, are invaluable to, and sit at the heart of, our communities, and it is essential that we protect them. There is a balance between what everyone who supports the Bill wants from these protections, be they on the Opposition or Government Benches, namely to prevent the most horrific atrocities, and ensuring that those businesses and community organisations can continue to exist.

6.30 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): The Bill's provisions are appropriate for venues below the enhanced tier. They are proportionate, low-cost and not onerous. They are prompts to encourage organisations to do the kind of thinking that they should do anyway to prevent terrorism or any kinds of attack. The measures are not disproportionate at all, and the legislation is appropriate in that respect.

Matt Vickers: I understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from. An existing regulatory body is being given an additional job; there is no harm in coming back after 18 months to review whether the provisions are working and are fit for purpose. Similarly, there is logic in the House having a say on the fees and penalties that might be applied, rather than that being delegated to the Secretary of State. Those logical changes could relieve some of the anxiety in the sector. Everyone wants the Bill to go forward and fulfil its objective of making our communities safer, but some of the anxieties in the sector about unexpected and unintended consequences for community venues and small businesses are real, so let us relieve some of them by agreeing the amendments.

Paul Holmes: I hope the shadow Minister will forgive me for intervening once again, but I expressed concern about the “responsible person” element at the Dispatch Box on Second Reading. As he has outlined, smaller charity and voluntary sector bodies, such as theatres and community organisations, welcome the aims of the Bill, as do I, but when voluntary organisations are responsible for allocating someone who will be legally responsible to the Security Industry Authority, that spreads fear among those organisations, given the bureaucracy that they already face. Does he agree that we need to look carefully at how great a burden we put on theatre groups, and in particular on voluntary community associations, which will be subject to the regulations?

Matt Vickers: We need to reflect, take time, and review the measures in 18 months, including the regulations. Many of our community and voluntary organisations already struggle to find the manpower to fulfil their functions, and this is another function. Its purpose is right, and it is right to take the legislation forward and provide these protections, but we have to consider the wider perspective and the proportionality for smaller venues, given the potential impact on communities.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is not in my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, but I am church warden of a small parish church. Most parish churches would probably come under the 200-person limit, but the vast majority would be caught by 100-plus. Not only is there fear among volunteers who have to take on this responsibility, but significant risk of unintended consequences. Volunteers may not be prepared to take on the responsibility, and as a result, vital community infrastructure spaces may close to the public. Would that not be a terrible unintended consequence of this well-meaning Bill?

Matt Vickers: My hon. Friend is right. We look at the numbers—100 and 200—and think of organisations we know, and events that we have attended in churches and parish halls. I used to be a Scout leader, and the paperwork, the burden and the challenges used to put us off, in many ways, from fulfilling some of our functions. People who might have come along to help one day get slightly put off by the challenges and responsibilities that come with doing so. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Does the shadow Minister not welcome the fact that the Bill increases the capacity from 100 to 200? His Government previously set the limit at 100—the figure that he is so concerned about.

Matt Vickers: I welcome the revisions; that is why we had scrutiny. The fact that the figures can be determined unilaterally is the concern. There is agreement across the House that it is right to take the Bill forward. We are looking at what we can do at the edges to mitigate the impact for smaller venues, but I agree in principle with what the hon. Member says.

Jerome Mayhew: I am particularly concerned about the Secretary of State or Minister having the power to reduce the number from 200 back to 100 by regulation. That is addressed by amendment 25. Does my hon. Friend agree that in the absence of significant evidence or consultation to support such a move, 100 is essentially an arbitrary number? Why 100, and not 125, 150 or 175? Does he agree that we need more evidence to support that regulation-making power being given to the Secretary of State? Does he therefore agree that amendment 25 is a sensible alternative?

Matt Vickers: I agree entirely. There is no reason why we should not bring that measure to the House for decision. There is no reason to delegate that power to the Secretary of State. It would be sensible to take that delegation out. We have just talked about the fact that some people think the number should be 100, and others think it should be 200. It would be logical to bring the measure back to the House, if required, in due course, and I hope the Minister agrees.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): We all hope that the Bill is absolutely right—that is what we want—but there is nothing wrong with increased scrutiny. Would it not be right for the Government to accept new clause 1, so that we can ensure that there is a review? Through that, we can get the evidence, and then we will know whether we have got it right.

Matt Vickers: That is entirely right. Most of the amendments are about looking at what we can do around the edges of the Bill to mitigate the challenges for small community organisations and small businesses.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): We have to be careful. Of course we want to work cross-party, and should be cognisant of small business, but on the other side of the debate, campaigners are worried that the Bill is already leaning too much the other way, and we will start to lose proportionality if we adopt the shadow Minister's amendments.

Matt Vickers: I slightly disagree. A body is taking on this regulation. Reviewing this in 18 months to see whether it is working is sensible. Keeping the ability to make decisions on numbers, rather than giving it to the Secretary of State, is a logical way forward. We all want this Bill to work, and we all realise the meaningful and important reasons why the Bill was brought forward, but we are talking about mitigation. All the amendments are fair, logical and sound in how they try to balance the two interests. We want to make all venues safe, whatever their scale or size, but we need to do so in a way that allows businesses and community organisations to carry on delivering, at the heart of our communities.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Last week, along with Opposition colleagues, I met representatives of a number of hospitality businesses across different sectors. Everyone wants to make their venue more secure, and everyone acknowledged the importance of the legislation, but there are points to address on clarity and the uncertainty being caused. We have talked about the responsibility of volunteers, and where it starts and ends. Some venues will have queues outside, and it is not clear how the legislation will work in that case. An 18-month review is important, because it would allow us to look at whether the legislation is making people more safe and secure. Does the shadow Minister agree?

Matt Vickers: My hon. Friend is right. When it comes to the Bill, the stakes are high for small community organisations and small businesses, so I see no harm in reviewing the regulations after 18 months, and in keeping those powers for the House, rather than delegating them to the Secretary of State. That is logical and makes a lot of sense for many venues. It is the way forward.

Jerome Mayhew: Clause 2(2)(c), defining the premises that will be covered by the legislation, states:

“it is reasonable to expect that from time to time 200 or more individuals may be present”.

Under the regulations, that might read “100 or more”. Coming back to my experience as a member of the parish church, I would love there to be 100 or 200 people present, but the congregation is closer to six or seven. However, the capacity of the church—the structure—is sufficient to take in 100 or 200 people. While on the face of it, the legislation seems reasonable, does my hon. Friend share my concern that a facility that could welcome 199 people may not have the structures in place, or physically have the people available, to support the increased burden placed on it by the Bill? That would increase the risks of unintended consequences and closure. That would be dealt with by amendment 25.

Matt Vickers: My hon. Friend is entirely right. In voluntary organisations, men and women who tend to do something else by day give their time to volunteer in the evening or at the weekend. They have other things going on in their lives. They will not necessarily be expert on the laws surrounding venues and what goes on in them, but from time to time—once a year, or once every two years—they will be expected to know about these regulations and to comply with them. There is logic in keeping the number at the intended 200, as well as in reviewing the regulations. We would allow the regulatory body to come back on that point 18 months, in the review, when we would review those numbers. We are just saying that these things should not be delegated to the Secretary of State at this point.

Tim Roca: I welcome the progress of this important Bill. We know the danger of terrorism in this country for the constituents we represent. There have been 15 domestic terror attacks since 2017, as well as the tragic arena bombing. That excludes terrorism in Northern Ireland. There have also been 43 late-stage plots foiled by the security services. We recently heard from the head of the Security Service about a 48% increase in terror investigations in the last year alone, so the threat is absolutely real and it is always changing.

We have had various attacks, including the marauding-style terrorist attacks that we saw so tragically here in London some years ago. The Bill is a crucial to making sure that premises, businesses and venues do what they can to keep people safe. We know from businesses and venues that they understand their obligations to their patrons, whoever they might be, and they want to keep them safe.

We have had a healthy debate about the Bill's provisions. There has been a sensible, mature, cross-party discussion about what works and what is practicable. I pay tribute to Manchester city council for the exercises it undertook. It worked with businesses to ensure that measures were both sensible and proportionate while keeping people safe. Across I think 10 sessions last year, and having spoken to 700 businesses and 2,000 people, it went through some of the measures in the Bill, and businesses overwhelmingly supported them. They understood the need for them, and that they were not onerous. Those ranged from businesses as large as Printworks, which many people in Manchester will know, down to local restaurants and bars, and the response was incredibly positive.

I say that because I want to reassure hon. Members from across the House about the proportionality of the measures in the Bill. In fact, I will quote Gareth Worthington, the night-time economy officer at the Manchester business improvement district:

"If a venue operator does not know how to evacuate their venue they should not be running that venue and if training can be provided to help make that evacuation safer then venues should grasp it with both hands."

On the thresholds, we have arrived at a sensible place. We had a healthy debate in the Public Bill Committee on them, and I think they are reasonable. I reiterate that I think campaigners would perceive any tweaking of provisions on the thresholds or delegated powers for the Secretary of State as a watering down of the Bill.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the hon. Member give way?

Tim Roca: I shall not, because I think we have touched on that point enough.

Finally, I pay tribute to my constituent Figen Murray for her bravery in championing these measures. No parent would ever want to have the name of their child on a law if they could help it, but she has worked tirelessly to push forward these measures. I hope to see them enacted. I recommend the Bill and thank the Minister for his hard work on it.

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

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I echo the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca): this has been a constructive, cross-party legislative process. I also pay tribute to the Security Minister for the way in which he has engaged with me and my Liberal Democrat colleagues, cross-party. My comments on the Bill are made in that spirit.

The purpose of the Bill, as well as new clause 2, tabled by the Liberal Democrats, is clear. I am pleased that the House has been given the opportunity to champion Martyn's family and their campaign. The Bill draws clear lessons from the tragic 2017 attack and brings fresh commitments to protecting lives.

6.45 pm

Martyn's law embodies the courage and determination of the families of the victims who have campaigned tirelessly to ensure that lessons are learned and such tragedies are prevented in the future. I also echo the comments of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), about Figen Murray, to whom I pay great tribute. She is a hugely inspirational campaigner. Their voices have been instrumental in shaping the Bill throughout this process. That is down to their resilience, and we as legislators have a duty to honour their efforts by ensuring that the Bill is as robust and effective as possible while avoiding putting any excessive burden on our already struggling businesses. As with all considerations of the House, we must remain balanced in our approach and carefully weigh up the safety of event-goers with pragmatic and realistic requirements. Although the Bill is strong, it lacks the proper provisions to ensure that staff at venues—especially smaller venues that may be on the cusp of the thresholds—are adequately equipped and trained to respond to threats. That is where new clause 2 comes in.

Let us consider just a few of the smaller venues in my North Cornwall constituency such as the St Kew Inn, St Petroc's church, Haywood cider farm, the Bosvena Events Arts Theatre in Bodmin and the Old Inn—there are countless others—which host ticketed events. Some are likely to fall close to the 200 threshold, and others may even fall close to the upper 800 threshold and be considered enhanced duty premises, yet many of the smaller venues are run by volunteers or communities with little or no formal training in event management or public protection procedures. The new clause would address that issue directly by ensuring that all venue staff and volunteers, whether they work in a pub, a church hall or a farm shop, would be equipped with the right training to prepare them to keep the public safe.

Sir Ashley Fox: On that point, does the hon. Member not think that those volunteers in church halls and other small venues would be put off by the thought of

[Sir Ashley Fox]

having to go through a training course, implementing a training plan and all the other aspects of new clause 2? While those may be worthy objectives for larger venues, does he really think them desirable for small venues? Does he not perceive the risk that they may put off volunteers who would otherwise freely give of their time?

Ben Maguire: I spoke to many venues across my constituency this weekend, and actually they were more put off by the ambiguity of the Bill and the lack of specifics that they will be required to undertake. New clause 2 would give them that clarity and ensure that they knew exactly what was required of them under the Bill.

Dr Luke Evans: I think that the volunteer side in particular is concerning a lot of people. One thing that strikes me about new clause 2 is that, given that these are often volunteer organisations, who would fund the training? Has there been thought about who would pay for it and how much it would cost? Small venues like my village halls may struggle to make a couple of hundred pounds a year, let alone be able to afford further training. I wonder if the hon. Member would enlighten me on how that may work.

Ben Maguire: I suspect that that will be a question for the Minister when we come towards the end of the debate. It is certainly something that volunteers will seek clarity on so that they can know exactly what is required of them under the Bill. Without adequate training, we will end up with just vague asks of them, and they will not know exactly how to carry out their duties under the legislation.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): With due respect, the hon. Gentleman said that the cost was a question for the Minister, but since this is his proposed new clause, surely he should have some idea of the financial and other implications for the organisations that would have to comply with it.

Ben Maguire: I certainly would not suggest, and neither would the Liberal Democrats, that the training fee should fall on small venues, but the Government should consider it so that there is clarity for those smaller venues. I hope that answers the right hon. Member's question.

The new clause covers evacuation procedures, monitoring of premises, physical safety and security and the overall provision of protecting lives. It would also establish a full training implementation plan, with the Secretary of State regularly updating Parliament to ensure that the right progress is being made. Crucially, it would ensure that our businesses are fully supported and given the clarity that they need. The public deserve to know that wherever they are—at a concert, a wedding or a local cider festival—staff are properly trained to respond to such emergencies. They should have confidence that venues are held to a consistent standard of preparation and readiness. For the venues themselves, the new clause would greatly improve safety, and would provide clarity and consistency on the standards that they must meet under this law.

Of course, there are concerns from many micro and small businesses about the financial impact and additional bureaucracy that these requirements may bring. That is why the new clause proposes a practical training plan to minimise the financial burden, with scalable and specific training.

Jerome Mayhew: I have already mentioned that I am a church warden of a small parish church, so I have practical experience. I also have other duties—I am the safeguarding officer, because there are insufficient volunteers who are prepared to undergo the quite significant training needed to maintain safeguarding duties in that organisation. I accept that, given the Church of England's troubled history over the past 20 years, safeguarding is a necessary part of modern life, but does the hon. Gentleman accept that the duties imposed on volunteers are cumulative in their impact? I can be a Member of Parliament, a church warden and a safeguarding officer, but can I also be responsible for the additional costs and responsibilities that he has in mind?

Ben Maguire: Certainly, the intention of new clause 2 is not to be a burden on our small venues, but to do the opposite and make sure that they have clarity on what they are supposed to do, what their responsibilities are and how they practically carry out the requirements contained in this legislation.

I was glad to receive the promising indication of a commitment in writing by the Security Minister. He said that if the Bill is given Royal Assent, an implementation period of 24 months will be set. That will give venues the time to understand their new obligations, plan and prepare and, if needed, provide training to staff. The Government promise that training will be supplied by a number of expert security partners. I look forward to hearing more details on that.

Over the weekend, I met various local venues in my North Cornwall constituency, such as the Sea View Farm Shop, which expressed concerns over possible fencing requirements. Its venue hosts small outdoor festivals with between 1,500 and 2,000 attendees. It is similar in scale to the nearby Rock Oyster Festival, and can be contrasted with much larger events such as Boardmasters, which hosts over 60,000 people. Could the Minister provide clarity on the requirements for outdoor events?

We are not seeking to push the new clause to a vote, but we seek reassurance from the Minister today about training for staff and operators for venues big and small. New clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford, proposes a review of the role of the Security Industry Authority as the regulator. We do not oppose a cost-benefit analysis of the role of the SIA, but we worry about the impact of additional responsibility on local government, which is already stretched to breaking point, without the accompanying resources to deliver that.

I welcome the intent to ensure efficiency and effectiveness, but I must stress the need for reassurance that smaller venues, such as the village halls that we have heard about and the community centres that, as the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) said, are often run by volunteers, will not be disproportionately impacted. In North Cornwall, we have venues such as the John Betjeman Centre in Wadebridge, village halls in Padstow, Lewannick and St Mabyn and many more.

I acknowledge amendments 25 and 26 to raise the minimum capacity thresholds for standard and enhanced duty premises to 200 and 800, respectively. These spaces are integral to our communities yet they operate with limited resources, often run by volunteers, and cannot shoulder excessive regulatory burdens. Any changes must prioritise support and scalability for these organisations, so that they are equipped to meet public protection requirements without being overwhelmed. This legislation will not be able to do that if it is too burdensome for businesses, which are not clear what their obligations really are.

Will the Minister confirm that the content of our new clause will be given due consideration? Keeping everyone safe is the absolute priority, but by providing clear guidance and training we can avoid burdening our already struggling local businesses, and ensure that they have the clarity that they need about the legislation.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): I would like to start by expressing my admiration for Figen Murray for her unwavering advocacy of this Bill, in memory of her son, Martyn. Her defiant message to promote peace and positive change in Martyn's name has been a source of inspiration to us all. Figen's strength and dedication in pushing for meaningful reforms to prevent such devastating attacks is truly commendable. Her courage and commitment continue to drive this important work, and we are deeply grateful for her contributions.

As a former police officer, I believe that this legislation represents an important step forward in improving our national security framework and in providing our communities with greater protection from the evolving threat of terrorism. The Bill is needed as the level of threat remains complex, evolving and enduring. By implementing stronger security measures, providing clearer responsibilities for venue owners and enhancing co-ordination between relevant agencies, this legislation will help safeguard the public in places where they gather, work and celebrate. In an increasingly unpredictable world, it is vital that we remain proactive to protect our communities and strengthen the resilience of our society. The Bill is a crucial part of that effort.

By designating a person responsible for considering the risks and for planning a response in the event of a terrorist attack, we are taking a proactive and structured approach to security. The role is about not only managing immediate responses, but fostering a culture of vigilance, communication and preparedness within communities and organisations in general. The legislation will ensure that our response is as effective as possible.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I thank him for his service in the police. Three victims of the Manchester Arena bombing were from my constituency—Sorrell Leczkowski, Courtney Boyle and Wendy Fawell—which is why I am so supportive of the Bill. He is talking about the duties of venues and their managers, but does he agree that it would be helpful for the Government to give clear guidance about their responsibilities for outdoor and public spaces when managing the particular regulatory framework that the Bill will create?

Matt Bishop: I wholeheartedly agree that that is a very important part of the legislation.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): What has been striking about the debate so far is the extent of cross-party consensus on this matter. My worry is that the Bill contains a set of proposals that we might be supporting because they are something that we deem possible to do, whereas we may be neglecting some things that are harder to do. In the inquiry into the bombing, several aspects of the story were very concerning, from the way the asylum system worked through to the Prevent programme. While 90% of MI5's counter-terrorism casework is Islamist, the latest data shows that the number of Prevent referrals for young people suspected of Islamist radicalisation has fallen from 3,706 in 2016-17 to only 781 in 2022-23. As a former police officer, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have to do something to ensure that Prevent is properly targeted at the real threats we face?

7 pm

Matt Bishop: I wholeheartedly agree; anything to support Prevent training in schools and education is very important.

The legislation will ensure that our response is as effective as possible and minimise the risks to lives and infrastructure. It is essential that everyone, from leadership to staff members, understands the importance of this role and supports the planning and implementation of all safety protocols.

However, the Bill is not just about securing physical spaces; it is about fostering a sense of security and trust in the places where we work, gather and celebrate. At a time when the threat of terrorism can cause widespread fear and uncertainty, knowing that protective measures are in place allows people to go about their daily lives with greater confidence. It is about protecting not just our buildings, but the social fabric that holds our communities together.

Being a member of the Bill Committee was insightful. It was an opportunity to closely examine the provisions of this important legislation and engage in constructive discussion with my colleagues, other stakeholders and those sadly affected by terrorism. In Committee sittings, I was pleased to hear that various businesses and venues are already implementing the standards of the Bill in their operations, which are intended to ensure that public premises and events are better prepared so that if the unthinkable happens, they are ready to respond.

The response to the Bill highlights the commitment of many organisations to the safety and security of the public, and their recognition of the importance of proactive measures in the face of potential threats. It demonstrates a shared understanding that protecting people from harm is the responsibility of not just the Government, but everybody in our society. The Bill seeks to formalise and build on those efforts, ensuring that security practices are consistent, comprehensive and capable of meeting the evolving nature of the terrorist threat.

I acknowledge the concerns raised during this debate and in Committee, which I believe have been addressed to make the Bill more effective, fair and responsive to the challenges at hand. As we move forward, it is crucial to remember that this is a shared responsibility; as I said, the Government cannot act alone.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about shared responsibility, and how it is the responsibility of us all

[Patrick Spencer]

to protect each other. As a former police officer, is he not worried about a degree of vigilantism, with untrained people taking the law into their own hands and doing things that perhaps, as a police officer, he thinks police officers would be best placed to do?

Matt Bishop: That is a fair point, but I am not worried that the Bill will cause that. I think that the wider general public will allow the police to deal with the matters in hand when they need to, but there may be, as I mentioned, several opportunities to act on this together.

Public venues, businesses, local authorities and communities themselves must all work in tandem to create a robust, unified front against terrorism. By integrating efforts across sectors, we make our society stronger, more resilient and able to respond more effectively to threats while ensuring the safety of every individual.

Terrorism is not a static threat—it constantly involves, and so must our response. The Bill will ensure that we remain ahead of emerging risks. As we have seen in recent years, attacks are becoming more unpredictable, more dispersed and harder to anticipate. The legislation will give us the tools and the framework needed to adapt and respond to those ever-changing threats. The legislation is about more than policy; it is about the future we want to build for our children, our families and our communities. We owe it to future generations to ensure that they inherit a society that values safety, peace and resilience. By taking action now, we lay the foundation for a stronger, safer tomorrow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Paul Holmes.

Paul Holmes: Thank you for your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I had to nip upstairs to sit in a Bill Committee programming session.

I am delighted to be here to speak on this legislation. As I mentioned earlier to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), I had the privilege of working alongside the Minister when I was the shadow Home Affairs Minister who took the Bill through Second Reading. I say again to the Minister, and to the Home Secretary, that I am a big fan of his, as he knows. That is for genuine purposes: for the way he treated me as the shadow Home Affairs Minister at the time, with informal consultations and phone calls, and for genuinely opening up the spirit of cross-party working on this legislation. I congratulate him and pay tribute to him, his Department and all officials working on the legislation for making sure the Opposition were involved. I am very pleased that he is in his place this evening so that I can thank him for that spirit of co-operation.

We know that the Bill is a key piece of legislation and a commitment that the Conservatives made at the last general election, and I am delighted that the Government have taken it forward. As he will know, I spoke of some concerns on Second Reading that I want to chase the Minister on, if he might be so bold as to try to answer them at the end. I have a number of concerns that I will speak about briefly, as you will be delighted hear, Madam Deputy Speaker. I cannot promise to be too brief, but I

will be as brief as I can. You will have to excuse me if I am out of breath—I did run upstairs and then back downstairs to get here in time, and I am not the fittest person in the Chamber.

I pay tribute to Figen Murray and Martyn's family. As I said on Second Reading, it should not require circumstances such as those we have seen to bring about a change in legislation. However, Figen Murray can rest assured that Martyn has played a huge role in changing the law for the good, and Martyn's family have a right to be proud of that legacy.

I rise to speak in favour of new clause 1 and amendments 25 and 27, which stand in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns). We all support the aims of the Bill and want to see the legislation succeed. We want to make venues across the country safer and to ensure they have the correct apparatus in place so that people who use hospitality or other venues across the country, of all shapes and sizes, can do so with confidence that a system and a regulatory framework are in place. We want people to be safe when they use those venues. My constituents expect that. I expect that for myself and for my family.

Just last night, my family and I used a hospitality venue for a good couple of pints. That will be one of the venues covered by this regulatory framework. Sitting there, looking forward at the parliamentary agenda, I thought how venues such as that one have a number of concerns. Those are the things I want to talk about this evening. In our constituencies, we have voluntary sector organisations, theatre groups, community centres and charities of all shapes and sizes who volunteer every day to do their best by their community, to represent the community and to work for the community in the best way possible. I remain concerned that, as has been outlined by a number of my hon. Friends, including the shadow Minister, there remains an undue burden that will be placed on those organisations, because of some of the environmental factors—I wondered how to put that, as I do not want this speech to be political at all—that have been placed on them in recent months.

Patrick Spencer: Will my hon. Friend speak for a moment about the situation facing small football clubs? They often have many people turning up week after week to watch their team play and are on a tiny budget with tiny margins, no money to spare and no money available for training. In such circumstances, surely those clubs will be really hard done by under some of the provisions in the Bill.

Paul Holmes: My hon. Friend is correct. My constituency has a number of small football organisations, some of which are subject to legislation that is currently going through the Lords more slowly than we would necessarily expect a piece of legislation to progress. The income of small football groups will be the focus of that Bill. However, my hon. Friend is right: not only does this Bill cover small football venues and football clubs, but it covers all sorts of organisations, some of which I have mentioned.

There are small community theatres, for example, which are the backbone of many small communities. People want to go to them with their family and watch amateur dramatics. The plays are sometimes better than

in the west end—I have seen them—and the scale of some venues means that they will be in the lower tier under the Bill, but they have very small incomes. There are also charities with very small incomes that have been affected by fiscal decisions in the Budget. I assure the Minister that I am not being political, but as the impact assessment shows, and as the constituents I have spoken to have said, many charities will be affected by increased costs through their national insurance contributions and the different taxation that will come in.

From what I have read, the average cost for smaller venues will be £330 a year and the cost for larger organisations will be £5,000 a year. Those are the latest figures that I can find, but perhaps the Minister will clarify that additional cost of £330 a year for smaller venues, because to many organisations, that will place a big burden on them. I met representatives of small theatres recently who were concerned that they have not been invited to a roundtable with the Minister to discuss the implications for the sector. I would be grateful if he outlined whether the Government intend to meet them, based on their concerns about the Bill.

I will bring my comments within the scope of new clause 1. Given the issues that I have outlined, I think the proposal by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford to have a review process for the SIA is perfectly sensible. When we set up a new organisation that has some kind of independence, regulatory enforcement capacity or management capacity, it seems purely sensible that after the period set in the new clause, we look to see whether its action has been proportionate, whether there has been overreach and whether it is doing its job properly. Has it taken the full responsibilities outlined in the legislation? Members may not think that it is overworking; it might be that it is underworking and we need to give it more responsibilities in the long run.

It seems perfectly sensible for the Government and the Minister to come to the Floor of the House. They should see new clause 1 in the spirit in which it is intended. Opposition Front Benchers, me and all my colleagues want the Bill to succeed, but we want it to be proportionate. When we set up an organisation with such responsibilities and an organisational jurisdiction, we want to ensure that it is reviewed, that it is conducting itself and taking its responsibilities seriously, and that the system is working.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that new clause 1 is not about a presumption of finding fault, but about ensuring that the proposals work correctly? It is so important that the regulator and the regulatory role work perfectly so that the Bill can be implemented in the way that is expected.

Paul Holmes: My hon. Friend is reasonable and a very good colleague in the way she carries out her duties in this House, so it will come as no surprise to hear that I absolutely agree with her. I do say that about some Government Members, so I am not being partisan—*[Interruption.]* Most of the time. However, my hon. Friend makes a good point.

That is why the Minister should see new clause 1 in the spirit in which it is intended. We do not want to disrupt the passage of the Bill. We do not want to disrupt the good intentions and the outcomes that everybody, on both sides of the House, wants. As a Conservative, I naturally think that the state should not be big or

oversized. When we set up organisations such as this, it is natural that the House and Members will want scrutiny functions to make sure that the organisation acts within the spirit of the law and within its jurisdiction and responsibilities. I think that is perfectly reasonable.

Dr Luke Evans: For me, when we think about creating the regulator, it is about ensuring that it is effective. It needs to be staffed and funded appropriately, and we need to ensure that it does the job that the House expects it to do. The idea of having a system to report back is important when we make these provisions. When my hon. Friend was shadow Minister, did he give any thought to how many businesses come within scope, and whether there are resources in the regulator to even provide those assessments, so that we can make sure that it is held accountable and that this is effective legislation?

7.15 pm

Paul Holmes: I would like to say that I have given that great thought, but as hon. Members across the House will know, after we came back in July, my tenure as a shadow Home Affairs Minister was rather short—*[Interruption.]* I thank the Minister, who said, “Shame”. That was after being shadow Northern Ireland Minister, shadow Foreign Affairs Minister and other Ministers, too. But I took this piece of legislation very seriously. The Government should make that decision, but I hope that the SIA is properly resourced and that it conducts its duties in the right way. That is why I think new clause 1 should be accepted this evening.

I do not want to overstay my welcome, but I will speak briefly about one of the concerns that I raised on Second Reading about the responsible person element of the Bill. I remain seriously concerned about this, and it was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox). Although I accept the scope of the Bill and the impact that it will have on the statute book, many organisations, particularly during cost of living crises and at this time of year, rely on their volunteers, and if we place undue and burdensome regulations on them, volunteers will simply not come forward and be in the voluntary sector. Charities are going through a difficult time. I remain concerned that if we tip slightly too much towards being overburdensome on those very small organisations, we will see a dearth of people in the voluntary sector. No one wants to discourage people from volunteering—we do not, and I know the shadow Minister and the Minister do not—but I worry that the thresholds set out in the Bill will have unintended consequences. I ask the Minister to look seriously at new clause 1 and amendments 25 and 26, which were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford.

Many will be happy to know that I am drawing my comments to a close. However, I am personally delighted that this Bill is before the House in record time, five months after the Government came into office. I hope that the Minister will see that the Opposition are working, and will continue to work, in a constructive way to get this on to the statute book. It is sad that, in order to have a relatively major piece of legislation changed so rapidly, we had to go through the atrocities that we saw in Manchester and terrorist attacks around the United Kingdom. However, I know that the legacy that Martyn leaves is one that his family will be greatly

[Paul Holmes]

proud of, as this country should be. This is a mainstream, major piece of legislation, and I hope that by working together, we will ensure that people who go to venues for many years to come will be protected, and they will be protected in Martyr's name.

Chris Murray: I welcome the fact that the discussion in the House today shows real cross-party support for the aims, principles and objectives of the Bill, and that the amendments focus only on nuances and more technical aspects. That shows that we are all united in trying to achieve this goal and in preventing tragedies such as that which happened in Manchester from happening again.

In trying to understand those nuances and where the more technical sides should be drawn, it is useful to reflect on the legislation's key dimensions and advantages. First, obviously, it makes terrorist attacks less likely. The terrorist threat is substantial and we know that it is changing. It has gone from large-scale infrastructure and iconic sites to much more workaday, normal locations.

The most recent terrorist attack that we tragically saw in this country was an attack on a children's dance class. It is clear that the terror threat is evolving and we must evolve with it, which is why the Bill is important, but it is also important because it minimises the death and destruction that result from a terrorist attack. Terrorist attacks may still happen despite our best efforts, and it is important for us to plan for that eventuality and make the right decisions in order to be ready when they do happen.

The former President Obama's Under-Secretary of State for Homeland Security, the Harvard professor Juliette Kayyem, has talked of the "boom" of a terror moment or crisis, and divides planning into "pre-boom" and "post-boom". Pre-boom is what must be done to prevent an event from taking place, but it is equally important to plan for the post-boom moment. We must ensure that even those running small venues have done some thinking in advance of an attack. What are the escape routes? Who needs to have the keys? What happens if they send people in this direction rather than that direction?

The Bill incorporates a distinction between enhanced and non-enhanced tiers, and that too is important. In my constituency we put on some of the biggest and best events in the world. I am utterly confident that those in the football and rugby stadiums and theatres who are in charge of security planning do all this thinking anyway, but there are many smaller venues where it has not occurred to people that that is necessarily their role, but which are now in the line of fire. It is important for people to recognise that responsibility, because the public have a right to expect it. The Bill codifies what should be happening anyway. We must bear that in mind as we decide where to set the thresholds, who falls in or outside scope, and what level of burden we expect organisations and venues to face.

In Committee, it was reassuring to hear several of my concerns being allayed. One of them has already been discussed, namely the impact on business and the potential for a burden. There is no denying that something of a burden will be placed on some organisations where no one has done any thinking or preparation for a potential terrorist or other attack, but the Bill contains very

proportionate elements that do not impose much of an extra burden. Its requirements are intuitive, they are not onerous, they are straightforward and they are commonsensical. As I said in an intervention earlier, they are essentially prompts for organisations to do the kind of thinking that we would hope they were doing already to avoid an attack. That not only avoids attacks, but mitigates their impact.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I entirely agree with my hon. Friend about the proportionality of the Bill, which we discussed in Committee. The word "burden" has been used a great deal this afternoon. In his evidence to the Committee, Andy Burnham said:

"I just think that we cannot talk ourselves into a sort of thing where it is all too big a burden. I can tell you from experience: a terrorist attack is a massive burden on a city and what it does challenges everybody at every level—and that is ongoing. Like Figen said, Manchester will never be the same again after what happened. It has changed us but it has strengthened us and made us more united, and as I say, I do not want any other city to go through that."—[*Official Report, Terrorism (Protection of Premises Public Bill Committee*, 29 October 2024; c. 16, Q11.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a proportionate Bill, and that the burden of a terrorist attack far outweighs any burden caused by its provisions?

Chris Murray: Absolutely. There is a small element of burden in the Bill, but it is light-touch and proportionate, and the alternative scenario is significantly more burdensome. In my own city of Edinburgh, the impact of a terrorist attack and of people not feeling secure in the aftermath could be destructive not just to the lives affected by the attack, but to the whole economy on which our city is based, which is event-focused. It is right for us to draw that distinction, and to seek to get the balance exactly right.

Nick Timothy: The hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent speech about the "protect" element of the counter-terrorism strategy. It is clear from the Manchester attack inquiry report that the asylum system is a big part of the story.

Salman Abedi and his brother Hashem—who planned the attack and prepared the explosives, and was as guilty of the attack as Salman—were born in Britain to Libyan asylum seeker parents. Their father, Ramadan Abedi, was a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an Islamist militia. He was granted asylum in this country, but travelled back and forth between Britain and Libya throughout that time, which is a story that we often hear about people who are granted asylum here. Given the number of people who come here illegally and across the channel, whom we have no ability to investigate and on whom we cannot make checks, how does the hon. Gentleman think we might reform the asylum system to prevent such things from happening again?

Chris Murray: I am struggling to understand quite how that falls within the scope of this debate, but it is important to discuss the issue of how we deal with terrorism. As we have seen in the history of this country, terrorist attacks can be both foreign and domestic. They can be homegrown, or they can come from overseas. I have talked about the need to prepare for an attack before it happens, so that mitigations can be introduced. They can be long term, which means looking at where

the threat is emanating from, or they can be immediately in advance of an attack, which means introducing security measures. My argument, however, is that the benefit of the Bill relates to what happens after the attack has taken place. We need to help the smaller venues that now find themselves within the scope of terrorist attacks to prepare for those attacks. It is not a question of who committed the offence, but a question of how they are prepared to deal with that event.

Dr Luke Evans: I was fortunate enough to listen to the hon. Gentleman's Westminster Hall debate on the Edinburgh fringe and its success around the world. That is a prime example of where the Bill might be helpful. Has the hon. Gentleman given any thought to how those small venues can work together? If they share best practice, that can create an environment of security. I wonder whether the fringe organisations themselves have thought about this, given that they are, by their very nature, likely to be a target. Sharing best practice may help to strengthen the entire environment when people visit it.

Chris Murray: That intervention was slightly more in scope and was also about Edinburgh, so I was happier to take it.

The hon. Gentleman is right. Indeed, in advance of the Bill Committee debate and the debate that we are having now, I spoke to Edinburgh city council and to some of the event organisers, who told me that it is exactly because Edinburgh has become a place where fringe events take place regularly that these considerations have been normalised. Our city has put a lot of the necessary infrastructure in place, along with the thinking and the organisational requirements—and there is also a corporate memory between the small venues—to cope with terrorist events. As Andy Burnham pointed out in his evidence, Edinburgh is one of the national leaders on this front. However, I recognise that not every community has that advantage, which is why the Bill will extend to other communities the measures that already benefit mine.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Member said earlier that these were “prompts”, and that what we should consider was what happened after an attack. What is worrying is that the Bill goes beyond that. It talks about occasions on which it is suspected that a terrorist offence might take place or is taking place. That is not an “after”. The Bill creates an obligation for those who are in charge of the event in question to prevent individuals from entering. Before an event or while it is happening, there is a security obligation on some of these small groups to prevent people from entering the premises. That is not a prompt; it is a huge burden on the organisers.

Chris Murray: The right hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. Again, having been on the Public Bill Committee, my argument is that the Bill is proportionate.

7.30 pm

That takes me to a concern that I had when we began legislative scrutiny, and on which I was reassured in the Committee evidence session. My concern was that in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, a staff member, an official or somebody responsible for compliance with

the Bill might find themselves in the eye of the storm. We know how high emotions run, and about the all-too-human urge to seek someone to blame, even unfairly, in the aftermath of an event, but we heard in evidence from council officials, and from the people who run events and who will be brought into scope, that they did not consider the Bill a burden for them, for several reasons. First, they would already find themselves in that situation. The legislation does not cause that; a terrorist attack causes that. Actually, this legislation makes a terrorist attack less likely. Secondly, they are already in the eye of the storm for other reasons, such as ensuring fire safety and crowd control. Thirdly, they said that this would be good legislation for them because not only are they already affected, but it equips them to deal with terrorism. The Bill does not create the responsibility; it equips them to deal with it. That is why the Bill is proportionate and good.

I will make my final comments, because I am testing everyone's patience. It is good that the legislation uses the capacity of the venue to identify whether it falls in scope of the provisions. It is important to calculate capacity based on actual usage, rather than historical attendance figures. It is also important that the Bill incorporates the “reasonably practicable” test, which allows venues and premises to work with their specific circumstances and idiosyncrasies. That is an important component of this legislation and will make sure that it works effectively.

I am heartened to see that, across the House, we all agree on the objective and thrust of this Bill, and the debate is about finely balanced and nuanced judgments. In the evidence sessions, we heard compelling evidence of the Bill's necessity, and we heard arguments for the thresholds to be set more loosely. Most evidence suggested that they should be set more rigidly and more strictly, and I am pleased to see that the Government have attempted to draw a coherent distinction between the arguments that we heard.

The true success of this legislation will be if we never hear about it again. Sadly, it comes too late for the victims of the Manchester bombing, but if we set the correct thresholds in this legislation, and pass it, we can ensure that this is the last time we have to hear about it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I look forward to the other contributions to the debate. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, terrorist threats are now a way of life, be they lone-wolf attacks, aggression and poisonings by Russia, attacks by terrorist groups from across the world, or Iranian attacks on those who support a free Iran. Such attacks focus our attention on where we are. It is good to see the Minister in his place, and I look forward to his comments. I wish to be constructive in my comments, and I have a few questions to ask. Hopefully, the Minister can give me some reassurances.

In Northern Ireland, terrorist attacks were the norm for some 30-odd years. I declare an interest: I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years, and in the Territorial Army for 11 and a half years. Why is it that when my fellow soldiers in the Ulster Defence Regiment and my part-time colleagues the Territorial Army went to a restaurant or café, they sought out a place where they could watch everything that was happening? They could see who was coming in and who was going out, and they had an escape route, so that they could get out quickly. That was the life that we led. In this debate,

[*Jim Shannon*]

we are asking our churches, our charities, our missionary groups and those who run community halls to consider things of which they have no experience. I am not saying that critically; I am saying it observationally, because I want them to be aware.

When the gallant Minister got the call to serve in uniform, he answered it. I put on the record our thanks to him for doing that, which tells us a lot about the Minister and his psyche. I look back at some of the atrocities and I am reminded of the Darkley massacre, in which the Irish National Liberation Army burst into a church and killed a number of people who were attending—innocent people. Had it not been for the bravery of some of the people on the door, more probably would have been killed. I think of Tullyvallen Orange hall, near Newry, where the IRA killed a number of Orangemen, simply because they were Orangemen.

The point I am making is that that was our life in Northern Ireland, and now we are asking our churches, our charities and other groups across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to look at providing better security. We are asking people with no experience to do that—people who have never considered there to be any need to do so—but we are doing it for a purpose.

We all support this legislation. I want to put on the record that I support it, and I understand the reasoning behind it. We were all incredibly concerned about the Manchester atrocity; it is an example of what we have to try to stop.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I completely understand that we are asking people to consider something that they have never experienced or had to consider, but is that not what we do with fire regulations?

Jim Shannon: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, this is not about fire regulations; it is about making sure that nobody dies, which is different. It is much, much more than fire regulations, which require people to check whether an extinguisher is working. This Bill is about making sure that nobody comes in to kill anybody, so it is a different scenario. I respect the hon. Gentleman, but we have to get a bit of focus.

I am reminded of the community hall where the Rev. Robert Bradford was killed. The caretaker was on the door when the IRA came. They shot the caretaker and the reverend, and his plaque is at the back of this Chamber. I am ever mindful of his courage and the stand that he took. These are the things that we deal with. We are not better than anybody else, but these are the things that we have faced down the years.

I want to focus on churches. On Second Reading, I spoke about Northern Ireland's unfortunate experience of these matters, and about the need for churches and places of worship to have a plan in place. I made it my business to go and talk to my churches and to get their thoughts. They want to be part of the process, so we need to see how we can help them. I note that a few of my questions have been asked by other hon. Members, so I will restrict my remarks to churches' questions about their roles and responsibilities. I ask my questions constructively.

On new clause 2, which I understand will not be moved tonight, I have spoken to a number of churches and key holders in my constituency, and they have all told me that they include terrorism plans in their annual child protection training, which they undertake at their own cost. Those are massive steps for people who may have faced some of these things in the past, but who suddenly find themselves thrown into the cauldron because of where they are. One church highlighted that it ran a special awareness event after the Southport atrocity in recognition that the church hall, where most of the adults gather, is a different building from the one used for church events.

I just want to understand how the process will work. This hyper-awareness is good as long as it is not driven by fear. I want to focus on that fear. I think it was the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) who referred to the fear that some people experience on these issues. In church services and meetings, where there are children and elderly people present, or in community group meetings, we do not normally have to deal with these things, but now we have to, because it is important. The legislation is important. That is why the Minister is bringing it forward, and why the House will support it.

We need to ensure that the larger venues and churches have support, so that there is no fear—just a plan of action. People can focus on the fear and become incredibly worried, or they can focus on a plan of action to ensure that if something happens, they can stop it. That is where I wish to focus. I will give the example of Queen's hall in Newtownards in my constituency, which can hold about 300 people. The events that I have been to there are nearly all charity events. It holds charity events, church events and fundraising events for missionary organisations, and they all galvanise a lot of people and bring them in. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) referred to the onus being on the organisations. I always try to be constructive, and I ask the Minister constructively what that will mean for how such places function, and how they will focus on looking after the people.

I also ask for clarity on the help that churches can expect to receive on training, to ensure that they are compliant with the standard tier expectations. They are not saying that they will not do what the Bill asks. They will; that is not the issue. I am just thinking about how we can help those churches, charity groups and others to gain the experience that they will clearly need. Will funding be made available to the charitable sector for the provision of training and assistance? Will a dedicated professional be available to churches on this issue? Will they check that churches are compliant and have a fit-for-purpose plan of action? That is my request on behalf of the churches that have spoken to me.

We must remember that churches can be largely self-governing, and the smaller churches outside the mainstream of the Presbyterians, the Anglicans, the Methodists and the Roman Catholics do not have bodies to break this down for them. I am asking on behalf of those smaller churches. I attend a smaller church—the Baptist church—but I am also thinking of the Elim church and the Brethren halls, of which my Strangford constituency has a great many, with large congregations. I make these

queries in a constructive fashion, and I know that the Minister will give the answers, not just to me but to everyone in the House.

Dr Luke Evans: I too have lots of churches in my constituency, and while I fully support the legislation, I do worry about some of the rural churches. There is a risk of a fine, if they are not compliant. Does that mean that there is a risk that those venues, which are already under stress, would not be able to open? I hope that is not the case, and that the Minister can allay some of my fears, but given how the legislation is written, that could be a prospect. That would be very damaging for many of the rural churches in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member has made his point very well, and I am sure that the Minister will answer it. I just want to make sure that the churches, the charities, the missionary groups and the community groups across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are able to meet, and that they get the necessary help to ensure that normal life continues. The churches all need to know what to do and when.

It took me a long time to be able to talk about the Southport stabbings, because they left horrors in the mind of every one of us. They shocked many on the mainland, but in Northern Ireland they recalled to our memories horrific attacks and the days of having men at our doors during a service. Times have changed, and so too have procedures, but we still have enough trauma to recognise the danger. The churches and charity groups tell me that they want to be equipped, and to be able to respond. This legislation calls for the churches and the charities to be equipped. I am asking the Government, and in particular the Minister, to ensure that there is help and support, in case the unthinkable does take place.

7.45 pm

Mike Tapp (Dover and Deal) (Lab): This legislation is a fitting tribute to Martyn Hett and the lives of 21 others that were tragically cut short in the 2017 Manchester Arena attack. It is also a testament to the tireless efforts of Martyn's mother, Figen Murray, who has campaigned with such dignity and determination to ensure that no family endures the pain that hers has suffered. This Bill is about increased resilience for us as a country. It seeks to make our public spaces safer by requiring premises and events to take proportionate, practical steps to prepare for and mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack. It is about ensuring that if the unthinkable happens, lives are saved and harm is reduced. I speak with personal conviction on this matter. Having served in a counter-terror role, I have seen at first hand the devastating consequences of terrorism and the critical importance of the prior preparation that this Bill lays out. It is essential that our laws and systems keep pace with an ever-evolving risk.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that Manchester, in a way, stimulated or catalysed this legislation. It is bigger than that, but it is no more tragic, for it could not possibly be, as he has described. He is also right to say that terrorists are becoming more adaptable, so we have to adapt the way we deal with them. Legislation is part of that. It is difficult, because legislation takes a long time to perfect, if properly scrutinised in this House.

The amendments that have been tabled today are an attempt to improve the Bill, not to frustrate it. Does he agree that the Minister and the Government will need to regularly review the provisions of the legislation—there is reference in the Bill to reviews, guidance and so on—and that that will become an ongoing part of how we deal with that increasing adaptability on the part of those who seek to do us harm?

Mike Tapp: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. Any threat that this country faces is continuously reviewed by the Ministry of Defence, MI5, the police and the Government, and we adapt our approaches to suit.

That brings me to the fact that since 2017, MI5 and the police have disrupted 43 late-stage attacks, yet we have seen 15 domestic terror attacks in this country. These incidents underline the ongoing and difficult nature of the threats. I am sure the whole House will agree that we have the finest intelligence services in the world, and we owe it to them to enable their work as much as we possibly can from this place. This Bill is another step towards achieving that. The approach it proposes is both practical and proportionate for small and large venues. I commend the Government for engaging widely in the development of the Bill and for working with businesses, local authorities and security experts to ensure that it is both effective and proportionate. It is right that we in this House support the Bill, and in doing so, we send a clear message that we will not only remember those we have lost but act decisively to protect those we serve.

Jerome Mayhew: Mention has been made during the course of this debate of cross-party consensus and what a good thing that is. In some senses that is absolutely right. We should have absolute cross-party consensus on honouring the memory of Martyn Hett and all those who were killed and injured in the Manchester Arena attack in May 2017, but I raise a note of caution because sometimes when we stop being adversarial in this place, we create legislation that is not as good as it could be. That is particularly the case where we have a very emotive issue such as this, and where there is a huge amount of personal sympathy across all the parties in the House. There is a risk that extreme circumstances provoke a natural reaction of saying, "Something must be done. This has to be prevented from ever happening again," and we end up with bad law.

There is a good example of this risk in the Bill's progression from its development under the previous Administration, through the election and out the other side. The initial intention of clause 2 was that the standard duty would apply to premises with a capacity to welcome 100-plus people. In my view, this would have had a wholly disproportionate impact on the kind of community buildings that I represent as a church warden, as well as on the village halls that we have already discussed. Pretty much every village hall has the capacity to accommodate 100 people. Every church, bar the very smallest chapels, can expect to welcome 100 people at a wedding or funeral from time to time. There is a tiny, infinitesimally small risk of terrorism in these typically rural areas, yet the previous Administration's Bill would have imposed very significant costs and time commitments on volunteers. I have already mentioned a couple of times that I am a church warden and, again,

[*Jerome Mayhew*]

I emphasise the risk of unintended consequences when we are all so keen to get on that we do not challenge each other.

Sir John Hayes: To reassure my hon. Friend on that subject, he will understand that those of us who have served on the Intelligence and Security Committee are fearless in holding Ministers to account, as this Minister will no doubt find out, and similarly fearless in challenging the agencies, which do such a wonderful job for us. He is right that the agencies need to be questioned appropriately and scrutinised fully.

On my hon. Friend's second point, about proportionality, it is, of course, right that our response to risk measures the real character of that risk and is proportionate to it.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's intervention, and I am reassured by his comments.

In a previous life, I was a barrister specialising in health and safety risk and risk management, and I was later the managing director of the leisure company Go Ape—Members might not have heard of it—and was responsible for the risk management of over 1 million customers a year. We could have killed every single one of them, so I am deeply familiar with the appropriate mechanisms for risk management. One risk that has to be taken into account is that, if the response is too great or too onerous for the assessed risk, people might not think it is reasonable, leading to omission.

Effective risk management requires mitigations to be put in place that bear some relation to the severity of the anticipated adverse event multiplied by its likelihood. I am very concerned that the previous Administration's initial proposal that these duties should apply to premises with a capacity of as few as 100 people would have broken that association between a reasonable response and the assessed risk.

I am therefore grateful and impressed that the Government have listened and changed clause 2(2)(c) to raise the standard duty threshold to a capacity of 200. To my mind, that seems a reasonable compromise to protect smaller facilities, which are, of course, most likely to rely entirely on volunteers, and are unlikely to have the financial capacity to undertake the kind of paid-for training suggested by the Liberal Democrat new clause 2 or to have enough volunteers who are prepared to accept this additional burden on their free time. I think this strikes the right balance. However, I am concerned that paragraph (a) in clause 32 introduces a power, through regulations, to reduce the figure back down to 100 without giving a reason. Why is that?

I therefore support new clauses 25 and 26, which would set minimum thresholds of 200 for the standard duty and 500 for the enhanced duty. A cross-party approach has taken the Bill this far, and it is important that that approach is maintained.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I join other Members in paying tribute to Figen Murray for the tenacity and courage with which she has campaigned—a campaign that has done so much to bring us to this point. Any of us who have been touched, even indirectly, by a terrorist attack know the pain, the loss and the shock. That pain is only made worse if there is a suspicion that anything, no matter how slight,

might have been done to have avoided or reduced the harm done. In fighting this campaign, Mrs Murray really has done Martyn's memory proud.

As has been obvious throughout this debate, there is a huge amount of consensus on the need for the measures in this Bill. It is a good Bill. The draft Bill before the election was a good draft, it was improved by pre-legislative scrutiny, and the Bill that this Government introduced and that has come out of Committee is better. The decision before us tonight is not whether we want these measures, because I think we agree, without exception, that we do. The decision before us is what can be done to make this the very best Bill it can be—one that provides the protections that are so clearly needed, as we heard from witnesses in the Committee's evidence sessions and throughout the debate around the Bill, both inside and outside this House, without putting an unnecessary burden on those venues that do not need it for the purpose that we seek.

It is precisely because this Bill has broadly struck the right note that I rise to support new clauses 25 and 26, tabled in the names of the shadow Minister and the shadow Home Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) respectively. In doing so, I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests relating to hospitality, although I intend to speak primarily not on the hospitality sector, but on the voluntary sector and volunteer-run venues.

I am thinking, in particular, of a venue in the constituency I represented until this year's general election. The Brierley Hill Civic is a medium-sized venue in the Black Country and, about a decade ago, an asset transfer process was started to transfer it from Dudley council to Dudley council for voluntary service. Over that time, Dudley CVS has done a fantastic job—a really professional job in every sense of the word—in providing a first-class venue for the area. It will typically host a few events each year that top 500 attendees, although they do not reach as high as 800.

The standard duty in this Bill is absolutely appropriate for a venue like Brierley Hill Civic. The concern is about how Dudley CVS, which is primarily run by volunteers, would be able to fulfil the enhanced duties if the threshold were suddenly lowered, taking the venue into the enhanced duty category. That would cause them great difficulty on a practical level as well as a financial level, because as a non-profit-making organisation, they have to balance the books.

8 pm

The threshold of 800 people is right, because it will mean that venues like Brierley Hill Civic will not get dragged into having to deal with onerous burdens. However, clause 32 could see such venues facing burdens, even in a hypothetical situation, that they are ill-equipped to carry out. I am worried about the impact those measures could have on decisions made by venues run by the voluntary sector, such as Brierley Hill Civic, about potentially investing to expand capacity to 500 or more. Such venues may think that a future Secretary of State could use the powers in clause 32 to lower the thresholds, so that such investments, at the same time as costing money, would lead to additional burdens. The Minister for Security said that extensive consultations

had, quite rightly, been undertaken to arrive at the figure of 800 people, but if that figure were lowered, it would drag in organisations like Dudley CVS, which would be dangerous.

I agree with the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), who sadly is no longer in his place, when he said that it would be sad to water down the Bill in any way. We do not seek to dilute, water down or diminish any part of what is in the Bill. However, we are worried about the use of delegated legislation powers to fundamentally change the provisions of the Bill, as it has been brought to the House at this point, and who it applies to. Not long ago, Members of the Minister's party would attack anything that resembled Henry VIII powers at every opportunity. I worry that a sudden conversion in government has seen them become a little bit too relaxed about falling back on those delegated powers in a way that is not needed.

If, at a later date, the Government want to bring substantially more organisations and venues into the provisions of the Bill, at either level, they can come back with primary legislation, which we can debate and consider. However, that is not what is being proposed today, which is why I will be voting for amendments 25 and 26. This is a good Bill, but we should not roll back the progress the Government have rightly made and we should stick to the thresholds as set out in the Bill.

Sammy Wilson: I fully understand the reasoning and the demand for a Bill such as this when it became known that, after a terrorist event, lives were lost because of bad organisation. If it is possible to introduce legislation that helps to avoid a situation that we have seen develop in the past, then of course we should do it. However, we have to be cognisant that when we introduce legislation, it has consequences for the people to whom it applies.

As we have heard time and again during the debate, Members believe that this legislation is both proportionate and practical. If Members genuinely believe that that is the case, there is absolutely no reason why new clause 1 should not be supported. We are entering a new field and imposing new regulations on bodies that were not regulated in relation to terrorism before, so surely it is important that we find out whether or not the objective and the intention is actually fulfilled. One way to do that is to monitor the effect over a period of time.

I have some concerns about the legislation, which people have already raised. In many cases, I do not think that the measures are practical. Secondly, I do not believe that they will not have an impact. That is not what Members expected and it is not what they want. Members across the House have said that they think the legislation may put people off engaging in activities that they would have undertaken in the absence of the regulations—activities that make a valuable contribution to their communities.

There is always a danger that people interpret the legislation that comes before the House, and sometimes our own rhetoric encourages them to do so. They may think a result of this legislation will be that it reduces the danger of people suffering a terrorist attack. To be clear, that is not and cannot be the purpose of the Bill. Terrorist attacks can be stopped only if we have intelligence, the security forces can act on that intelligence and we act in time. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) pointed out, the legislation

is more about what happens after the event. However, it is not only about what happens after the event. The legislation puts obligations on people before they make a decision to undertake an event. Some of the wording in the Bill raises concerns.

Chris Murray: To clarify, I was not saying the legislation was only of value after an event. I said that part of its value was the impact it had on planning for the period after an event. On the burden the right hon. Gentleman talks about on people making preparations, does he accept that it is important that they consider the potential impact of events and think in advance about that in taking those decisions? That is how we will avoid the kind of atrocities we have seen.

Sammy Wilson: Let us look at some of the language and the requirements in the Bill that are totally reasonable. For example, the Bill sets out that people who are organising events should have plans

“for evacuating individuals from the premises”.

As far as I know, that already happens. At many of the events I attend, before the event even starts, somebody stands up and says, “Here are some house rules: in the event of a fire, the exits are here, here and here. Leave in an orderly way. When you get outside, meet at a certain point, so we can check everybody is out of the area.” There are measures in the Bill that are reasonable and that I would assume people are already doing. If they are not doing them, then it is not onerous on them to start saying that at the beginning of an event.

However, the Bill applies to retail as well. It is easy to communicate that kind of information to people if they are in a theatre or at some kind of concert, but it is a bit more difficult to communicate that to individuals when they are moving in and out of retail premises. We have to be careful about the practicalities of what we ask people to do.

Let me set out some of the things I have concerns about, which I believe are unreasonable to require of organisations. First, “public protection procedures” have to be

“followed by individuals working on the premises or at the event if there is reason to suspect that an act of terrorism is occurring, or is about to occur, on the premises”.

I suppose it is fairly obvious if something is “occurring”—we know if something is happening—but what if it is likely or “about to occur”? Are organisers meant to liaise with the police and get intelligence from them—intelligence that the police may not be able to divulge, or may not even have? What onus does it put on individuals in terms of preparation, given the random nature of terrorism? We have seen somebody go into a pre-school class with a knife. Nobody could have anticipated that.

Furthermore, when an event is occurring, or might be about to occur, the organiser has to prevent individuals from entering the premises. If I were organising an event, I would want to know what kind of security requirement that puts on me as the organiser. Am I meant to ensure that a security presence is there? What kind of security presence? We have talked quite a lot tonight about the fact that many events of 200 people could be organised by ordinary community groups. I think of theatre groups in my constituency. The only interest that people who organise such events have is acting. They do not have any of the skills that might be

[Sammy Wilson]

required to prevent people from entering the premises, so do they need to have security apparatus, such as security people?

The next measure about which there is a degree of ambiguity is the requirement that organisers do not divulge security information relating to the premises or event. I understand that they should not send out plans of the building in which they will be operating, showing the doors through which people can come in and get out, and the easy and hard ways into the premises. However, the Bill goes further than that. The organisers cannot give information about the event. The whole purpose of an event is to publicise it. Where will it be held? At what time will it be held? How many people can be facilitated? How do people get tickets? The point that I am trying to make is that there is language in the Bill about which I would have a lot of questions, were I an individual who was subject to it, because if I did not get it right, there would be a fine of up to £5,000 or £10,000.

Ben Maguire: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that he is making a compelling case to support new clause 2, tabled by the Liberal Democrats, which would provide for training to address some of the ambiguity that he describes?

Sammy Wilson: I do not believe that training would address the ambiguity, because the ambiguity is in the wording of the legislation with which people will be required to comply. We all know what happens with training schools. As soon as training is mentioned, people start rubbing their hands and thinking how much they will charge for it. We are talking about training for a one-off event.

When we introduce such legislation, we have to be careful not to put a burden on people. I know that Members have said that this is not a burden, but I hope that I have explained why I believe the Bill puts a burden on people whose main job is not security. I understand common-sense requirements being made of event organisers, but if someone's main job is not security at such events, they are more likely simply to drop the event.

I also support the amendments about the ability of the Secretary of State to change regulations, because that ability relates to not just the size of the premises, which can be decreased, but the purpose for which the premises will be used, the people who can be held responsible, and the scope of the premises that can be covered. The powers in clause 32 to amend the legislation are fairly extensive, and if the Secretary of State decides that there are to be changes in those four areas, the legislation that we approve tonight could be radically different in a year's time, because the review depends upon whether there is a need to reduce the vulnerability of events, as per clause 6(5).

8.15 pm

Terrorists are very adaptable. Large-scale events are a bit harder to attack, so they go to smaller-scale events. We have found that in Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned what terrorists did when they could not get through the security cordons in big towns: they went to

mission halls, where there were maybe 40 worshippers, in the middle of the country. Those places then became targets, as did Orange halls and small country pubs. Terrorists will be adaptable. I have no doubt that there will be an outcry at some stage because what we anticipated was vulnerable to terrorists has changed. Maybe smaller venues will become vulnerable. Will we then bring into scope those with a capacity of 100, or 50? The Secretary of State should not be able to change the regulations without coming back to the House, so that we do not find ourselves placing burdens on, and regulating, individuals we never intended to, and who would find it impossible to comply.

For those reasons, I support new clause 1 and the amendments that relate to the powers of the Secretary of State. I know that it is always difficult for Government Members to vote against their own party, but they should not forget that the Bill will affect activities, premises, organisations and businesses in every one of our constituencies. For that reason, we ought to be very careful about what we vote through tonight.

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I pay tribute to Figen Murray and her campaign team. That she has somehow been able to channel personal grief into a fierce determination to change the law is beyond inspiring. We should be clear that we would not be here tonight without her campaigning efforts. The whole House owes her a debt of gratitude.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today. As ever, I will endeavour to respond to the points that have been raised. I am particularly grateful for the constructive approach that has been taken to considering the Bill, today and at previous stages. I place on the record my thanks to the Opposition for the constructive way in which they have approached the Bill throughout its passage. It is time that this cross-party commitment to improving the safety and security of venues is delivered without further delay, and I am proud that we are moving one step closer tonight.

As hon. Members have heard during the passage of the Bill, the threat picture is complex, evolving and enduring. Since 2017, agencies and law enforcement have disrupted 43 late-stage plots, and there have been 15 domestic terror attacks. In October, we heard from the director general of MI5 that the country is subject to the most interconnected threat environment that we have ever seen. Sadly, terrorists can seek to target a variety of locations. The examples of terrorist attacks that have been raised during the passage of the Bill are a sombre reminder of that. I pay tribute again to all victims and survivors of past attacks, as well as their loved ones, and all those affected. I reiterate the Government's commitment to supporting anyone affected by a terrorist attack.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and, indeed, the Opposition on the Bill. Of course, all hon. Members hope that future attacks will be prevented by the Bill, but, as has been mentioned, it is also about planning to ensure increased survivability for those impacted by an attack. With that comes the need to ensure that the support we provide to victims is fit for purpose. What efforts will the Minister make to improve support for victims of terrorism?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises an important point. One of the most humbling parts of this job is meeting those who have been the victims of terrorism and their families. I think of people like Figen Murray, Brendan Cox, Travis Frain, Dr Cath Hill—all people I have spoken to recently. We are working across Government to progress this important work, and I intend to meet victims and survivors in the new year to hear more about their experiences and say more about what we will do as a Government to support them.

The Bill will improve protective security and organisational preparedness across the UK, making us safer. We heard about the excellent work that many businesses and organisations already do to improve their security and preparedness. However, without a legislative requirement, there is no consistency. The Bill seeks to address that gap and complement the outstanding work that the police, the security services and other partners continue to do to combat the terror threat. As a result, qualifying premises and events should be better prepared to respond and to reduce harm in the event of a terrorist attack. Additionally, certain larger premises and events will have to take steps to reduce their vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

The public have a right to feel safe, and that is what this legislation seeks to deliver. I am grateful for the considered way in which the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) approached the debate. It is clear that the focus of the Opposition's amendments and concerns is on, among other things, the impact on business and smaller organisations. I assure him that that has been a central consideration for the Government, informed by extensive engagement, as well as pre-legislative scrutiny by the Home Affairs Committee and two public consultations under the previous Government. As a result, the version of the Bill that this Government have brought forward includes important changes to ensure that we can achieve public protection outcomes and that there are no undue burdens on businesses and other organisations.

The Government have, of course, raised the standard tier threshold from 100 to 200, which creates a more appropriate scope. We have also added a reasonably practicable standard of requirements for the procedures required under both tiers. That concept is in line with other regulatory regimes, such as health and safety, and is designed to allow procedures and measures to be tailored to the specific circumstances of a premises or event.

Sir John Hayes: Mindful of what the Minister said about consulting and acting in accordance with the consultation, and of what I said earlier about the changing character of the threat, I ask him to commit from the Dispatch Box to considering, as the legislation begins to have effect, changing the guidance and improving regulation where necessary, sensitive to those circumstances.

Dan Jarvis: If the right hon. Gentleman bears with me for a moment, I intend to say more on the matter, but I assure him that if he is not satisfied, I will give way to him again.

We have introduced a fairer basis for calculating whether a premises or event is in scope. Replacing capacity with the "reasonable expectation" of the number of people who may be present will reflect the actual usage of premises or attendance at events. I am confident that this version of the Bill strikes precisely the right balance.

I turn to amendments 25 and 26 tabled by the hon. Member for Stockton West for the Opposition. Clause 32 will allow the Secretary of State to increase or decrease the qualifying threshold for either tier. We anticipate that the thresholds would be reduced to either floor only in very limited circumstances, such as if the nature of the threat from terrorism were to change significantly. That will enable the regime to maintain an appropriate balance between being able to protect the public and managing the burden on those responsible for premises and events. The amendments proposed would remove that ability.

Furthermore, the power is narrowly drafted, and regulations made under it will be subject to the affirmative procedure. In requiring the approval of both Houses before they are made, parliamentarians will be able to scrutinise any proposed changes. The Government therefore do not support the amendments.

I thank the hon. Member for amendment 27. I thought he made his points in a reasonable way, as he often does. While I understand the sentiment, the Government do not support the amendment, but let me explain why. It is intended that the Security Industry Authority will rely on advice and guidance in the first instance. However, a credible enforcement regime with suitable monetary penalties is necessary to ensure that the regulator can secure compliance, particularly where the regulator identifies serious or persistent non-compliance.

The maximum daily penalty amounts are set at a level to counter financial gain from non-compliance, recognising the breadth of organisations in scope as well as the potentially more serious consequences at larger venues. It is important that the Secretary of State has the power, by regulation, to change those maximum amounts, including to increase them if necessary—for example, if the amounts were to prove ineffective in ensuring compliance, or the figures needed updating to reflect changes in economic circumstances in the longer term.

Critically, when determining penalty amounts, the Bill requires the SIA to take into account a range of factors, including the seriousness of the contravention, any action taken to remedy or mitigate its effects, and an organisation's ability to pay. That will ensure the penalties are effective but proportionate. I reassure Members that changes will be subject to the affirmative procedure, unless they are simply to reflect inflation.

The hon. Member raised concerns over the role of the SIA as the regulator, which I believe is the motivation for tabling new clause 1. There are several reasons why the Government do not support the new clause. The Government are confident that the SIA is the right delivery option for the Martyn's law regulator, owing to its years of experience in increasing security standards and ensuring public protection. It already plays an important role in safeguarding the public through its work regulating the private security industry. The SIA has long-established inspection and enforcement functions that ensure compliance with its licensing regime, and it already works with security partners to promote best practice around counter-terrorism protective security.

Paul Holmes: Will the Minister give way?

Dan Jarvis: If the hon. Member will bear with me, I am going to address some of the points he raised.

[Dan Jarvis]

Furthermore, it will take at least 24 months following Royal Assent for the SIA to begin undertaking its enforcement duties. It would not be fair of us, nor indeed possible, to judge its performance before it has begun carrying out its new functions, which seems to be the effect of the new clause.

Sammy Wilson *rose—*

Dan Jarvis: I will make a bit of progress.

I can also assure the House that the Bill already contains provisions to ensure the appropriate oversight of the SIA. Ultimately, the Bill gives the SIA the tools that it will need to deliver its new enforcement functions successfully. We are committed to exploring wider opportunities to strengthen the SIA so that it can carry out its public protection role and deliver the Government's ambitious agenda.

I turn to the amendments on training provision tabled by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire). I thank him again for his interest in that important issue. As he knows, the Bill has been developed to ensure that those working at premises and events are better prepared to respond quickly to evolving situations in the event of a terrorist attack occurring or being suspected. Those workers make rapid decisions and take actions that could save lives. There is no specific training requirement in the Bill, but it is essential that workers with responsibility for carrying out public protection procedures are adequately instructed—and, where appropriate, trained—to do so. Training and instruction will be tailored to the premises and events in question, and to the procedures that they have developed, rather than our using a one-size-fits-all approach.

Paul Holmes *rose—*

Dan Jarvis: I will make a bit more progress.

The Government think that the focus of premises and events should be on how to ensure that their people can effectively carry out their roles, rather than requiring the completion of generic modules or courses. We understand the importance of training, and so have committed to publishing free dedicated guidance and support. That guidance will ensure that those responsible for qualifying premises and events have the information required to understand and identify training needs. The Government also intend to signpost a range of training offers, including the significant support that we offer in the shape of access to expert advice and training on ProtectUK, which already includes free access to the "Action Counters Terrorism" and "See, Check and Notify" training packages. Furthermore, following Royal Assent, the Government intend for there to be an implementation period of at least 24 months before the legislation's commencement. We are confident that that will allow sufficient time to understand the new obligations and to plan and prepare accordingly, including by training staff where necessary.

I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I want to respond to points made by a number of hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) made important points about the threat of terrorism. He also rightly paid tribute to Manchester city council for its work with local businesses. What he said about proportionality should reassure any businesses that might have concerns.

As a former police officer, my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop) speaks with great authority on these matters, and I pay tribute to him for his service. He rightly made the point that the Bill is not just about securing physical premises but has a wider value, and that protecting the public is not just a matter for Government; others also have an important responsibility in that area.

Let me turn to the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), who has been very patient. I have to say, I am a little mystified that he is not on the Opposition Front Bench. He seems an effective performer and responded well on Second Reading. *[Interruption.]* I am not sure that I am helping him, but I thought he made a strong contribution again tonight, and I found his words about Martyn's legacy particularly moving. I am grateful for his constructive approach this evening and previously. He helpfully highlighted concerns about smaller venues, particularly small theatres. I assure him that there has been extensive consultation with smaller venues, although I am sorry that it did not include the constituency venue that he mentioned.

All hon. Members have village halls, churches and community halls in our constituencies, and we all recognise the hugely important role that volunteers play. The Government raised the standard tier threshold from 100 to 200 people specifically in response to the feedback, including from those operating smaller venues similar to ones that the hon. Member for Hamble Valley mentioned. We assess that that has resulted in a reduction in the proportion of village halls in scope of the Bill's requirements from 56% under the original proposals to 13% now. I assure him that we will continue to work closely with smaller venues to ensure the easiest transition to the new arrangements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) said that the nature of terrorism is constantly evolving, and that we need to plan to protect against it. He pointed out that the Bill contains straightforward measures—prompts, essentially—that are light touch and proportionate. He also very helpfully referenced the Edinburgh example. I hope that that provides positive evidence of the potential benefits to businesses of the measures.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was constructive, as he always is. He speaks with great experience and authority on matters relating to terrorism, so I always listen carefully to what he has to say, and often find it profoundly moving, as I have again tonight. He mentioned churches, which he has raised with me before. The Government acknowledge that places of worship have a unique and important role in communities right across the country, and have considered them very carefully in the context of this legislation. We have consulted extensively with churches and with places of worship more generally, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to work closely with them to ensure that they have the support and guidance they need. That is a commitment that I make to him.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Dan Jarvis: I am conscious of time, so I will keep going, not least because I want to briefly reflect on the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Dover and Deal (Mike Tapp). He spoke with personal conviction

and experience, and I know that he understands the importance of preparation and planning—I will not say the second bit of that phrase. He also rightly paid tribute to our intelligence services, and I echo that tribute.

The hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) spoke with authority, not just as a Member of this House but as a church warden, and made a really interesting point about critical challenge. I hope he will appreciate this point: the Bill is the result of two very extensive public consultations and pre-legislative scrutiny. It is forged from all that work. That is why I am confident that the measures in the Bill are proportionate and reasonable. However, I was grateful for the constructive challenge he offered.

The hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) made a number of constructive points about thresholds. I hope the responses I have already given have provided him and the venue in his constituency with the reassurance they want. Finally, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) spoke with passion, as he always does, and raised a number of entirely reasonable concerns. I am afraid that we will not agree on every aspect of them this evening, but I hope that he will at least acknowledge that the Government have worked incredibly hard to ensure that the Bill is proportionate and not unreasonable, given the nature of the threat we face.

I will touch briefly on the Government amendments, which make only very minor and technical changes to the Bill to ensure that its purpose and intent is clear. They include small drafting changes for consistency, to remove unnecessary text, and to clarify technical detail.

In closing, I again pay tribute to Figen Murray and her campaign team, and thank them. Their campaigning for this legislation has been an inspiration to us all. Figen's son Martyn lost his life in the Manchester bombing. As the Home Secretary said on Second Reading,

"To suffer such a horrendous loss and somehow find the strength to fight for changes...is heroic."—[*Official Report*, 14 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 624.]

This is a vitally important Bill. The public deserve to feel safe when visiting public premises and attending events. It is therefore right that appropriate and reasonably practical steps be taken to protect staff and the public from the impact of terrorism. That is what the Bill seeks to achieve. Security will always be the foundation on which everything else is built, and for this Government, nothing will matter more. With that, I commend the Bill to the House.

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

Matt Vickers: I thank the Minister for his considered response to the debate. However, while entirely supporting the objectives of the Bill, we do not see why the Government cannot commit to a review of the effectiveness of the Security Industry Authority as the regulator, given that the Bill places an entirely new set of requirements on venues and an entirely new set of responsibilities on the SIA, so we will press new clause 1 to a Division.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 89, Noes 340.

Division No. 58]

[8.38 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Mims
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Jopp, Lincoln

Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Philp, rh Chris
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wild, James
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:

Rebecca Paul and
Mr Richard Holden

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia

Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beaena, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly

Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogie, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura

Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian

Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Wagh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia

Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Keir Mather and
Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 3

QUALIFYING EVENTS

Amendments made: 1, page 3, line 4, leave out “individuals will be employed or otherwise engaged” and insert “measures will be in place”.

This amendment and Amendment 8 make provision about how permission to access premises is checked.

Amendment 2, page 3, line 8, leave out “and” and insert “or

(iii) are members or guests of a club, association or other body, and”.—(*Dan Jarvis.*)

This amendment makes provision about events for members and guests of clubs, associations and other bodies.

Clause 22

APPEALS AGAINST PENALTIES

Amendments made: 3, page 16, line 15, leave out “appealed against” and insert “to give or vary the notice”.

This is a drafting change.

Amendment 4, page 16, line 21, leave out “appealed against” and insert “to give or vary the notice”.—(*Dan Jarvis.*)

This is a drafting change.

Schedule 1

SPECIFIED USES OF PREMISES

Amendment made: 5, page 35, line 31, leave out “(or guests of members)” and insert “or guests”.—(*Dan Jarvis.*)

This is a drafting change.

Schedule 2

EXCLUDED PREMISES AND EVENTS

Amendments made: 6, line 20, after “ground” insert “that is not a designated sports ground”.

This amendment clarifies that large sports stadia are not excluded from the application of Part 1 of the Bill.

Amendment 7, page 36, line 21, leave out “, exercise”.

This amendment omits an unnecessary reference to a particular type of recreation and leisure.

Amendment 8, page 36, line 22, leave out “individuals are employed or otherwise engaged” and insert “measures are in place”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.

Amendment 9, page 36, line 26, at end insert “, or

(c) are members or guests of a club, association or other body.”

This amendment makes provision about parks and similar places which are open only to members and guests of clubs, associations and other bodies.

Amendment 10, page 36, line 26, at end insert—

“(3A) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (3) disregard measures in place in relation to—

(a) particular events, if the measures do not limit public access to the premises at other times, or

(b) particular facilities, if the measures do not limit public access to the premises generally.”

This amendment and Amendment 11 make provision clarifying the application of paragraph 3 of Schedule 2.

Amendment 11, page 36, line 26, at end insert—

“(3A) Nothing in this paragraph—

(a) prevents premises which do not fall within this paragraph, but form part of premises which do, being qualifying premises;

(b) prevents events held at premises which fall within this paragraph, or form part of such premises, being qualifying events.”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 10.

Amendment 12, page 36, line 29, at end insert

“(and see section 1(4) of that Act for the meaning of “designated sports ground”)”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 6.

Amendment 13, page 36, line 32, at end insert

“(and see Article 3 of that Order for the meaning of “designated sports ground”)”.—(*Dan Jarvis.*)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 6.

Schedule 4

LICENSING: DISCLOSURE OF PLANS OF PREMISES

Amendments made: 14, page 45, line 27, leave out “a post-commencement” and insert “an”.

This amendment and other Government amendments of Schedule 4 remove transitional provision that does not need to be in the Bill.

Amendment 15, page 45, line 29, leave out “a post-commencement” and insert “an”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 16, page 45, line 31, leave out “post-commencement”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 17, page 45, line 32, leave out “post-commencement”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 18, page 45, line 38, leave out from beginning to end of line 14 on page 46.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 19, page 46, line 15, leave out “a post-commencement” and insert “an”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 20, page 46, leave out lines 23 to 26.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 21, page 50, line 15, leave out “post-commencement”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 22, page 50, line 17, leave out “post-commencement”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 23, page 50, line 18, leave out “a post-commencement” and insert “an”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Amendment 24, page 50, leave out lines 24 to 35.—
(*Dan Jarvis.*)

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 14.

Third Reading

King’s consent signified.

8.54 pm

Dan Jarvis: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I start by thanking everyone across the House who has contributed to the debates on the Bill for their incisive and necessary contributions and their considered scrutiny. I thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Keir Mather) who has done such an excellent job in whipping the Bill through. I also thank the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) and the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) for their work on the Opposition Front Bench during the earlier stages of the Bill and the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) for taking over so ably on Report. I look forward to continuing to work with him in his new role.

Hon. Members will be aware of the Bill’s history, coming as it does out of the tragic events of the Manchester Arena attack in May 2017. I take this opportunity once more to pay tribute to the 22 victims of the horrific Manchester Arena attack, and to Figen Murray, mother of one of the victims, Martyn Hett. Her campaigning has been crucial in driving the Bill forward. We would simply not be here debating this legislation without her.

During these debates, I have been particularly moved by the contributions of hon. Members who have spoken on behalf of constituents who have been affected by the attacks in Manchester, Borough Market and elsewhere, and the important reflections and lessons we can learn from recent history in Northern Ireland. The Bill is one part of our already extensive efforts across Government, including those of the police and security services, to combat the threat of terrorism. I take the opportunity to thank them for their vital work in keeping our country safe; we owe them a debt of gratitude.

As hon. Members have heard me say more than once in this place, the first responsibility of any Government is to keep the public safe. This cross-party commitment to improve the safety and security of venues in the wake of the Manchester Arena attack must be delivered without further delay. The Bill was a manifesto commitment, and I am proud that we have been able to introduce it so early in the Session. I thank colleagues from across the House for their support for the Bill, which has enabled it to progress through its stages in this place so smoothly. I am also grateful to the previous members of the Home Affairs Committee for their report; its recommendations have been crucial in shaping the Bill.

I also take the opportunity to say an enormous thank you to the following people: Ella Terry in my private office; the Bill team of Tom Ball, Chloe White, James Fair and Izzy Hancock; Michelle Chapman and the policy team;

Kris Lee and his legal team; Joel Wolchover and Tim McAttackney at the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel; and Debbie Bartlett and Shaun Hipgrave, whose leadership over several years has been exemplary. I also thank all the many civil servants, including those in the Home Office analysis and insight and comms teams, who have worked on the Bill with great diligence and professionalism. Many of them have done so for several years. Finally, I thank the fantastic staff of this place for their work in supporting the Bill’s logistics, in particular the Doorkeepers and the parliamentary Clerks’ team.

I finish with a gentle word of encouragement to colleagues in the other place. It has been wonderful to have seen consensus on the Bill in this place. I hope that they will agree with us on the importance of the Bill and that this manifesto commitment can proceed as smoothly through the other place as it has done here. After several years, and as Figen has said, it is time to get this done.

8.59 pm

Matt Vickers: Recent years have seen too many tragedies and too many precious lives taken by terrorist attacks—hurt that will never truly heal. Despite those tragedies, inspirational people such as Figen Murray and Survivors Against Terror have shown us that good can come from bad, and that the power is in our hands to act, even in the shadow of grief. Martyn’s law and everyone who has worked to make it a reality are an embodiment of that spirit.

Implementing this legislation will require us all to work together. National security is a collective endeavour. Organisations affected by the changes are acutely aware of their responsibility. They understand the importance of protecting their customers from terror, and are committed to ensuring that people can attend concerts, exhibitions and performances with the confidence that they are safe. That spirit of collaboration and mutual responsibility ultimately will make the provisions in Martyn’s law a success.

The responsibility goes both ways. Just as we expect venues to take the necessary steps in the Bill, they expect the Government to approach its implementation in a measured and sensible manner. I want to finish by thanking the Government for continuing the important work on the Bill, and to reiterate to the Minister my willingness to work with him on its passing and implementation.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 to 5 together.

Ordered,

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

That Wendy Morton be discharged from the Backbench Business Committee and Martin Vickers be added.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

That Mims Davies be discharged from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Damian Hinds be added.

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

That Josh Simons be discharged from the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and Jon Pearce be added.

TREASURY

That Lucy Rigby be discharged from the Treasury Committee and John Grady be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

Pimping websites and paying for sex

9.1 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I rise on the 15th day of the 16 days of activism against violence against women and girls. Sexual exploitation for commercial gain is a form of violence and abuse. Pimping websites provide a platform for abusers to sell women for sex, and our current legislation is inadequate to tackle it.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of West Lancashire,

Declares that demand from the minority of men who pay for sex is driving the prostitution and sex trafficking trade, and this sexual exploitation is being facilitated by pimping websites that operate with impunity.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to outlaw pimping websites and paying for sex, and provide support, not sanctions, to victims of sexual exploitation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003027]

Waste and Recycling

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Kate Dearden.*)

9.2 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise these issues this evening. The UK Government's approach to waste management and recycling has evolved significantly in recent years, reflecting growing environmental concerns and the push for sustainability. Every single year, the UK generates nearly 200 million tonnes of total waste, but recycling rates in England have been stagnant for some time. The previous Conservative Government made huge efforts to improve that in recent years. Their simpler recycling reforms will move us towards a more consistent system across England. In 2026 we are expected to see the majority of planned recycling reforms come into effect, with recyclable plastic films to come in 2027.

The last Government made great progress with their "maximising resources, minimising waste" programme, which brought together a range of initiatives to keep products and materials in circulation for as long as possible, and at their highest value, including through increasing reuse, repair and remanufacture, helping to grow the economy and boost employment. These plans included scrapping fees for households to have bulky domestic furniture collected from their homes in 2025, saving people money and making it easier for them to recycle furniture so it can be reused, as well as helping to prevent fly-tipping.

The last Government did not stop there. They also made reforms to ensure collections of food waste for most households across England by 2026. Further still, they delivered on reforms for reporting requirements for extended producer responsibility, meaning that producers and businesses will be required to pay for the collection and disposal of household packaging that they supply when it becomes waste. That will cut waste and move costs away from local authorities.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Minister will not be surprised to see me speak in a debate on waste. I put it to the hon. Gentleman that for all his recounting of what the previous Conservative Government did, he may want to look to Wales and to the experience and success of the Welsh Labour Government, who have some of the highest recycling rates in the world.

Matt Vickers: I am glad to hear that. Hopefully Stockton's Labour borough council can learn some lessons from Wales, because we have some of the most shambolic recycling rates in the entire country. There will be lessons to learn for Stockton-on-Tees borough council. Extended producer responsibilities will cut waste and move costs away from local authorities and taxpayers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. When it comes to records and what is being done well, I think we should recognise that my own local council is near the very top of the recycling charts in Northern Ireland, although there is still much to be achieved, of course. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that to reach all our local government targets, and if we want to be good stewards of what we have, more support must be available to supply bigger recycling bins to customers? Further to that, does he

[Jim Shannon]

agree that we should ask the Minister to provide help to councils to enable them to do even more with recycling?

Matt Vickers: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. The receptacles that we recycle in are a game changer. In Stockton, we have these disposable bags that disappear off down the road whenever it is windy, never to be seen again. Having the right recycling receptacles is important. As a country, we need to look to the councils that do it well, learn the lessons and roll out best practice.

The previous Government kick-started plans for a comprehensive deposit return scheme. It is estimated that UK consumers go through about 14 billion plastic drinks bottles and 9 billion drinks cans every single year, often contributing to our litter epidemic.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend raises the issue of plastic. With the growth of anaerobic digesters dealing with more food waste, energy-from-waste incinerators are now burning more plastic. BBC analysis of five years of real data shows that incinerators are now the dirtiest way to produce power. Does he agree that in dealing with recycling and its growth, we should not be building more incinerators—and in particular not building the Wisbech incinerator?

Matt Vickers: I agree wholeheartedly. Putting these plants in the right place is a very big deal—I know how hard my right hon. Friend worked to prevent that. I could not agree more. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on the roll-out of the deposit return scheme and say when it is set to be delivered.

Of course, it is not just businesses but local communities that can support the Government's goals to ensure responsible waste disposal.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. If the hon. Member could come further forward and sit back down, a formal intervention could then be made quite smoothly and quickly.

Matt Vickers: I would be very happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Iqbal Mohamed: I thank the hon. Gentleman. My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On the matter of consumers taking responsibility for recycling, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the prevalence of accessible recycling centres, and having them close to where people live, is important in increasing the volume of recycling that we can achieve? One recycling centre that was used by my constituents has been closed down, which means that the nearest centre now is more than 3 miles away. Does he agree that keeping these recycling centres open and making them more effective at recycling would be a step forward?

Matt Vickers: I agree entirely. As we look across the piece at the challenges we face in recycling, we should be doing everything we can to make it as convenient and as local to people as possible. We have to worry about

the consequences of not having local recycling schemes. Some people might dispose of their waste irresponsibly and choose to fly-tip instead of making the journey.

An estimated 2.25 million pieces of litter are dropped every day in the UK, with the consequence that around £1 billion is spent every year by local authorities and land managers to clear it up. In Stockton West, we are fortunate to have some amazing, community-spirited litter-picking groups: the Thornaby community litter pickers, the Eaglescliffe community litter project, the Ingleby Barwick litter pickers and the Hartburn community litter pick. These incredible volunteers protect our environment and restore pride in our communities.

The last Government took action and increased the maximum fines for fly-tippers from £400 to £1,000, alongside increasing the maximum fine for those who litter or graffiti from £150 to £500. What further steps are the Government taking to tackle that important issue, and what steps are they taking to support and recognise these important community litter pick groups?

The Government must allow an environment for businesses to innovate and help to create solutions that support households to reduce waste, and they must tackle the 40.4 million tonnes of commercial and industrial waste generated every year. Businesses that innovate in this space for the common social good include Amazon, whose Multibank initiative helps redistribute 750,000 items of surplus goods to families in need. We were delighted to see its most recent scheme launch in Teesside, reducing waste while improving people's lives.

Humans waste around 40% of the food produced, and that contributes 10% of global emissions. The Government should champion enterprises such as Too Good To Go in their efforts to reduce food waste, taking excess produce and ensuring that it is put to good, value-for-money use. Currently, the Government's target is to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030, and they must take further policy measures to ensure that we reach that target. One cost-effective measure to the taxpayer that Too Good To Go is calling for is mandatory public food waste reporting, which would deliver a vital first step in measuring food wastage and drive businesses to innovate for meaningful change and allow customers to make informed decisions. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are considering mandatory food waste reporting?

The answer to our waste and recycling challenges starts at home—in fact, in every home in the country, and how they dispose of their waste. Local authorities have the biggest role in determining that, as they decide how and where people can dispose of their waste and recycling. Although the Government can go so far directly, they also have a role in ensuring that local authorities are doing all they can to support residents and businesses to drive up recycling rates. While UK councils are required to run a service that collects recycling and garden waste separate from general waste, councils are not obligated by legislation to separate the different types of recycling. Different recyclable materials may not be collected if it is not “technically or economically practicable”.

A study by the TaxPayers' Alliance found that many constituents and households had concerns that they would have to deal with multiple different bins, placing unnecessary obligations on households and businesses. We have seen a complete disparity among local authorities

when it comes to delivering the Government's waste and recycling strategy. Some local authorities have up to 10 different bins compared with others that have only two. Although waste collection is one of the primary services provided by councils, the inconsistent and often inefficient approach has hugely varying consequences. Good, efficient councils provide accessible, reliable, well-used services, while others less so, with real consequences for littering, fly-tipping and recycling rates.

In my constituency, Stockton's Labour-led council provides the worst example, with poor services and even poorer value for money. Stockton's Labour council has presided over the worst recycling rate in the region, and its rates are so poor that they are among the worst in the entire country. Local litter pickers have questioned why the council are failing to take action on fly-tippers, with Stockton being among the lowest performing when it comes to issuing penalties. All the while, the verges of the A66, one of the gateways to the town, remain covered in discarded cans, bottles and rubbish.

It is about to get a whole lot worse. Despite Labour subjecting residents to some of the highest council tax rates in the entire country, the council decided to vastly reduce waste and recycling services. It is axing weekly bin collections, and now residents will have to stack up waste for fortnightly collections. It has closed four local recycling centres, making people travel to other towns to dispose of their recycling.

Adam Jogee: I am enjoying listening to the hon. Gentleman's expression of support for Labour-led Stockton-on-Tees borough council. Between 2017 and 2019, the UK shipped 263 containers of waste to Sri Lanka. The UK had labelled them "used mattresses, carpets and rugs", but what Sri Lankan authorities found inside the containers has been described as "far more sinister". Does the hon. Gentleman agree that whereas the last Government had plenty of warm words, they were very quick to throw the problem as far away as they could?

Matt Vickers: That is an interesting point. I think that there is a responsibility on the Government and local authorities to ensure that we recycle stuff rather than shipping it abroad or putting it into landfill. It is our problem, and we should sort it out at home whenever possible. I look forward to what will be achieved in the next few years.

Stockton-on-Tees borough council is ending our free green waste collections, imposing additional charges on anyone wanting to get rid of grass clippings, fallen leaves and garden waste. The changes represent a fly-tippers charter, and there are now fears that Stockton could become the UK's fly-tipping capital, because these barriers could lead to more people disposing of waste irresponsibly. Residents ask me why their services are being slashed when the council tax that they pay is among the highest in the country.

While those on my Labour council are no good at dealing with waste collection, they are experts at producing plenty of waste. The council has spent nearly £16 million on recruitment consultants since 2021—£370,000 a month. It is refusing to answer questions about the use of other consultants and the costs; it is spending more on director salaries of over £100,000 than other councils across the region; it is spending money on flying people out to Montpellier and Copenhagen to watch shows and decide

whether they are worth featuring at the local festival; it continues to throw VIP soirées with free food and drink for councillors; and much, much more. Does the Minister agree that when it comes to delivering the Government's recycling aims and ambitions and driving up the UK's stagnant recycling rates, we need to ensure that all councils take their role seriously?

9.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship this evening, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) for raising this issue—he has certainly had a busy day, having moved from the Front Bench to the Back Benches—and I thank everyone else who has taken part in the debate.

The Secretary of State has made it clear that resources and waste are a priority issue for DEFRA, and I am pleased to share our plans in this regard. The Government are committed to the transition to a circular economy—a future in which we keep our resources in use for longer, reduce our carbon emissions and invest in critical infrastructure and green jobs in every nation and region, and in which our economy prospers and nature thrives. We want to abandon our linear and unsustainable "take, make, throw" model, which means that we extract resources from the Earth, make things and then throw them away, because there is no such place as "away". If the whole world consumed resources as we do in the UK, we would need 2.5 times the Earth's raw materials to sustain our current systems. Meanwhile, nearly 100 million tonnes of residual waste is disposed of annually, and waste crime alone costs our economy £1 billion every year.

That cannot continue. We must and will move toward a system that values longevity, repair and reuse over disposal. In our manifesto, we pledged to reduce waste by moving to a circular economy. That is why we have committed ourselves to developing a circular economy strategy for England, which we will create in partnership with experts from industry, academia, civil society, local government and beyond.

Steve Barclay: I am glad that the Minister has described this as a priority. She has a statutory target to halve residual waste, but what she has not mentioned is the impact that will have on mega-incinerators that are being built essentially to burn plastic. Does she accept that more than 30 environmental charities—charities usually linked to her party and the left—are strongly opposed to those incinerators, and will she commit herself to publishing an impact assessment on the effect of reducing residual waste on the need for incinerators?

Mary Creagh: I will come on to those points later in my speech, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will intervene if he does not get the satisfaction and clarity that he seeks. Good things come to those who wait.

Let me begin with the strategy. We want to have an economy-wide transformation of our relationship with our resources, which is all about supporting the Government's missions to kick-start economic growth, make Britain a clean energy superpower, and accelerate the path to net zero through our efforts to tackle waste crime and take back our streets. To answer the question posed by the hon. Member for Stockton West, preventing food waste

[Mary Creagh]

is key to my Department, and we are reviewing a range of issues associated with food waste in the supply chain. We hope to make further announcements soon.

Let me address the collection and packaging reforms, which the hon. Member outlined. They are an important starting point in transitioning to a circular economy, and we are proud of the steps that we have taken so far. Over the next three years, simpler recycling, extended producer responsibility and the deposit return scheme will deliver transformational change, creating thousands of new jobs and stimulating billions of pounds' worth of investment. Those three areas make up the three-legged stool of this Government's plan to kick-start the circular economy, so I will briefly take each one in turn.

The first area is simpler recycling. We recently affirmed our commitment to delivering simpler recycling in England, which will be introduced for businesses from 31 March 2025 and for households from 31 March 2026. This Government inherited legislation introduced by the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) that could have required households to have up to seven bins. As the hon. Member for Stockton West rightly said, some councils have up to 10 bins, but that is because they thought they were doing the right thing, given the signals that were being sent out under the previous Government. That places an unnecessary burden on people and businesses, and unnecessary clutter in everyone's front and back gardens. We are simplifying the rules to make recycling easier for people, while stimulating growth, maximising the benefits and ending the postcode lottery for recycling. Across England, people will be able to recycle the same materials at home, work or school.

The legislation for simpler recycling has already come into force. To confirm the final details of the policy, we laid regulations before Parliament on 3 December. The policy will support our ambition to recycle 65% of municipal waste by 2035. It is important to remember that figure, because when the last Labour Government brought in the landfill tax reforms in 2002, the original target was to have a recycling rate of 50% by 2015—a target that, sadly, was lost under the previous Government. Ten years on from that date, the target has still not been met.

The policy will also deliver an estimated £11.8 billion-worth of carbon savings between 2024 and 2035. As we have heard, local circumstances differ across the country, so we are making sure that councils and other waste collectors have the flexibility to make the best local choices. We know that local authorities may want to review their waste collection services to ensure that they provide best value for money. As is currently the case, local councils will continue to decide the frequency of waste collections in a way that suits the needs of their local community. The Government's priority is to ensure that households' needs are met, so we have recently published guidance to support councils in this area.

The second area is extended producer responsibility for packaging. To help fund simpler recycling, we are introducing in parallel extended producer responsibility for packaging, or pEPR, which will require obligated producers to pay the full end of life costs associated with the packaging that they place on the market. That will bring more than £1 billion of investment into local government waste collections, and incentivise producers

to reduce unnecessary packaging and make what they use even more sustainable. Those regulations have now been debated in both Houses. They received unanimous cross-party support and will come into force on 1 January 2025.

The third and final leg is the deposit return scheme—DRS—for drinks containers. We have seen this work in over 50 countries around the world. The DRS will make a real difference to people's lives by tackling litter and cleaning up our streets. Recycling rates will increase and the drinks industry will benefit from the high quality recycled materials that the DRS will provide. We are committed to delivering a deposit return scheme in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland in October 2027 and we will continue to work closely with industry partners, the Scottish Government and the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland to launch the scheme.

Iqbal Mohamed: I worked across Europe for more than 15 years, and a DRS scheme has been in place all over Europe during all that time. I have been hearing for so long that it would arrive in the UK, but it has not, so I would be interested to hear the timescales. Also, will the Government consider putting restrictions on the use of fresh plastics for drinks bottles? Instead of them being recyclable, can we make them recycled?

Mary Creagh: I share the hon. Gentleman's impatience. I am old enough to remember, as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee in 2017, hearing several predecessors of the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire promising that we would have a DRS scheme. The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) is also right to say that there is no point in recycling if there is no end market. I welcomed the plastic packaging tax that was introduced under the prime ministership of Theresa May, which mandates a 30% recycled content. The question, where fossil fuels are very cheap, is how we drive business's behaviour change, and that is under active consideration to ensure that there is an end market for the recyclates that are placed on the market.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about the timescale, we laid the regulations for England and Northern Ireland before Parliament on 25 November and we plan for the regulations to come into force in late January, parliamentary time permitting. The Scottish Government will then make the necessary amendments to legislation in Scotland. After that, the three Governments will appoint the Deposit Management Organisation in April 2025, for which applications opened on Monday 2 December, so this is all hot off the press, and this is a timely debate. The aim is for the DRS to come into force on 1 October 2027.

However, there is much more to do. On Friday, I was delighted to visit Suez's Malpass Farm facility in Rugby. Working in partnership with Cemex, Suez has provided 1 million tonnes of climafuel from non-recyclable waste, diverting it from landfill and reducing coal consumption in the neighbouring Cemex plant by 75,000 tonnes, thus enabling big industrial decarbonisation. Earlier today, I made a quick trip up to Newark to visit the Curry's site, which is home to one of its unique repair centres. I saw how Curry's, a great and proud British company, is using its resources and its market position to repair and

refurbish broken phones, laptops and tablets, and I recommend its refurbishment website to anyone looking for a last-minute gift from Santa.

Such industrial partnerships, working together to maximise the value of resources, demonstrate the role that the resources and waste sector can play in supporting net zero and supporting economic growth. A high-performing resources and waste sector is key to driving a circular economy. However, waste crime threatens this by taking resources away from that circular economy and from the good businesses that want to do the right thing and make those green investments. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) is interested in this, and I am glad to see him in his traditional place. Waste crime costs the country £1 billion a year, and we know that 18% of waste may be handled illegally at some point in the waste supply chain. That is around 34 million tonnes of waste every year. We are committed to tackling this scourge.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): The Minister has spoken about many different types of rubbish, but not where it often goes, which is to household waste recycling centres. Not content with the Tory tip tax, cash-strapped Norfolk county council has gone further in trying to encourage fly-tipping by creating a mad booking system for residents who want to use household waste recycling centres. Will the Minister extend the same guidance to household waste recycling centres that she has talked about extending to kerbside recycling schemes?

Mary Creagh: I am very happy to look at that, but I gently tell the hon. Gentleman that after more than a decade of austerity, providing more services with less money is a challenge, and many local councils have not been able to square that circle. Rather than indulging in thinking about what could be done in a perfect world, we have to look at the world we are in and ask, “What can we do?” It is clear that this three-legged stool of reforms will put some much-needed fresh cash into the system, so that the various municipal collections can be ready for the go-live dates, and there may be opportunities in that.

We have had several debates about fly-tipping, and there were more than 1 million fly-tipping incidents in 2022-23, which is 10% more than we had three years ago. As the hon. Member for Stockton West said, Stockton-on-Tees alone has had 1,700 fly-tipping incidents. We cannot allow these incidents to continue, and I pay tribute to the many local litter groups he has met. I will have the enjoyment of meeting the Aylesbury Wombles in Parliament this Wednesday, and there are little groups everywhere.

We want fly-tippers and vandals to clean up the mess they have created, and we must take back our country from these criminals who blight our communities and undermine legitimate businesses. I look forward to providing details on that.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my favourite Minister in His Majesty's Government for giving way. Notwithstanding any legal action relating to Walleys Quarry, will the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), and the Minister join me in paying tribute to all the hard-working, good and loyal subjects in Newcastle-under-Lyme who

campaign, day in and day out, for clean air, healthier lungs and the kind of change we so desperately want to see?

Mary Creagh: What we saw there was a local community campaigning to stop the stink, and I am pleased that the regulator has taken swift action.

On the point raised by the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire about energy from waste, his Government failed to reach their recycling targets. We do not support over-capacity of energy from waste, and incineration should be an option only for waste that cannot be prevented, reused or recycled, such as medical waste or nappies.

In the waste hierarchy, recovering energy from waste is still preferable to disposing of waste in landfill. It maximises the value of the resources being disposed of, and avoids the greater environmental impact of landfill, which continues for generations, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee). We cannot solve today's problems by storing them up for future generations, so we will shortly publish our analysis of the need for further energy from waste development in England, following delivery of our reforms. However, I make it clear that it is for the relevant planning authority to determine the need for proposed developments. Our capacity assessment will help inform decision making on planning.

Steve Barclay: In a classic example of joined-up government, many of these incinerators, including the Wisbech incinerator, are classed as nationally significant infrastructure, so decisions on them are made by the Government, not devolved locally. I welcome the Minister saying that she does not support over-capacity of incineration, just as I welcome her ambition to increase recycling, but given that she wants increased recycling, there will be over-capacity of incineration. We need to see the impact assessment so that we can see the trajectory, and can see the increasing rate at which waste will be recycled. We can then avoid the over-capacity. When will we see that impact assessment, so that we do not have too much capacity in incineration?

Mary Creagh: I am a bit mystified by the right hon. Gentleman's question, because he put a stop to planning decisions on energy from waste. Did he not conduct an impact assessment beforehand?

Steve Barclay: I do not want to intervene too much, but as a point of clarification, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was recused as the Minister, so I certainly did not make that decision. I am making the argument against incineration; I would have thought that the Minister would support that, because she wants more recycling. Over 30 environmental charities say that incineration is the dirtiest way to produce energy—that it is as dirty as coal. Five years of analysis by the BBC found it was the dirtiest. I am highlighting the contradiction between the Government saying that they are for the environment and clean energy, and there being a risk of over-capacity in incineration, which burns plastics and is harmful to the environment. I am highlighting that contradiction and saying that that is the reason why the Government should publish an impact assessment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Now that the House is aware that Mr Barclay recused himself, we should not repeat that statement, but no doubt the Minister wishes to respond.

Mary Creagh: I am very keen to set the record straight, Madam Deputy Speaker. The House will have heard what the right hon. Gentleman had to say. It is important that we do not incinerate recyclable materials. The environmental permitting regulations prevent the incineration of separately collected paper, metal, glass or plastic waste unless it has gone through some form of treatment process first, and, following that treatment, incineration is the best environmental outcome. As I say, we will publish our capacity assessment before the end of this year, and we do not support incineration over-capacity.

If we look at the waste hierarchy, waste incineration does not compete with or conflict with recycling. I think the right hon. Gentleman may have been talking to Madam Deputy Speaker when I was describing my visit to Rugby, where it is possible to see some uses for energy from waste that help with the hardest to abate industrial sectors. The process for cement, for example, requires a furnace that is heated to 1,400°C. In my view, the end result in that case means that it is a good use of incineration. That is what comes out of the municipal recycling facilities—out of our black bins—and it is the very tail end of the waste process I have described.

We have consulted on expanding the UK emissions trading scheme to include waste incineration and energy from waste, in order to divert plastics away from incineration. We are taking on board responses, and we will detail final policy on that in due course. We are including energy from waste under decarbonisation readiness requirements. We believe that any energy-producing waste facility seeking an environmental permit needs to look at how it will decarbonise. Moving to a circular economy is no small task, but we will do so by working collaboratively, and across this House, building on the policy left by the previous Government.

Adam Jogee: The Minister talks about the importance of working across Government, across this House and across our communities. Notwithstanding her position as my favourite Minister in His Majesty's Government, I gently put to her the importance of looking at councils that give planning consent to developments in and

around landfill sites. In Newcastle-under-Lyme, a number of housing developments have been built right around Walleys Quarry. That has a material impact on the health and wellbeing of the people who move there, and more generally on how our community is viewed. I urge her to have the appropriate conversations with colleagues across Government to ensure that the 1.5 million homes that we all want are built in the right places, with the right communication and consultation when decisions are taken.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Minister may wish to check *Hansard* to see how many times the hon. Member has mentioned his “favourite Minister”.

Mary Creagh: Indeed, and how many times my hon. Friend has mentioned Walleys Quarry.

Adam Jogee: And my favourite Deputy Speaker.

Mary Creagh: I think the kindest thing that we can say is that the experience of Walleys Quarry is a learning experience for us all. I have a former landfill site in my constituency that has been properly remediated and covered over, with housing built alongside it. It started out as a clay quarry for brickmaking. Then it became a landfill site for the council, and now it is housing, but the site has been properly remediated. I think the problems have come through a lack of guidance and regulation about where housing can and should be built, an understandable keenness to build the homes that people desperately need, and a failure to understand that things should not be placed 30 metres away from a landfill site. It is simply not acceptable. Certainly, that is a learning point that we are bringing into the planning and infrastructure Bill.

Moving to a circular economy is no small task, but we are committed to playing our part, building the UK Government's reputation at home and abroad, and driving green jobs, green growth and the green shoots of recovery in every nation and region of our country.

Question put and agreed to.

9.40 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 9 December 2024

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Fireworks: Sale and Use

4.30 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 639319 and 700013 relating to the sale and use of fireworks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to introduce the two e-petitions on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Like me, many colleagues will have received countless pieces of correspondence regarding fireworks, so it is no surprise that both e-petitions received significant numbers of signatures. The first received more than 50,000 signatures in the first six months. I particularly thank Chloe Brindley for creating the petition, and for her elegant arguments for banning the sale of fireworks to the general public. Chloe outlines many of the negative impacts of firework use, including animal stress and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as the impact on our A&E services. Chloe is in the Public Gallery today.

The second e-petition was kindly brought to the attention of the House by Alan Smith, whom I was privileged to meet last week, and I am pleased is also in the Gallery. It is a pleasure to welcome him to the House. The petition garnered more than 75,000 signatures, despite being created only a month ago. Alan's story is particularly harrowing but, given that we are considering the terrible and traumatic damage that fireworks can do, it is an important one, and I hope he will not mind my mentioning it.

On the night of 28 October 2021, two teenagers, who were under age, went to their local fireworks shop and asked, "What are the good ones to let off at people?" They were not refused service, nor did the owner of the shop ask them for identification. Later that evening, they would take the fireworks they had purchased and stuff them, lit, through the letterbox of 88-year-old Josephine Smith, Alan's mother, starting a fire that went on to kill her. Not only was that a shocking tragedy and an outrageous, harrowing act, but it shows, without a shadow of doubt, that fireworks are not toys and are not risk-free. If used in that manner, they are weapons that can kill.

Whether through accident or malice, 113 people find themselves spending an average of two days in hospital because of fireworks injuries, and research suggests that the total number of injuries is higher. However, fireworks have impacts far wider than those on the users, as the petitions' signatories will know. Excessively loud bangs and flashes from fireworks can make the surrounding area feel like a warzone. In Keighley, which I am exceptionally proud to represent, fireworks are used throughout the year, often well into the early hours of the morning. There are times when the night sky above Keighley is lit up under the constant thunder of fireworks. The use of fireworks may peak around and in the

run-up to bonfire night, but for many of us it is an issue throughout the whole calendar year. In places such as Keighley, and in many other communities right across the country, many are negatively impacted by the antisocial use of fireworks. Working people who just want to get a decent night's sleep cannot, because of the sheer nuisance caused by fireworks.

Unsurprisingly, fireworks have a dramatic effect on those who suffer from PTSD. Our veterans may quite literally fear that they have been thrust back into a life-or-death situation, and can be completely debilitated by their use. Other victims of trauma can be triggered even if the event that led to their condition has no connection to the sounds or sights of fireworks. I heard that at first hand just last week, when I met representatives of Anxiety UK, Help for Heroes, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the Firework Campaign to prepare for this debate. I thank them for their time.

As with humans, fireworks can also trigger the fight-or-flight response in animals. Pets and livestock alike are often terrified by fireworks, and unlike us they do not understand the consequences when they are let off. Of course, that leads not only to incredible distress but, in some circumstances, to the injury or death of animals. I have heard in correspondence from across my Keighley and Ilkley constituency of farm animals stampeding as a result of loud bangs, tearing through fences in their panic, injuring themselves and others, and being at risk of causing road accidents. I have also heard much about dogs, cats and rabbits—in fact, almost every single kind of pet—being negatively impacted.

In November, we learned of the tragic death of Roxie, a baby red panda at Edinburgh Zoo. She died on bonfire night due to the stress caused by fireworks being let off throughout the city centre. We must also be conscious of wildlife who do not have a voice but are nevertheless affected. We often forget them but, as those animals are more sensitive to sound than us, they are also impacted considerably. What we hear as a distant rumble can seem to them like a much more threatening, intense experience.

Distressing fireworks are used as tools for crimes in my constituency and throughout the country, as many colleagues have told me. Fireworks are used as weapons against emergency services and as nuisance items in antisocial behaviour by youths. In 2021, firefighters attended an incident in my constituency and came under attack by a group of 15 youths hurling fireworks at them. The fact that the individuals were able to source the fireworks to carry out those acts was incredibly distressing, not only because of those who were impacted but because it shows how easy it is to get hold of fireworks.

Fireworks have many more impacts, not least causing hearing damage, interrupting sleep and affecting those with sensory processing disorders. I hope Members will forgive me when I say that I and others have raised these concerns before. I take this opportunity to stress that I am absolutely still concerned about this issue.

Before I discuss the way forward, it is important to mention the existing body of regulations. The sale of fireworks is banned to anyone under the age of 18, and for the largest fireworks for public use, but that does not stop people buying them, and it does not stop individuals selling them to under-18s. Setting off any firework is also banned after 11 pm, except on certain evenings,

[Robbie Moore]

but I fear that, as in the case of Josephine Smith, the regulations are not being properly followed, as we all know.

I recognise that e-petition 639319 calls for a ban. Indeed, along with those who signed the petition, some 74% of people more widely who have got involved with the many fireworks petitions to come before the House believe that a ban is the right way forward. I must admit that, personally, I am reluctant to endorse bans when they are not completely necessary, but there is growing evidence, including testimony from the many people I spoke to in the run-up to the debate and from police incidents, that enforcement will never be enough to tackle this issue. Simply put, once those who let off fireworks as part of antisocial behaviour have abandoned the scene, it is extremely difficult to catch the culprits.

Of course, we must recognise the freedom to enjoy fireworks, but above all else we must protect the liberties of those who are so devastatingly affected, because there is certainly no freedom for those who are trapped in their homes throughout the year because of fireworks misuse. If the illegal use of fireworks cannot be curtailed, the only option we are left with is stricter regulation at the point of sale. Although it may be difficult to catch an offender using fireworks, it is surely easier for authorities to ensure that regulations are followed at the point of sale, and to advise fireworks businesses to use discretion when they fear that fireworks may be used improperly.

In a report published this morning, the campaigner Hamza Rehman highlighted the rise in the stockpiling of fireworks across the Bradford district, with fireworks being bought in bulk and stored in private garages to be sold at a later date. I have no doubt that the same is going on in other constituencies throughout the country, and that it could be curtailed if we enforced the laws that are already in place. Even a simple requirement to apply for a permit may be a sufficient barrier to cancel out many nuisance buyers of fireworks, who can currently purchase fireworks as easily as they can a bottle of wine.

Stricter requirements could also be introduced, such as raising the age limit. None the less, we must be careful not to force the sale of fireworks underground and create an even more dangerous situation. I hope that in the debate many other Members will get to the heart of the issue and explore the action we can take, as this issue has been idly discussed for far too long. I know that many Members have raised it in the House time and again.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing this really important debate. Like his constituents, mine next door in Shipley have raised concerns about antisocial fireworks. Under the last Labour Government, the Fireworks Act 2003 and the Fireworks Regulations 2004 were introduced to restrict the antisocial use of fireworks; since then, there has been very little action. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a review to tighten up the regulations is long overdue?

Robbie Moore: I thank my constituency neighbour and friend for raising that issue. The challenge is that although previous Labour Administrations introduced regulations, the stark reality on the ground is that there has been no real change. There is still antisocial behaviour,

the misuse of fireworks and people getting away with buying fireworks—in my constituency, and I suspect in the hon. Lady's—when they are under the age of 18. Having seen the Government's response to both e-petitions, released earlier today, I do not believe they are willing to go far enough, albeit they have said they are willing to listen. I hope Members will contribute in respect of the actions the Government should take.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this subject. My constituent Annie Riddle has lived in the Harnham district of Salisbury for 34 years, and her four dogs have been left in the state of trembling wrecks as a consequence of the random use of fireworks. Does my hon. Friend agree that better public education on just how destructive the use of fireworks is to the health of many people—he mentioned veterans, for example—and to the animal kingdom is important to changing behaviours on the ground? That must be part of the solution.

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree. Better education is critical for the wider public—for not only those behaving antisocially but those organising large events. As part of the evidence taken before this debate, I heard that even big public events have a negative consequence on pets at home, wildlife, farm animals, or veterans living nearby. Education is key but, personally, I would like to see tougher licensing provisions and much more resource put into enforcement.

I commend the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) for bringing forward a private Member's Bill aimed at tackling this issue. In my opinion, the next step forward must be a commitment from the Government to undertake proper research into and impact assessments of firework regulation, so that we can reach a cross-party solution to the issue. Findings from the Petitions Committee, the Government and stakeholders have all pointed out that a lack of evidence limits any serious policy changes. We must therefore ensure that the Government have the evidence available as quickly as possible so that they can make further legislative changes, if they so desire.

If a ban or restrictions are necessary, they will take time to implement, so we must also take immediate action. Local councils must be supported to deliver proper enforcement immediately, as must the police to tackle those using fireworks illegally. There is no point in having regulations and laws in place if they are not enforced. Moreover, there is nothing to prevent the Government from delivering that support right now.

E-petition 639319 received a response from the previous Government, and I am glad that the current Government responded this morning to e-petition 700013. But as I said, the Government must go much further than just giving warm words. I hope this debate will be an opportunity for all Members to stress to the Minister the points they wish to make on behalf of their constituents, and that the Minister will be able to expand on that in his response. I am sure he will appreciate that this issue is of deep concern to the many petitioners who signed the petitions.

I am not opposed to fireworks in and of themselves, but I definitely wish to see much tighter licensing provisions, much stronger enforcement and a change so that fireworks can be used only at licensed events. I say to the Government that we simply cannot continue to ignore the growing

public demand for change. I hope this debate marks the beginning of real change on fireworks legislation. Fireworks bring joy to many, but their misuse can have devastating effects. When used antisocially, they disturb the peace of an entire neighbourhood, terrify pets and leave vulnerable people trapped in their homes. The culprits terrorise neighbourhoods, as unfortunately I have seen in Keighley.

The petitions are not one-offs—indeed, since May 2022 five other petitions relating to fireworks have been put before Parliament—nor are the concerns of the petitioners without justification. In the face of such concerns, there must be action, and that cannot occur until we have had the weight of a full Government policy assessment to decide the best way forward. I fear that if we choose to continue to ignore this issue, there will inevitably be more unnecessary deaths, injuries and traumas for victims of fireworks in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I remind all Members that they should bob if they wish to speak in the debate. Twenty-four Members have put in to speak, so I will have to impose a time limit of six minutes, because I am anxious that everyone should get in. I remind you all that the more interventions there are, the more likely it is that someone may not get to speak at all.

4.47 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I appreciate the opportunity to take part in what is obviously a wildly popular debate, and will therefore make a short contribution on behalf of the 181 constituents in Newport East who have signed the petitions as well as the 130-plus who have been in touch on social media. I apologise profusely that I cannot stay till the end of the debate as I will be chairing the parliamentary Labour party meeting, and I thank you, Sir Edward, for allowing me to do that.

Like others, I have been a regular contributor to fireworks debates over the years. This year I am very proud to be a supporter of the Fireworks Bill, a private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). She does absolutely great work on the subject, and I wish her much success with her Bill.

I take part in these debates with a bit of a heavy heart, because from my youth, which was a while ago, I have very happy memories of bonfire night, as my late and very lovely dad would insist on fireworks in our back garden. It is fair to say he very much liked risk and hated organised fun of any kind, so we never went to displays. I therefore understand why people enjoy fireworks, and I acknowledge that many people use them responsibly and that there are enforcement measures for those who do not.

However, the days of a small tin of fireworks in the back garden are long gone, which is why constituents have a keen and passionate interest in this issue and regularly raise it with me. Fireworks are bigger, louder and more powerful than ever before and are easily available from unlicensed vendors. As the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) said, fireworks season now seems to last through autumn and winter. I agree with all the points that he made. This is distressing for animals. For constituents who are veterans with

PTSD, it is difficult. The antisocial use of fireworks impacts on children and teenagers, and staff in A&E have to deal with fireworks-inflicted burns.

This is a seasonal debate, and we return to it every year. Constituents report having fireworks thrown at them at bus stops, animals being too traumatised to go out, the terrorising of livestock, fireworks being put through letterboxes, and more. As one constituent put it, “a generation that can't smoke but can buy mini bombs seems bizarre”.

I pay tribute to the partnership work of the council, the police and the fire service in Newport East on big nights such as firework night and new year's eve. It is much appreciated in our communities.

The vast majority of the constituents who have been in touch with me in recent weeks want fireworks to be allowed only for organised displays. I recognise their concerns, and I fully support the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North to restrict the sale of fireworks to licensed shops, lower the noise limit to 90 dB and remove the loudest fireworks—F2 and F3—from sale.

Finally, I want to give a big thanks to the police for their enforcement work. Let us make their lives and those of overstretched local authority officers easier by looking again at the legislation.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I have grown up enjoying fireworks in the garden, especially with my children. Does she agree that the solution may be to reduce the noise levels from 120 dB to 90 dB, as is the case in New Zealand, to better enforce the rules relating to the times during which fireworks can be let off, and to increase the age limit for firework sales? That would enable people to enjoy a family firework occasion while ensuring safeguards are in place.

Jessica Morden: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. He proposes some sensible measures, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North will talk about.

It is time that we look again at the legislation so we do not keep returning to these debates year after year. People should not live in misery, so it is time we tackled this issue.

4.51 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) very much for leading this important debate; I agree with a great deal of what he said. I also thank the many petitioners who raised the issue. As the MP for Hazel Grove, I was not surprised to see that my constituency has one of the highest numbers of signatures. That highlights the strength of feeling among my neighbours.

Fireworks are among the most common topics that my constituents get in touch with me about; that was the case before I was elected in July, when I was a local councillor, and has been since. I also care about the issue because I am the owner of a mischievous rescue dog, Bonnie, who is absolutely terrified of fireworks—both the lights and, particularly, the noise—so the period between the end of October and the new year is always particularly upsetting for her.

[Lisa Smart]

We all vaguely know when to expect the beginning of the firework season, but these days fireworks do not seem to stop. Many displays seem to occur outside the typical season, and it is the same for kids enjoying themselves on the estate behind my house. Across the autumn and beyond, there is little I can do to prevent the enormous distress that Bonnie goes through each year. Every time she hears the opening whizzes or bangs, she throws herself around the room or across the garden, barking furiously and absolutely terrified. There is only so long that we can keep her inside with the blinds closed, with drum and bass blasting out to block out the noise. The call of nature calls her outside from time to time, and then she is back to being terrified again. I am sure that experience will resonate with the tens of millions of people across the UK who have animals in their homes.

The impact of fireworks is felt not only by pets and their owners but by all the wildlife across the UK, as well as the many people who have conditions such as PTSD or sensitivity to unexpected noises. We should not have to expect or accept regular and continuous fireworks displays for many weeks of every year. The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley rightly pointed out the difficulties in enforcing the existing regulations.

I am a Liberal, and I do not think we should ban things just because I find them annoying, but I do think that when my actions harm someone else and my freedoms bump into someone else's, we should look at whether we have the balance right. In the majority of states and territories in Australia, it is illegal for members of the public to possess and use fireworks. In the few regions that permit public use, they are limited to a small number of very specific holidays. In other states, they are carried out only by trained and licensed pyrotechnicians or those they have approved and instructed.

We must balance the cultural significance and recreational value of fireworks displays on special holidays with the safety and welfare of people, pets and wildlife. If we adopt Australian-style legislation, local authorities would be able to manage their own fireworks calendars and prevent the continuous barrage of fireworks that we regularly face in the last few months of every year.

The petitions are a mandate from our constituents to act. We need to do more to protect our friends, families, pets and wildlife from the harmful effects of fireworks. I urge the Government to take action to reduce the detrimental impact of fireworks across our communities and to adopt similar legislation to that which we see elsewhere. On behalf of my many constituents who signed the two petitions, and particularly on behalf of my mischievous and pyrophobic rescue dog Bonnie, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues today.

4.55 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for presenting the petition. We have this debate every single year—it is heartening to see the widespread support for the debate and for the petitions. I want to thank every single member of the public who signed and shared

them, making sure their voices are heard loud and clear here in Parliament. That is incredibly impressive and to be welcomed.

We have these well-meaning debates every year and we hear the same thing time and again: “Isn’t this awful? Isn’t this horrific? It has a horrible impact on our constituents’ lives”, yet we have not seen action for 10 years. Nothing has changed. We know that the problems exist. The licensing laws mean that any registered seller, even if they do not have a special firework sale licence, can sell fireworks during the festive period. That seems absolutely the wrong way round. At a time when people go out of their way to buy fireworks for bonfire night, new year’s eve and lunar new year, any unlicensed seller can now sell fireworks. That seems a perverse way of doing things. If it is not good enough for the rest of the year, why is it good enough for the part of the year when most fireworks are used?

I have heard people say today, “We have this debate at this time of year because we have had a lot of complaints about firework use in our inboxes”, but for constituencies such as mine in Luton North, this is an all-year-round thing. Fireworks have become not just something for a special event, but something that happens day in, day out—not even always when it is dark, which is bizarre. I have been out on the doorstep in the summer and people have said that they have an issue with fireworks, and those fireworks have gone off in the middle of the day. Their unpredictable nature causes a huge problem, whereas people can plan their lives around properly licensed, regulated and organised professional displays. The chaotic, sporadic and frequent use of very loud fireworks is very different.

I will talk about my private Member’s Bill in a minute, but I think we need to look at licensing because the existing laws are so difficult to enforce. Just six fixed penalty notices have been issued in the past three years, which indicates a serious problem. We know the police are overstretched. I am currently working with Bedfordshire police and Luton borough council on a new way to report fireworks use, but we need to see things change—we need solutions. I am grateful for all the MPs that have supported my private Member’s Bill, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) and for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed). We have to do something different because people with PTSD and people with young children who just want a good night’s sleep are struggling.

Let us not forget the animals. Last week I spoke to Guide Dogs UK and the fireworks lobby, which is very small but very loud, ironically. It tells us we should train our animals better, but nothing is better trained than a guide dog. Guide dog users have told me that during the firework season, they cannot take their dogs out because some of them are so frightened. They described it as like having a car that does not work. Children with special educational needs and disabilities and parents of non-verbal children find it incredibly distressing.

My Bill seeks three simple things. The first is an end to the loophole in licensing for sales, so that we have the same regulations throughout the year—only licensed sellers should be able to sell fireworks. The second is a limit of 90 dB—the same as a lawnmower—on the sound of fireworks that are for general public consumption. At the moment, the limit is 120 dB, which is the sound

of a rock concert. Thirdly, we need to ensure that the loudest categories of fireworks—F2 and F3—are not available for public consumption. We have seen the damage they have caused and heard how they are being used as weapons. If they were anything else, we would be talking about banning them outright. I have learned from my first time around: this is not my first rodeo with a private Member's Bill on fireworks—it is my second one.

We have also seen a surge in online sales of fireworks, which is a real issue. My Bill covers online as well as high street retailers. We are seeing fireworks advertised on TikTok and Facebook. Those are not places where we should be going to get something so potentially dangerous to the user, as well as those around them. I am grateful that Members in the Chamber seem to be quite supportive of my Bill. There is a difference from previous debates on fireworks: we have had a change of Government and there is a different Minister responding. I hope that he has a different response for us.

5.1 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I thank the petitioners for raising this important issue, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for setting out the issues behind the petitions so well. I know from my own mailbag that many people are concerned about the unintended impact that fireworks have.

Fireworks should be a symbol of joy and happiness, with everyone in awe as they light up the sky. People often use them to celebrate and mark special occasions while surrounded by friends and family. Whether it is bonfire night, new year's eve or just a simple get together, there is no doubt that fireworks make for a fun time and bring people together. However, we should not forget that that is not always the case.

As we have heard, fireworks can have unintended consequences. People suffering from PTSD and trauma are at a particular risk, as are those with severe mental health issues. Pets and animals often get frightened by fireworks, abandoning their owners to find safety. Others become extremely anxious and, in the worst cases, tragically pass away. As Members have heard, a baby red panda called Roxie died of distress at Edinburgh Zoo on bonfire night this year. For some of my constituents in the Scottish Borders, that is the reason they contacted me and encouraged me to participate in this debate.

A report by the Office of Product Safety and Standards in 2020 stated that noise blasts resulting from fireworks can be particularly stressful to dogs. The report highlighted that some farm animals, such as pigs, should not be exposed to the kind of noise levels that fireworks make. Fireworks can also trigger significant behavioural changes in cattle. In the last 13 years, there have been at least 98 horse injuries, and 20 fatalities. When it comes to the effects on people, the report states that there were 990 injuries due to the misuse of fireworks in 2005, and there is evidence that they can exacerbate stress and anxiety. The report raises legitimate questions about how and where fireworks are used, and whether they do more harm than good.

Over the years, greater restrictions have been enacted in Scotland. The Fireworks (Scotland) Regulations 2004 restrict the times of day when fireworks can be used by the general public, and the times of day that they can be

supplied to the general public. However, the most significant piece of legislation affecting fireworks regulation in Scotland is the Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Act 2022. Although part of it is still to come into force, that Act will significantly toughen up the law in this area. It is now an offence to supply and distribute fireworks to persons under the age of 18. Anyone found guilty faces a maximum fine of £5,000 or a six-month prison sentence. Local authorities in Scotland now have the power to designate firework control zones, which are areas where fireworks are prohibited and cannot be used. In some cities, such as Edinburgh and Glasgow, additional control zones are coming into force.

Despite the increased regulation of the use of fireworks, concerns remain. I very much sympathise with those who have been affected by the misuse of fireworks, particularly those who have been directly affected by some terrible acts and brought forward these petitions. The offenders committing those serious criminal acts should be punished. However, I am very reluctant to ban anything, and I am worried that, as a society and a country, we are moving into an extreme nanny state where we rush to ban everything and anything that poses some level of risk.

Home Office data shows that there were seven fatalities from fireworks between 2010 and 2020. Meanwhile, the World Animal Foundation claims that 27 people die in the UK every year from accidents involving cows. Does that mean we need to ban the keeping of cows because they pose a risk? If we are to strike the right balance between fun and safety, the starting point must surely be to ensure that the existing rules and regulations for fireworks are always followed and enforced. The data suggests that misuse is the biggest issue, not the fireworks themselves. Instead of talking about banning, let us talk about personal responsibility. If an individual is irresponsible or commits a crime with a firework, they should face the full force of the law. Let us give local authorities and the police the powers and resources they need to properly enforce it. Let us learn from different parts of the UK, such as the different rules that we have in Scotland compared with England, to understand which interventions are effective and which need to be reformed.

In conclusion, I do not support a ban on fireworks altogether, but I support their proper regulation and their being used safely at all times. I hope that is where we can take this debate.

5.6 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing this very important debate, and I thank all those who organised the petitions, especially my constituents who signed one or both.

In Hounslow, as in many areas represented by Members here, we have almost continuous fireworks through Diwali, bonfire night and the birthday of Guru Nanak, as well as new year's eve nowadays, which I do not think used to happen. On new year's eve, the fireworks can last for 24 hours, as local people who hail from different parts of the world let them off at the same time as their family and friends back home, or just because they feel like it. There is also the danger of exploding fireworks. I have a relative who, as a child, lost her eye when the kids were messing around. One new year's eve, when we were

[Ruth Cadbury]

at a party in our neighbour's house, suddenly all the children were no longer in the back room watching films—it was suspiciously quiet. They were in the road, egging on a group of very drunk young men who were letting off fireworks with no safety measures whatsoever. Yet again this year, I have had a string of emails over the autumn from concerned constituents who almost certainly signed these petitions.

As Members have said, and as others will no doubt say for the rest of the debate, a common complaint is fireworks being let off well after midnight, sometimes up to 3 am, disturbing families and those doing shift work. People do not object to public displays at a social time, but they do not want them in the middle of the night. The impact on animals is increasingly cited by constituents, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has stated:

“There is increasing evidence that fireworks can have negative effects on the behaviour and wellbeing of animals.”

Constituents cite the increasing number of days on which late-night and early-morning displays happen over a number of weeks from October through to the new year.

I agree with others that the legislation needs updating for our safety, for our ability to get a reasonable night's sleep, and for the wellbeing of our pets and wild animals, so I welcome the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). Legislation has not been updated for 20 years, but, as other Members have said, fireworks being bought in shops are far louder and more powerful than they were in the past.

The current legislation says that fireworks can be bought from unlicensed traders for Chinese new year, Diwali, bonfire night and new year, but not at other times. Why the religious discrimination in favour of some and not others? How does that work in a highly diverse constituency such as mine, where people celebrate, often with fireworks, on many days, anniversaries and other religious festivals? Sometimes, they might just be celebrating grandad's birthday. Animals do not know whether it is a religious holiday or grandad's birthday; they are equally traumatised whatever the occasion, so would it not be fair if there were a level playing field, with organised, licensed displays and quieter, safer fireworks?

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I want to draw attention to another petition handed into Downing Street recently, which had 1.1 million signatures. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful to encourage manufacturers to design and produce quieter fireworks?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know that it is possible to buy bright, colourful, exciting fireworks that do not make nearly so much noise, and some jurisdictions already legislate for that.

During the firework season, our hospitals work even harder than ever, treating what are too often life-changing injuries. Local authorities do not have the resources to enforce the 11 pm to 7 am legislation, so, in my experience, that aspect of the law is not worth the paper it is written on.

I support restricting the use of fireworks in some way. Scotland allows local councils to designate firework-free zones in areas where fireworks are likely to have a greater impact on animals, the environment and vulnerable people. As has been mentioned, we could have a decibel limit, as is the case in New Zealand, where the sound level has been brought down from 120 dB to 90 dB. We should certainly address who can sell fireworks and in what circumstances. When I was very young, I was working for a community organisation and I was sent to buy the fireworks for the bonfire night display that we were organising. I found the address of the seller—a flat high up in a tower block in Camden, packed from floor to ceiling with boxes and boxes of fireworks. If that is not a justification for licensing sellers, I do not know what is.

5.13 pm

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for leading this debate.

I begin by thanking the many people from my Cheadle constituency who have signed the petitions, and all those who have contacted me over the last few months about the sale and use of fireworks in our community. Firework displays are incredibly popular in Cheadle. A number of organisations and community groups hold events throughout the year, including around bonfire night and new year, as well as during religious and cultural festivals such as Diwali and Chinese new year. The vast majority of events are held and managed properly, and adhere to all the necessary guidelines and laws. Such events are vital in bringing people together and building community cohesion across Cheadle. That said, many of my residents have contacted me about the other side of firework use, which relates to what is said in the petitions.

The growth in antisocial behaviour across the country has alarmed many of us, and Cheadle is no exception. Cuts over the last decade to local authority and police spending have seen our youth services reduced to below the bare minimum, and on-street policing stretched to breaking point. That has resulted in more and more antisocial behaviour in some areas in my constituency, leaving many of my residents feeling helpless and unsafe. All cases of antisocial behaviour peak and dip in patterns depending on the time of year. Summer months, for example, can be terrible as the lighter evenings lead to more young people staying outside with little to do, while the period just before Christmas, when firework sales are up, is another period of peak activity.

I want to make the important point that this is not a demonisation of young people. For 10 years, central and, in some cases, local government have let our young people down. We have seen young people's services systematically decimated in this country to the point where they can hardly be called services any more. Youth centres are now a thing of the past; after-school clubs and services are regularly cut as schools manage even tighter budgets; and as the cost of living crisis grows, sports clubs and other activities have become too costly for many families living in my area. All in all, many young people in my constituency have been given a raw deal and are left with literally nothing to do.

Without the appropriate structures and guidance around them, a small minority of young people will find less productive ways to fill their time. That leads to the issues faced today by some of my residents, such as Stephanie, who on her way back home one evening was set upon by a group who threw a firework at her. Stephanie was incredibly lucky; she is disabled and the firework missed her by just a few inches—she told me that she could feel the heat of the rocket go past her head.

I have also been contacted by Di, who has been forced to provide what she calls a cocktail of drugs to her dog throughout October and November due to the incessant noise and flashes from fireworks being set off in her street. Her dog is terrified and can be calmed only through sedation. It puts so much strain on Di and has caused her huge amounts of stress and anxiety. As well as by Stephanie and Di, I have been contacted by residents who suffer from PTSD, some of whom are veterans. Fireworks cause huge amounts of mental stress for those people, further impacting their mental health and quality of life.

What can we do? For me, enforcement is the issue here. The current law puts much emphasis on councils ensuring that fireworks are being sold correctly and legally, and it is the responsibility of local councils and the police to ensure that any breaking of the law is tackled and punished appropriately. But in a world where councils are being forced to cut more and more services and police chiefs are writing to the Chancellor to say that they cannot fund the officers they currently have, is it any wonder that our constituents feel that not enough is being done? It is clear that the solution to tackling this issue lies with our local authorities and giving them the tools to crack down on shops and businesses that are selling fireworks illegally.

We need to ensure that the police have the resources to tackle antisocial behaviour when it peaks, such as during fireworks season, and that those crimes are put through the system as efficiently as possible so that effective punishments are delivered and those impacted are given the justice they deserve. We have to be able to provide that level of service when tackling antisocial behaviour. Otherwise, any new laws or guidance the Government produce will be as ineffective as the laws we currently have. Parallel to that, we need a statutory youth service that provides for, guides and helps young people to reach their full potential.

Finally, there are two things raised in the petition that I would be interested in further discussing. First, the regulation of quieter fireworks for private use makes complete sense to me; I would be very supportive of that. Secondly, providing local authorities with the power to declare firework-free zones may be a useful tool in tackling nuisance hotspots. While police and council resources are stretched, that could help to concentrate efforts in particular areas. However, it should not be used as a way to escape the fact that more funding is required for our emergency services and local authorities.

I thank my residents for contacting me about this issue and would like to say to them that I understand how troubled and worried they are by what is happening in their communities. I will do all I can to push the Government to ensure that the police and Stockport council have the resources needed to tackle this issue.

5.18 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening the debate on this important petition. Fireworks have many positives, and we have heard a number of them already. Many of our earliest memories are related to the times that we come together: our first sparkler in the garden with friends and family; bringing in the new year with loved ones; and important cultural and religious events, which are often times for unity and for the community to come together. It is important that we do not lose sight of the positive role that fireworks can play in our society.

But as we have heard painfully often today, there are often serious consequences from firework misuse. For many, fireworks season is a time not of joy, but of fear and dread each year. Like many other hon. Members, I have heard from many people in my constituency who are concerned about the impact of fireworks on animals, loved ones, vulnerable people and veterans in our community. These are very serious and legitimate concerns, and I am pleased that we have the time here in Westminster Hall today to consider them fully. The strong interest in this issue demonstrated by Members shows how seriously we are taking it.

The current regulatory framework was designed to support people to enjoy fireworks while reducing the risks, dangers and disruption to pets, property and people. There is an open question about whether the existing firework regulations strike the right balance between enjoyment of fireworks and their negative effects, so I welcome the Government's commitment to engage with businesses, consumer groups and charities to gather evidence on the issues with and impacts of fireworks; that has recently been outlined in a number of Government responses to parliamentary questions. I hope that commitment will lead to a more formal review of the fireworks policy and legislative framework to see whether it is still fit for purpose. As we have heard today, given the growth in online sales and in the size and decibel limit of firework use domestically, it seems the right time for a full review of regulations.

That said, regulations are an effective tool only if they are properly enforced. I have heard from many of my constituents that the existing rules on fireworks are already broken without consequence or punishment. It strikes me that although it is easy to regulate the fireworks sold in shops or online, it is much harder to enforce regulations once fireworks have been bought. I hope that, in the future, as well as changing regulations we give full and due consideration to how that issue can also be addressed, to ensure that enforcement can be fully self-funding through tougher fines for those breaching regulations.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): I held a public meeting in my constituency of Rother Valley and we discussed a lot of the regulations that my hon. Friend and others have mentioned in this debate. However, does he agree that we can do more as a community? Perhaps in local villages such as Harthill, Kiveton Park, Dinnington and Maltby in my constituency, we could set aside weekends where we encourage people to enjoy fireworks, but the rest of the month could be set aside for those who perhaps do not enjoy fireworks.

Danny Beales: It is almost as if my hon. Friend had a copy of my speech, because I am just about to turn to that point; I might speak to my researcher, in case he has been leaking my emails.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. It must be said that the public displays of fireworks that many of us were used to are now often a thing of the past. In any village or town, people used to go to the green on important occasions and there would be a public display of fireworks, often led by the community and the local authority, and often free. Far too often now, those public displays are either not free—indeed, they are often very high-cost for a family—or, as is more common, not taking place at all.

I remember going to the Thames each year with my family, travelling from Uxbridge and South Ruislip to the centre of London to enjoy such displays. Now, they are heavily ticketed and heavily priced, so many people have now turned to having individual private displays in their gardens instead. I hope we will give consideration to my hon. Friend's point about how we can encourage collective displays that are much better regulated and, as he said, much better communicated to local residents.

To conclude, it is time now for a full and detailed review of the fireworks regulatory framework, considering enforcement as well, so that we can balance the needs of those who have legitimate desires to celebrate, bringing their families and communities together, but also strike the right balance and preventing the significant issues of the misuse and overuse of fireworks.

5.23 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for bringing this issue to Westminster Hall.

As we have already heard, fireworks can be a very polarising subject. Like many other Members, in the run-up to this debate I have had countless emails from animal lovers in my constituency who want to see certain fireworks banned, and noise limits and other restrictions introduced. However, I have also had briefings from fireworks fans and lovers of our bonfire night traditions who worry about moves to change the law.

Someone who has always understood both sides of that debate is Alan Smith and it is on Alan's behalf that I speak today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley has said, Alan is the son of my constituent, Josephine Smith. She was a beautiful 88-year-old lady from Harold Wood, who lost her life in a house fire after a lit firework was stuffed through her letterbox in October 2021. Alan is in the Gallery today and I am very grateful to him for his courage in highlighting an issue that has caused him and his family such pain and trauma.

Alan recently came to Parliament to speak to me, and I know that he has also spoken to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley. He described the role that Guy Fawkes night always played in his happy family when he was growing up; it was one of the few times in the year when everybody got together. Each year his dad, Derek, would go to the shop to buy a little display box, a pack of sparklers and maybe a pack of rockets, as happens in many families; Josephine would

make the jacket potatoes; their two ponies were put in their stables and the cattle put in another field; and the dog would go into the house, with the radio on. When raising his own family, Alan always had a fireworks display in the garden, or they attended a local organised display. His experience was like that of countless of our constituents.

However, on 28 October 2021, those happy memories and traditions were upended. Around 9 o'clock, he was woken by his wife, Lisa, with the words he still hears every day: "Al, your mum's house is on fire." When he rushed to Josephine's home, he recalls, he saw emergency services outside the building, and then saw his mother's body being brought, lifeless, in a fireman's arms. The scene, he says, was like a horror movie. A fire officer later came over to say that they found a firework just inside the door.

Early the next morning, the family were told that arrests had been made: an 18-year-old and 15-year-old had deliberately put a firework through Josephine's door. They were later charged with arson and manslaughter. During the trial at the Old Bailey, CCTV of the night in question was shown. It showed teenagers laughing and joking with the salesperson. I have seen the CCTV with Alan, and it is very worrying. The conversation from the two youths included the following: "People are going to get terrorised tonight," and "We are going to throw them at the police." The person manning the shop goes on to say, "You can hold them, throw them, do what you like with them." Alan's entire family were distraught. Two stupid boys had been sold fireworks by a man apparently with years of experience in selling them, and full knowledge of the boys' intentions. Both those young people are now serving custodial sentences.

A further trial had to take place for the shop owner and sales assistant. As Alan says:

"The two youths were stupid, irresponsible thugs who had not had the best of childhoods and were not even thinking when they caused havoc in our lives that night."

In contrast, the retailer

"was a grown man with years of experience in selling fireworks, yet still decided to sell them to a minor who had stated his intentions to 'terrorise'."

Fireworks4Sale, the shop involved, was fined in the region of £17,000. The seller himself was fined £1,200 and received a six-week sentence, which was suspended for 12 months. The actions of the shop that night made Alan question whether the laws and regulations for the sale of fireworks are robust enough. That brings me here today to debate the petition that Alan started, from his grief and desire not to see future tragedies like that which led to the loss of his beautiful mother.

The debate around the use of fireworks creates a great deal of division, but despite the tragedy Alan can still see both sides of the argument. He says:

"Arguing and insulting each other is not the way to a sensible and mutually agreeable solution to the problem."

He asks for

"a sensible, respectful debate, so those that wish to enjoy fireworks on the few important days of the year can do so. And in turn, those who have pets, PTSD, mental health issues etc only have to manage their situation on a handful of dates a year."

The fireworks used to take Josephine's life were bought on a whim on a local high street. Alan asks whether a more robust licence requirement might have prevented her death.

The Minister has kindly agreed to meet me and Alan in the new year. Before then, I want to ask some brief questions on Alan's behalf. First, fireworks can currently be used from 7 am to 11 pm, 365 days a year; would a 4 pm to 10 pm window be more acceptable? Secondly, the safe distance from F2 fireworks is 8 metres, and the safe distance from F3 fireworks is 25 metres; given that the vast majority of UK gardens do not meet that minimum size, is it safe to use them in private gardens? Thirdly, fireworks can be bought easily on the high street—it was an impulse that resulted in Josephine's death—so do regulations around high street sale need to change? Fourthly, even when fireworks are set off legally at organised displays, organisers often do not take into account the surroundings, so should there be safe buffer zones around such displays?

Many debates have taken place over the years, and the response is often that the industry is already heavily regulated and that the regulations are adequate. I therefore ask on Alan's behalf, and on behalf of everybody whose constituents are affected by this: is now the time to look at the issue much more deeply, so that future tragedies, like that which affected Josephine, do not happen?

5.29 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I pay tribute to Alan and his family, whose horrific story we have just heard. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

We are a nation of animal lovers, and it is deeply upsetting to hear stories about pets and wild animals being distressed by fireworks, but equally this issue affects people with PTSD and children with SEND. A growing number of constituents from across Bexleyheath and Crayford have written to me about this issue and the problems with the regulations. I was a councillor when the regulations were introduced 20 years ago; there was improvement at the time, but there clearly continue to be issues today.

Under the current legislation, members of the public are not required to have any form of licence or training to let off consumer fireworks. Public displays are controlled and must take place during set times, but private displays can go on well into the night. A recent study by the RSPCA found that as many as 14 million Britons plan to have a private display each year. Dog owners report that dogs are scared of fireworks and exhibit the five signs of stress. Pet owners say they have no choice but to try to manage their pets, as the fireworks remain out of their control and they cannot remove the triggers.

The regulations state that fireworks can be set off past 11 pm on four nights of the year, when the cut-off is extended to 1 am. Under the current rules, it is impossible to predict when fireworks may go off, especially around that time of the year. In my area of south-east London, fireworks are a nightly occurrence for a month or two in the autumn, and they continue into the early hours.

I welcome the private Member's Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) has introduced, and her asks of the Minister. I hope the Minister will outline plans for stricter enforcement of the sale of fireworks and to give more powers to local

authorities such as the London borough of Bexley to stop disturbances. I also hope he will address the asks in my hon. Friend's private Member's Bill.

5.32 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward.

Like many other Members, I have been calling for tougher action on the misuse of fireworks for many years, because this issue is of great concern to many of constituents in Bradford East. Across our community, the inconsiderate and antisocial use of fireworks by a small minority is causing misery—as others emphasised, it is a small minority, as many people use fireworks considerably. As we have heard, families have been kept awake at night, residents are disturbed during the day, and vulnerable groups, such as children with sensory sensitivities and the elderly, have been disproportionately affected.

I have written to Ministers on a number of occasions over the past decade to call for stronger licensing powers, a reduction in noise levels and restrictions on the sale of fireworks, yet they have failed to act. Time and again, they have insisted that the existing laws are sufficient, but that response ignores the reality on the ground. The question we must ask is: if the powers are adequate, why do so many of our communities feel that their concerns are being ignored? Why are so many residents, councils and charities calling for change? Let me be clear: I am not calling for a complete ban on fireworks. Alongside my constituents, I am calling for a sensible and balanced approach to regulation that ensures fireworks can be enjoyed safely without causing undue harm and distress.

Firework misuse is not unique to Bradford, although the impact on our city is clearly felt. Residents have shared their harrowing experiences. Meanwhile, Ban the Menace Fireworks, a local initiative, is supported by 30,000 signatures, and the number continues to rise. That highlights the devastating impact of late-night fireworks on the public. Quite rightly, animal welfare organisations including the RSPCA and Dogs Trust have made it clear that the distress caused to pets, livestock and wildlife is unacceptable. Those charities have called for clear, achievable reforms. It is clear that the current legislation is outdated, not working, and insufficient.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with my constituent Hayley from Adel, who is woken at 3 o'clock in the morning, that we have to address this antisocial behaviour? As he says, the current legislation is not working. A reduction in the decibel limit would not diminish the joy; in fact, it could increase the joy, because it could increase accessibility for people to attend fireworks displays. It would diminish the terrible impacts we have heard about today, from Roxie to the tragic story of those in the Public Gallery.

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend is right. Those who use fireworks responsibly would be little concerned about a reduction in the noise level. It is a sensible call that many people, including my constituents, charity groups and others, have been making for many years now.

While the current laws restrict the hours during which fireworks can be set off and impose age restrictions, they do little to prevent the antisocial behaviour that we

[Imran Hussain]

see in our communities. Much of the misery is caused by antisocial behaviour. Our local authorities and police forces, including my own Bradford council and West Yorkshire police, have repeatedly stated that their hands are tied by inadequate laws and a lack of resources. Despite the challenges, I take this opportunity to commend Bradford council for its proactive approach in working with venues and other parties to reduce the antisocial use of fireworks, and in calling for stricter laws on noise levels and sales.

I feel that any criticism of local authorities is not warranted, because the reality is that if they had the extra powers they have been requesting for many years—certainly during my time in Parliament—they would deal with the issue differently. We must not forget that over the last decade trading standards and our police force have had their resources massively reduced, which impacts enforcement. I consistently argue that councils need more powers to tackle the issue effectively.

In recent years, we have heard about the issue from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who previously introduced a Bill on the subject. Today, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) is doing fantastic work in this area, and she has my full support. The measures they have brought to Parliament are backed by many public petitions signed by thousands in all our constituencies. That is why I urge the Government to take immediate steps. This is not a call to end fireworks—that is certainly not my call, which I hope is supported by others. Fireworks can and should be a source of joy, community and celebration, but their misuse is causing distress, harm and destruction to too many people.

It is time for the Government to listen to our communities, empower councils and put in place sensible, enforceable regulations that balance enjoyment with responsibility. The Minister and I have worked together for many years and I know he understands this. I therefore urge him to address four points in particular today: stronger licensing and enforcement powers, the reduction of noise levels, restrictions on the sale of fireworks, and giving further enforcement powers not just to local authorities but to trading standards and other enforcement bodies, to allow us to move forward.

5.39 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening this important debate on the sale and misuse of fireworks.

Like many people young and old, I enjoy the magic of fireworks lighting up the night sky, bringing joy and wonder, and as a former chemistry teacher I cannot help but become immersed in the science of fireworks—the science of the colours and of each and every precisely timed explosion. However, my enthusiasm is tempered by my awareness of the darker side of fireworks when they are misused. I know, at first hand, of the devastation that can unfold when fireworks fall into the wrong hands. They are not toys: they are powerful explosives with the potential to cause life-changing injuries and even death. I share my condolences with the family and

loved ones of Josephine, the emergency workers and all affected by that tragedy. When misused, fireworks will endanger lives and put communities at risk.

I am a mom to Bruce, a 14-year-old pet Labrador. As a gun dog Bruce is, ironically, petrified of fireworks, and there is very little I can do to reassure him when he is left trembling and distressed. Many of my constituents in Wolverhampton North East have shared similar stories about their pets, from terrified cats hiding under furniture to horses panicking and injuring themselves and others.

Animals are not the only ones that are petrified. There are so many people living with PTSD, particularly veterans, and fireworks are a source of profound distress. Combat Stress reports a surge in calls for support during this season, as the bangs and flashes of fireworks can mimic the sounds of frontline combat. These triggers can leave veterans grappling with flashbacks and overwhelming anxiety.

Children are also at risk. More than 550 children were taken to A&E around bonfire night in 2021, with most injuries occurring at private displays and many suffering life-changing burns to their hands, faces or eyes. Those scars, both physical and emotional, can last a lifetime.

The current legislation is simply not enough. Fireworks can be purchased online with relative ease and used daily—365 days a year—with limited restrictions. That easy access undermines our ability to protect the most vulnerable. To address this, I would welcome further debate on a series of changes, including further restricting sales to licensed shops; restricting firework use to specific celebrations, such as Guy Fawkes night, new year's eve and Diwali, to mention a few; reducing maximum noise levels to 90 dB to minimise distress for animals and those who are sensitive to sound; enforcing more robust and stricter checks by retailers, including mandatory age verification; and increasing price thresholds to discourage reckless use.

Public support for better legislation is overwhelming. In just the last few months more than 60 Wolverhampton North East residents have raised concerns with me personally. A recent RSPCA survey found that 91% of respondents support quieter alternatives, and a significant majority believe they would be just as enjoyable as traditional fireworks.

Fireworks can bring communities, families and friends together at a time of joy and celebration, but for too many they bring fear, trauma and harm. I urge the Government to review the current legislation and take action to protect our communities, our animals and those who are vulnerable. With that, we can ensure that fireworks are used responsibly, bringing joy, not distress, to all.

5.44 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for securing this debate, which has a specific resonance in my constituency. When Edinburgh Zoo told me what happened to the baby red panda whose birth we had all welcomed and celebrated just a few days before, my stomach dropped. It was heartbreaking. What terror she must have felt alone in the dark, bombarded by loud noises she could not have understood and with no comfort. We later learned that her mother had also died probably as a result of stress caused by fireworks.

I thought about other animals, not just in Edinburgh Zoo but across the country. My dog had paced the floor barking, running in from the garden terrified when the first of what seemed like hundreds of fireworks began going off. Worse, I thought about the accident and emergency departments that would deal with burns. I thought about instances like the heartbreaking story of Josephine. I pay tribute to her family and thank them for allowing her story to be shared here today.

I, too, am reluctant to ban fireworks, partly because I loved bonfire night as a child. When we were parents of young children, our group of friends loved the annual firework display, with hot drinks and snacks organised by the school. Hogmanay for me is defined by the awe-inspiring firework displays from Sydney to New York to mark their respective midnights, and Edinburgh is of course always a highlight.

I have always believed that the availability of fireworks for those spectacular organised public displays was part of a valuable expression of celebration, but now I am not so sure. That is why I welcome the private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). We need to somehow limit noise levels, especially of fireworks sold to the public, so perhaps the time has come to question our attitude to fireworks, if not through legislation. We need to think about how we prevent celebrations descending into antisocial nuisance. Many people agree that something should be done—they signed the petitions, after all—so it is time we listened.

We know from official figures that around 2,000 people visit accident and emergency departments with firework-related injuries every year, many of them severe burns that require long-term treatment. Sadly Roxie, the red panda cub, is not the only animal casualty. The Kennel Club says that around 80% of dog owners notice their pets shivering, barking excessively, hiding, howling and crying as a result of stress caused by fireworks. The British Veterinary Association says that some animals suffer such terror that they have to be put down.

It may seem unusual that the death of one baby red panda in a zoo should cause such outrage, but perhaps it is the irony of an endangered species being legally protected across Asia, carefully looked after and bred by one of the world's respected zoological societies and yet utterly defenceless against noisy fireworks, or perhaps it is the innocence of a tiny orphaned creature that tugs at our heartstrings. Whatever the reason, it is time that the UK Government paid attention to the people who have signed this petition to say that we must find a way of preventing the damage that is done every year.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Like the hon. Lady, I have had multiple complaints from constituents who are concerned about the impact of fireworks on the most vulnerable, children and pets. That particularly applies to fireworks being set off by people in their gardens or illegally in public places. According to recent research, Slough has 18 firework-related events, displays or shops per 10 square miles, which is the highest number of any UK town. Does the hon. Lady agree that centrally-held events are often safer and more considerate, and limit the environmental impact on our local areas?

Christine Jardine: I agree that that is often the case, but it still leaves the problem of noise, which is central.

In Scotland we have an unusual situation: the use of fireworks is devolved, but the regulation of the sale of fireworks is reserved, so local authorities such as Edinburgh have brought in trial control zones. Edinburgh Zoo welcomed that, but suggested that silent or at least quieter fireworks might be the solution; others want an outright ban or specially controlled areas. As I say, Edinburgh introduced such areas this year, but unfortunately it could not select the area around Edinburgh Zoo in my constituency. Whatever the solution, we have to find it quickly or accept that fireworks and firework displays will be consigned to the past because they are too noisy, stressful for animals and dangerous for people.

5.50 pm

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for presenting this debate on restricting the public sale of fireworks. It has strong public support, including in my constituency of Glasgow South West. I am delighted to support my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and her private Member's Bill to ban the sale of the loudest fireworks and to ensure that fireworks are purchased only from licensed premises. If the Bill is passed, the public sale of fireworks would be restricted all over Britain, including in Scotland.

I will share some of the adverse experiences that have taken place in Glasgow South West. For many years, Pollokshields in my constituency has suffered the impact of over-the-counter fireworks on bonfire night and the weeks around it. I saw the disasters that resulted from fireworks when I worked as a junior doctor many years ago in my local A&E—not only burns, but penetrating injuries from the increasingly high velocity of more sophisticated fireworks. This year, the situation in Pollokshields could have been helped by the introduction of a local byelaw using a firework control zone. Devastatingly, the paperwork was put in too late by Glasgow city council and it did not come to fruition.

Instead, in the weeks around 5 November, Pollokshields residents—my constituents—were subjected to loud, intrusive fireworks being set off on roads and pavements, from inside cars, and everywhere in between. On bonfire night itself, there were fires on roundabouts and disturbances into the early morning of 6 November, with even the police fearing for their safety. That was not an abstract fear because, in the previous year, 40 police officers across Glasgow were injured in firework-related incidents.

In Pollokshields the morning after, shrapnel was left in and around parks and gardens, risking injury to children, and the remnants of fires could still be seen down the main promenade of Albert Drive. Despite the criminality on their doorstep, community council members led by chair Ameen Mohammed, and local schools and residents, engaged in a massive clean-up operation to bring back dignity to the streets that were once their own.

I also held an emergency public meeting where community members engaged with the police and councillors in an attempt to reconcile themselves to what had taken place and to raise concerns. As a result, the police spent precious resources scouring hours of CCTV to make arrests and send a strong signal that criminality will not be tolerated in our community.

[Dr Zubir Ahmed]

I place on record my thanks to Inspectors Hogg and Thomson of Police Scotland for their tireless efforts in holding those responsible to account.

Glasgow South West is probably the most culturally diverse community in Scotland, where fireworks are often used in festivals and religious celebrations. I personally know the significance of such celebrations, which should of course be facilitated, but it is time to accept that there need to be controls on general sales so that they are curtailed for the common good.

Over and above the impact of fireworks on pets, children and the vulnerable, I note that when my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) asked on 30 October whether an impact assessment had been done on the effect of the noise of fireworks on the mental health of veterans, the answer was that there had not. At a time when our mental health services are stretched beyond recognition, we must be cognisant that veterans can often suffer from PTSD, as has been mentioned, and other mental health issues for which fireworks are a recognised trigger.

Directing fireworks to controlled settings has many benefits beyond safety. They can become a focus for community cohesion and a stimulus for small businesses to diversify into servicing those events. Moving forward, I hope to work constructively on the Fireworks Bill with Members from all parties, because it is clear from these petitions that modern society demands that this issue needs to be sorted.

5.55 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening this important debate. I, too, pay tribute to Josephine's family.

Fireworks have been part of our celebrations and traditions for years. Whether at a public display or a family gathering with sparklers and sausages, they can bring joy and excitement. However, for some people, including hundreds in my constituency of Eastleigh, fireworks are more than just a spectacle—they are a source of profound distress. As we have heard, those living with PTSD, dementia or other mental health challenges can find the unexpected bangs and flashes deeply disorientating and distressing. For shift workers, including our NHS staff, and for families with young children, the sudden noises can be incredibly disturbing.

Of course, it is not just human beings who are affected. As I know from my personal experience of having a much-missed rescue dog who was petrified every November and new year's eve, fireworks can be terrifying for our four-legged friends. Research by the Blue Cross tells us that 70% of pets are affected by fireworks, with many trembling in fear, hiding for hours or even becoming physically ill. Horses startled by fireworks have been known to suffer injuries. Sadly, there have even been cases of animals losing their life as a result of stress caused by fireworks.

We need to strike a balance. Public firework displays provide a structured and predictable environment, minimising unexpected noise and allowing people to prepare. However, private fireworks, when used carelessly and at unexpected times of the year or in instances of

antisocial behaviour, can amplify the distress for both people and animals. That is where our collective responsibility comes in.

What steps are the Government taking to address the concerns of people living with PTSD, dementia or other vulnerabilities, who are disproportionately affected by fireworks? I support calls to reduce the noise limits for F2 and F3 fireworks to 90 dB, and to enhance the legislation governing the use and sale of fireworks. Will the Minister consider setting stricter noise limits for fireworks sold for private use to ensure that they are safer and more inclusive for people and animals?

Finally, I echo the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison). Ultimately, it is our emergency services, our NHS, our vets and our animal rescue centres that have to pick up the pieces. A proper review of the fireworks legislation is long overdue.

5.58 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing the debate.

In the days running up to 5 November this year, I met by chance at an event in Edinburgh an off-duty police officer who lives in my constituency, and he explained to me that he had been injured on Guy Fawkes night in 2023 and had still not made a full recovery. He was just one of 62 police officers injured after being targeted with fireworks and other projectiles as part of a significant outbreak of antisocial behaviour around Guy Fawkes night that year. I stress "other projectiles" because it is not just fireworks, but fireworks are a catalyst for antisocial behaviour and they are also, obviously, extremely dangerous. I talk about "antisocial behaviour", but we all know that that is just a euphemism; it is outright lawlessness that we are confronted with at times in Edinburgh in relation to fireworks.

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

In the days running up to Guy Fawkes night—I keep wanting to call it Guy Fireworks night—this year, I met with two community police officers to support a local shopkeeper who was concerned about shoplifting. Both were set to be on duty on 5 November, and both had been through so-called public order training. I had to wish them both good luck. It is shameful that we know such violence is coming on 5 November, but all we can really do as MPs is wish the police officers good luck. We should be empowering them and also protecting them.

When the night came in Edinburgh South West, we saw disorder in Sighthill, Oxbgangs, Calder Road and Broomview. Thankfully, we only saw one injury, which was to a female police officer. Nevertheless, the police were clear:

"The levels of violence and aggression police officers, fire service and ambulance service personnel faced in some areas was wholly unacceptable".

They said that residents were left

"terrified as serious disorder took place in their communities and vital bus services that allow safe travel across our city were violently attacked".

I know that Members will not know Edinburgh well, but I will list the bus services affected just to give the scale of what happened. They included Lothian Buses services 2, 12, 14, 21, 30, 46, 48 and 400. There are many

jobs where people's partners worry about them when they go to work, but driving a bus should not be one of them. We really have to take steps to tackle that.

The police are still hunting down those responsible, and so far several houses have been searched under warrant and several vehicles seized. There have been 27 people arrested in Edinburgh and they have been charged with 64 offences. The police showed me a huge stash of fireworks that they took out of one car on 5 November. The driver had set himself up as a mobile fireworks delivery service, and he was cautioned and charged accordingly. I do not understand how one person was able to buy that volume of fireworks.

My office is engaging with communities impacted by the disorder to ask what they think needs to change. There is fantastic community partnership work going on to try to tackle the causes of antisocial behaviour of all types, but people are saying that, where fireworks are concerned, we have to do more to tackle both their supply and their use. We already have a mix of dispersal zones and firework control zones across Scotland, particularly in Edinburgh, to try to control the problem.

Firework control zones are designed to reduce the negative effects of fireworks on the environment and vulnerable groups, as well as to support animal welfare. They essentially make it illegal to set off fireworks, including within private property. However, imagine the job of the police in trying to identify who is letting a firework off in their back garden. How are they supposed to enforce that? Israel's Iron Dome comes to mind, but perhaps it is not applicable in that setting. The Scottish Government said that the control zones were

"a key milestone in the journey towards a cultural change in Scotland's relationship with fireworks."

This is not a criticism, because the legislation is well intentioned, but so far there is little evidence that it is having an impact. A senior police officer told me that the orders were "mildly preventative at best."

John Lamont: The hon. Member is making an excellent point, but does he agree that, in Scotland, the issue is about resources as well? The local authorities and police authorities of Scotland just do not have the resources to police this. He is making the point that the legislation and rules are there, but, if he reads some of their responses, he will see that the police are concerned about their ability to enforce them effectively. It comes down to the money from the Scottish Government for the police and local authorities.

Dr Arthur: I support the police, both north and south of the border, having more resources. I am one of those people who is quite happy to pose next to the police at a community event and share those pictures on my Facebook page, but the price I pay for that is to support them in their calls. What resources do they need to deal with fireworks? Do they need helicopters to see where they are being launched from? We need to tackle the import and sale of these devices, and we have to be honest about that.

The police officer was clear with me that more could be done to restrict the import and sale of fireworks, which was the point I just made, and I think we have to listen to the police on this issue. The chaos in my constituency and what I hear from police officers is why I am here today. We have known that fireworks are

dangerous all my life. I can remember warnings on "Blue Peter", when we used to get told to keep our fireworks in metal biscuit tins—remember those dangerous days? We knew back then about the impact of fireworks on animals too. At this point, I have to mention my cat, Millie—other people have mentioned dogs, but there have been no cats yet. Since then, fireworks have only got bigger and their misuse has become an increasingly significant driver of antisocial behaviour.

The British Fireworks Association wrote to me—I am sure it wrote to others—to say that fireworks-related injuries account for less than 0.03% of all A&E attendances.

Ruth Cadbury: I, too, read the briefing from the British Fireworks Association, and what concerned me was that it seemed to underemphasise the damage being caused by providing the tiny percentage of people who are injured. Does my hon. Friend agree that that ignores the fear, terror and trauma of animals and people, which Members across the Chamber have been addressing in this good debate?

Dr Arthur: Absolutely. We cannot reduce the issue to numbers; it is about the human impact. There are 25 million attendances at A&E every year, so that figure of 0.03% is 7,500 people. That is incredible. The British Fireworks Association has a list of actions that it thinks the Government could pursue, and we should engage on that. These are difficult times for Government finances, so why not fund some of those measures via a levy on firework sales?

I apologise to Alan Smith for talking about this, but a video was shared locally of a firework being put through someone's letterbox that could have started a fire in that house. I checked the data, and between 2010 and 2023 there were 291 non-fatal firework-related casualties due to fires, and seven fatalities. Earlier, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) compared that number with the number of injuries resulting from cows. We are discussing fireworks, not cows. It is time to act and place tighter controls on the sale and import of fireworks. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

6.7 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for presenting this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I also thank the 285 Gloucester residents who signed the petitions, and the scores more who have emailed me about the issue. Fireworks are a hallmark of celebrations in my constituency and around the world. From Eid, Chinese new year and Diwali, to bonfire night and new year's eve, for many they symbolise moments of unity, happiness and cultural expression. However, I understand that for many others, the sight and sound of fireworks is not so warmly received.

Like many Members in the Chamber, I have received dozens of emails from constituents expressing their concerns about the use of fireworks. Some have written to me to highlight the risks they pose to the wellbeing and safety of pets and wild animals. Others have expressed concern about the effects that they may have on those with PTSD or respiratory conditions, and on people with autism and Down's syndrome, who may be more

[Alex McIntyre]

sensitive to loud noises. Additionally, many of my constituents have raised concerns regarding the use of fireworks to commit crime. I share all of those concerns, and I am not alone in that, as demonstrated by today's debate.

From the several public petitions that I have seen, I know that the concerns that I hear in Gloucester are echoed across the country. The issue is not confined to my constituency, but resonates nationwide. Sadly, in Gloucester there have been a number of crimes involving the use of fireworks, including fireworks being posted through letterboxes and set off in people's front gardens. That is incredibly dangerous, as the cases of those present in the Public Gallery show us. We need to tackle that surge in antisocial behaviour, and I am pleased that the Government have set out their commitment to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour in all our communities.

I am also concerned about the pressure we place on our emergency services. Last year on bonfire night weekend, people sought advice on burn injuries from the NHS every 21 seconds. The fire service is under immense pressure too, responding to frequent call-outs regarding fireworks. That is particularly concerning, as we lost almost a fifth of the fire service workforce under the last Government, further exacerbating the strain.

I am saddened to hear of the effects fireworks have on our wildlife and pets, which suffer as a result. As a father of a rather sleepless one-year-old, I also highlight the struggle of parents with young children who just want a few peaceful hours of sleep. We must find a balance one that allows people to enjoy fireworks while ensuring that their enjoyment does not negatively impact others.

We need thoughtful and considerate legislation and we as individuals must be mindful of the impact of our actions on those around us. It is clear from the debate that the current regulations and enforcement do not work. I am particularly persuaded by the articulate arguments made by hon. Members from across the House for lowering the decibel limit to 90 dB, in accordance with international comparators.

I am pleased that the Government will work with businesses and charities to inform any future fireworks policy. We must ensure that legislation on the use and sale of fireworks keeps the public safe, prevents the misuse of fireworks and protects our pets and wildlife.

6.10 pm

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): Fireworks are used all over the world as a way of celebrating different events, and they bring enjoyment to many. However, fireworks now continue throughout the winter season; they are not set off just on bonfire night, Diwali, new year and Chinese new year. Fireworks can cause significant injury and fear to people and animals, and their increased use makes it difficult to predict and prepare. Almost 200 of my constituents have signed the two petitions we are debating, and I know that many more share their sentiment.

Last week, I met up with former Stourbridge councillor Karen Shakespeare, who has campaigned tirelessly over 15 years for a change in the law on fireworks. Her dog Henry is petrified of fireworks; a single bang sends him into a panic and he cannot be soothed for many hours

afterwards. Karen has previously submitted motions to Dudley council calling for a change to regulations on local displays and lobbied the office responsible for public protection along with the RSPCA. In Dudley borough, the main fireworks display takes place at Himley Hall, a site surrounded by farmland and woodland, with additional local displays happening at various sports grounds. Karen and I would like to see a move towards alternative displays, such as drone displays, which would eliminate noise and environmental impact while offering a high-quality display that could increase attendance and profit for the event.

George the Stourbridge station cat told me that during fireworks season he is not allowed out on "pawtrol" in case he gets startled. His colleague Simone's greyhound gets distressed to the point of refusing to eat and shaking and panting for hours. Ahead of this debate, I reached out to several local animal rescues, including CatsMatter, Stour Valley Cat Rescue and Stourbridge RSPCA, which all told me that their animals can become traumatised by fireworks. They all spoke of making preparations well ahead of 5 November due to random fireworks being set off weeks before and after that date. All the rescues make efforts to drown out the noise by closing curtains and leaving a radio or television on, but it is difficult to negate all the noise as fireworks can go off at all times of the day. There is constant worry about the potential for major stress and heart attacks, especially for rabbits and other small mammals. Horses, farm livestock, wildlife and birds die every year because of fireworks set off for our enjoyment.

One rescue told me about Coco the cat, who developed feline idiopathic cystitis as a direct result of fireworks. FIC is an inflammation of the bladder caused by stress and is extremely painful for cats. There is no cure, only management of the condition and measures to make the animal less stressed. It can take weeks for a flare-up to settle down, and Coco struggles to go to the toilet. It is visibly painful for her and she cries out to her owner. The vet prescribes pain relief, but the unpredictable use of fireworks makes them difficult to avoid. I have also heard reports of foxes running into roads in front of cars, birds falling out of trees and even badgers falling off walls in a bid to rush for safety.

The charity Guide Dogs says that around a quarter of guide dog owners report their animals showing signs of distress when they see or hear fireworks. The organisation works hard to socialise the dogs and expose them to firework noise using recordings, but even so, some dogs take longer to recover from unexpected loud sounds, which can restrict the activities of guide dog owners during the fireworks season.

As well as the clear impact on animals, there is a significant effect on the NHS, which has to deal with firework-related injuries. During my NHS career I saw many life-changing injuries, often in young people, caused by irresponsible use of fireworks. Those injuries ranged from minor burns to loss of fingers, limbs and sight. In 2024, how can we think it is okay to sell explosives at the local shop? It simply does not make sense.

The Scottish Government have introduced tighter regulation around the sale of fireworks. I believe that any change in the law in England and Wales should build on the Scottish example and aim to go further. The Petitions Committee carried out an extensive inquiry

into fireworks in 2019, and concluded that it could not support an outright ban on the public use and buying of fireworks, but it stated:

“Inconsiderate and irresponsible use of fireworks should be considered as socially unacceptable as drink driving.”

The petitions call for users of fireworks in the UK to be required to obtain a licence, with the aims of reducing public noise and nuisance, preventing crime and disorder, improving public safety, and protecting people and animals from harm. A licensing system would allow sales to continue without affecting the industry, and would eliminate concerns about black market sales. The introduction of licences would increase public education about firework safety and prevent impulse buying.

I fully support the recommendations put forward by the RSPCA and the Social Market Foundation, and the licensing proposals put forward by the Firework Campaign UK, which include reducing the maximum decibel level, limiting the sale of category F1 and F2 fireworks, and designating firework-free zones in areas where fireworks are likely to have a greater impact on animals, the environment and vulnerable people. Local authorities have a unique opportunity to showcase alternatives, such as drone displays, light shows and quieter fireworks, and can lead the way by setting an example for others to follow. That would help to increase the popularity of alternatives and encourage suppliers to stock them.

6.16 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his opening speech, which covered many of the points that I want to make. I also wholeheartedly echo everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) said.

Bonfire night brings great joy to people across the west coast of Scotland. For the most part people use fireworks safely, but they remain a significant problem in Glasgow and the west of Scotland. I recently met a constituent who has worked for many years at Edinburgh zoo, and one of her responsibilities was to look after its red pandas and black and white pandas. She explained to me how the death of the two pandas came about: she said that there is no doubt that the cause was fireworks in Edinburgh. Like her colleagues, she is absolutely heartbroken about what happened to the red pandas.

Fireworks cause misery for people with PTSD, young parents, people with autism, animals and people across Glasgow, so we need to think about how to manage and regulate them. Clearly, in Scotland and across our family of nations, the current situation is not working. Although fireworks bring joy, they also bring misery to many communities.

The SNP council in Glasgow has cancelled the major public displays, particularly in Glasgow Green, and the reason for that has never been fully explained. We need to give people opportunities to see fireworks, and councils cancelling displays without explaining why do not help.

The power to restrict the use of fireworks is, in the main, devolved to the Scottish Government. I regret to say that, although there has been legislative reform, it has not been an unalloyed success. The flagship measure was the introduction of a licensing system, but the Scottish Government say that that has been postponed

to at least 2026 due to resourcing issues. Well, this Government have provided £4.9 billion to the Scottish Government, so hopefully they will start to make some progress on introducing that much-needed reform, which will prevent misery from being inflicted on my constituents and others in Glasgow.

The Scottish legislation also included firework control zones, and one was to be introduced in Glasgow, in the constituency neighbouring mine. That was bungled by the SNP council, which simply did not use the correct time period for the notice. As every trainee lawyer knows, it is necessary to count the days for a notice properly if it is to be effective. That basic error has caused misery for my constituents and the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West.

There is much hard work by council officials, fire services and the police to deal with fireworks in Glasgow. However, the legislation is not working: it is not being properly implemented. How can it be that in Edinburgh it is not possible to introduce an exclusion zone for fireworks around a zoo, which obviously has many animals? How can it be that we cannot review the introduction of exclusion zones around buildings such as hospitals? Clearly, the legislation is not being properly implemented, is not properly drafted and requires thorough review.

I am actually a big fan of fireworks; I love fireworks. However, my enjoyment of fireworks should not inflict misery on animals and people in my communities in Glasgow East. It is clearly time, in Glasgow, in Scotland and in England and Wales, for us to review how fireworks are regulated. Many good ideas about how to improve the system have been suggested in this debate, and there is much to consider and learn from every contribution to it. However, the current situation is not sustainable and I submit that it is high time that both the Scottish Government and the UK Government looked at this issue again.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mundell (in the Chair): I will call Lizzie Collinge and then Patrick Hurley. If there is anyone else who has not been called and wishes to speak, please can they indicate that to me?

6.21 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve here in Westminster Hall today under your chairship, and I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing this important debate.

I will speak about the impact of fireworks on my constituents in Morecambe and Lunesdale. I have to declare an interest, as I absolutely love fireworks; I cannot get enough of them. I am also a heavy metal fan, so maybe I just like loud bangs in the dark. *[Laughter.]*

However, hearing from constituents who are deeply affected by the weeks and weeks of fireworks that we get at certain times of the year has persuaded me that we need to have this debate. Constituents tell me of terrified animals and terrified humans, and they also tell me about the weeks of fireworks surrounding bonfire night and new year's eve. Because that lasts for weeks and weeks, it gives them no opportunity to plan and to feel safe. My joy in fireworks is their terror.

[Lizzi Collinge]

What specific action needs to be taken is up for debate. The petitioners have asked for a ban on sales of fireworks to the public and there are excellent arguments for that, which have been made here today and through the petitions. Initially, I was instinctively reluctant even to consider a ban on all public sales as a first step, because although fireworks can be deeply harmful, they also bring families and communities together in celebration.

I thought, “Is there an alternative?” Maybe it could be limiting the number of days per year that fireworks are allowed, for example on bonfire night and the nearest Saturday, replicating that across the year for important events such as new year or Diwali. Would enforcing such a system ruthlessly and alongside age verification allow people the freedom to enjoy fireworks but also minimise harm, which is the desired impact? My constituents tell me that if they can plan for the fireworks, it minimises the harm they experience, so the situation would not be so bad.

However, as I wrote this speech, I really thought the issue through. On balance, and having heard the stories of fireworks being used as weapons and the harrowing story of the Smiths, I believe that it is right to examine all options to regulate the sale of fireworks. A change in regulation may also create market incentives to develop more options and cheaper options, such as silent fireworks, drones or laser shows. Those options would allow families to come together to enjoy a show, but they would also protect people and pets from some of the devastating impacts of the misuse of fireworks.

6.24 pm

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell.

I thank the petitioners and the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for the opportunity of today’s debate on firework regulation, and I also thank the Petitions Committee for its decision to grant the debate.

Like many hon. Members, I love fireworks and I certainly do not think that they should be banned. In my constituency of Southport, we are proud to host the British musical fireworks championship every year in Victoria park. Often a sight to behold, it always features excellent displays, but that is the point: they are displays, they are specialised and regulated. Many technicians are on hand to ensure safety, and specialised explosive technicians set off the displays.

Neither the petitions nor the Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) call for a total ban on fireworks. They both celebrate the enjoyment that the majority of people feel from firework displays. However, I am sympathetic to the idea that our current framework does not do enough to protect people and animals, and allows fireworks to be used dangerously and irresponsibly. Look at the current regulations. Allowing unlicensed traders to sell category F2 and F3 fireworks over a month around bonfire night, as well as during new year, Chinese new year and Diwali, is excessive. It means that there are widespread firework displays over an entire month, which disproportionately affects our vulnerable groups in society.

One such group is our veterans, many of whom are suffering from PTSD or other forms of distress from fighting for our country. During the period of remembrance, as it is so close to bonfire night, we put our veterans under further pressure. The charity Combat Stress has recorded a higher rate of distressed veterans accessing its services during the period around bonfire night, due to the whistles, the bangs and all the paraphernalia reminding them of past trauma. I welcome the Government’s support for veterans and attempts to provide more services for veterans’ health through NHS England, but that enhanced distress could be stopped by shifting the balance more in favour of regulating firework sales.

Alongside that, the well documented effects of excessive firework displays on our pets and animals are saddening. Despite us being a nation of animal lovers, according to the Kennel Club, one in five dogs show signs of distress, and Cats Protection reported that in 2024, 64% of cat owners feel that fireworks have negatively impacted their cats.

There is also a serious risk that the current regulations allow the irresponsible use of fireworks. NHS England reported 113 firework-related injuries in 2023-24. Most of those injuries happen at family events and amateur displays, due to the widespread availability of most fireworks. Back in 2020, the chief constable and the chief fire officer for Lancashire, with oversight for part of my constituency, spoke out about introducing regulations similar to those proposed by the petitions, due to police officers having had fireworks launched at them. Our emergency services should be able to go about their lives without fear of being attacked. More recently, police officers had fireworks shot at them in attacks during the riots this summer. One way to clamp down on such extreme attacks on our emergency services would be to reduce the availability of fireworks.

We can minimise the impact on our vulnerable groups in society by supporting some of the regulations suggested in the petitions. We should limit the sale of F2 and F3 fireworks to licensed firework shops only, and encourage those wanting to have displays to be recognised as firework-safe handlers and technicians. Against that backdrop, I welcome the public bringing the issue to Parliament. I also welcome the Fireworks Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North, which would introduce many of the changes we have talked about. I hope that it will get time for debate on the Floor of the Chamber. To conclude, I welcome the Government’s commitment to monitor the situation, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments.

6.29 pm

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for introducing this important debate. I am grateful to the Petitions Committee for ensuring that the sale and use of fireworks receive parliamentary scrutiny. I join colleagues in welcoming those who are in the Public Gallery and those at home who have signed the petitions and are watching us debate this important matter. I add my condolences to Alan and his family on the very distressing story that we heard earlier.

Overall, 161 people in my constituency signed the petition to ban the general sale of fireworks, or at least to limit their sale to licence holders. I take their views

very seriously, and not only because my own dog Rhea is absolutely terrified of fireworks, as all gundogs are, at least in my experience. I have to say that my childhood love of fireworks has paled after seeing the fear that she experiences.

I rescued Rhea as a little puppy from Spain and was desperately trying to settle her in. Unfortunately, it was during firework season. While I was trying to move her from a safe space, a neighbour's firework landed on a tin roof in my garden. My neighbour's garden was really not big enough for the firework display that they thought they should have. That explosion, and that firework landing on the tin roof, was such a nightmare that Rhea disappeared into the frozen night, not to be found until at lunch time the following day some very kind neighbours, some five miles away, found her on the other side of a river. My story was a lucky one, although she was a much thinner dog, and a constantly terrified dog in the years onwards, so it is perfectly understandable why constituents of mine, the RSPCA and other leading charities are so concerned about the impact of fireworks on all animals.

I thank hon. Members for raising the plight of the baby panda at Edinburgh Zoo, who died from stress related to firework use. My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) has highlighted the impact that fireworks have, not just on pets but on our natural environment more broadly. Her reference to the Australian approach was particularly insightful. I hope that the Government will reflect on those suggestions.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) and for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) have expressed, fireworks can pose a serious challenge to people with post-traumatic stress disorders, particularly veterans. I know from participating in the armed forces parliamentary scheme and from having met many veterans in my constituency that it is unexpected fireworks that cause particular stress. As the chief executive of Combat Stress, Chloe Mackay, rightly points out, if we give people more notice that fireworks are planned, those with PTSD will be able to use coping mechanisms and prepare in advance.

Although we are not completely convinced that more primary legislation is necessarily the right way to minimise firework disruption, the Liberal Democrats do support existing measures to minimise the disruption that can be the result of firework use. We are also open to a limit to the maximum noise level for fireworks, especially for those that are sold to the public for private displays.

My neighbour the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who is unfortunately no longer in his place, made the good point that prioritising education to the wider public would be a good way to more effectively reduce the damage that fireworks cause in our communities. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) mentioned that her local council does great work to educate the local public on how firework safety works, particularly on bonfire night.

It is clear from today's debate that the UK must engage in more in-depth consultation, both with the businesses that sell the fireworks and with people who are affected by the disruption and the danger that fireworks can cause. It is important that we recognise how much more powerful fireworks have become since the days when my father bought boxes of sparklers and rockets. The Liberal Democrats look forward to the Second Reading of the private Member's Bill introduced

by the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). I hope that this debate has generated the attention that the issue rightly deserves.

6.35 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. What a pleasure it is to be part of this substantial debate. It is the largest petitions debate in which I have ever had the privilege of taking part, and it was opened enormously ably by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore).

It is clear that this is a matter of great concern across the House, including in my constituency of Arundel and South Downs, where many people, including myself, are great lovers of dogs. We are fortunate to be able to exercise our dogs on the beautiful south downs. There are also many horse owners—my constituency is a big area of equine ownership—so I am familiar with the real challenges created by the deployment of unlicensed explosives over a significant part of the year: it seems that they go off throughout all the autumn months. We also heard about how fireworks are bigger and louder than before. That sounds a bit like the one about policemen getting younger, but I am told that it is objectively the case that fireworks have become bigger and louder.

I congratulate the petitioners, Chloe Brindley and Alan Smith. If Chloe does not mind, I will particularly commend Alan's bravery in highlighting an issue that has a real personal resonance for him and his family. He has bravely shared his story, and his Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), did it great justice. That is exactly what this debate is all about.

It is clear that, as we have heard from both sides of the Chamber, no action is not the answer. I really hope the Government are listening. Members of my party and others, as well as some of the petitioners, think that although a ban should not be a first resort, it should not be taken off the table as a last resort.

Some of the compliance measures are completely inadequate. We have heard a large menu, to which I invite the Government to respond. I appreciate that it is not always easy to respond at the Dispatch Box, so if we are left a little bit wanting, perhaps the Minister will be so kind as to take the matter away for further consideration. As hon. Members have mentioned, this is not the first time that this House has sought to put in place greater protections.

We heard about the lack of sentences for the improper sale of fireworks; if such sentences had been in place, the tragic death of Alan's mother might not have happened. We know that our police and blue light forces are under great pressure, but we also know that to govern is to choose. We all have to make choices with limited resources, and it would be good to see this area of criminality targeted.

We heard about a menu of opportunities to tighten up regulations and particularly to restrict the stockpiling of fireworks. Although I am concerned about rushing to a ban that would deny the enjoyment that we heard about from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), it is also true that there is no possible reason for people to stockpile explosive fireworks, potentially in residential premises.

[Andrew Griffith]

This is an area that could be looked at again. The same is true of the age limit on purchase. Without answering those questions for the Government, the House should explore all those areas in more detail. I suspect that measures that are couched in the right way and are evidence-led will attract support across the House.

Substantial contributions have been made today. On the Opposition's part, let me say that we hear them loud and clear. I commend all involved: this has been an excellent use of the House's time.

6.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. As the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), said, this has been a good debate and a wide range of suggestions have been made.

We had speeches from 20 Back-Benchers: my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison), my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis), and my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre), for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles), for Glasgow East (John Grady), for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and for Southport (Patrick Hurley). That was quite a good spread across the isles: it shows that the issue affects everyone in this great nation of ours. Everyone spoke with great passion and insight into how fireworks affect individuals, and there were a range of suggestions about what might be done.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) on leading this important debate. He set out well the balance of issues that we have to take into account when considering these matters. As he highlighted, fireworks can have a dreadful impact.

The two petitions that we are debating are "Ban the sale of fireworks to the general public" and "Limit the sale and use of Fireworks to licence holders only". I join the shadow Secretary of State in paying tribute to Chloe Brindley and Alan Smith for their work in helping to get the petitions debated today. The debate has shown that there is an appetite across the House to look at the issue. As a constituency MP and as a member of the Government, I know from my own postbag that it is an issue of widespread concern.

I express my condolences to the family of Josephine Smith, who, as we know, sadly passed away following the placing of a firework through her letterbox. The tragic story, which was conveyed by the hon. Member for

Hornchurch and Upminster, brings home the consequences of the deliberate misuse of fireworks. We heard from her about how the CCTV caught those responsible talking about what they might do, and I cannot imagine how difficult that must have been to view that irresponsible behaviour. The hon. Lady conveyed Mr Smith's thoughts well. He asked for a sensible and respectful debate, and I certainly believe that we have had one today. I assure him that we will meet in the new year and that we will continue to engage in a sensible and respectful way. There are many things to explore in what he said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North has caught the attention of a lot of Members with her private Member's Bill. She highlighted what is arguably an illogical approach to licensing, and mentioned the challenge of enforcement, which all Members spoke about. Many Members clearly feel that the enforcement regime is not working as it should. There may be a number of reasons for that. She also mentioned the impact on children with special educational needs and on guide dogs, and the impact of online sales, which were not something of which we were cognisant when fireworks were last legislated for. Those were important points.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West is not in her place, but her constituency contains Edinburgh Zoo, where Roxie the panda cub sadly died. That graphically brings home the impact that fireworks can have on animals. She was right to highlight the irony of a zoo doing its utmost to protect an endangered species but losing an animal through the deliberate and possibly unthinking acts of humans. There are many elements to this. We must recognise that for many people and animals, noise and disruption can be challenging. That is why we have had this debate today and why many people have signed the petition.

We must recognise that for the many people who use and enjoy fireworks responsibly, they are an important part of their life for enjoying celebrations with family and friends, and as part of the wider community. We know they are a popular product: the industry is valued at £200 million a year. Research published by the Social Market Foundation showed that 77% of the public like fireworks a lot or somewhat. As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford said, about 14 million Britons—a significant number of people—plan to have their own displays each year. However, the research also showed that only 15% of people in Great Britain want the regulations to stay as they are. It was clear from the debate that a lot of Members share that view. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge mentioned, there is potential for alternatives, including the use of light displays, drones and lasers. The use of alternatives was also highlighted in the Social Market Foundation report.

As Members have said, the Petitions Committee launched an inquiry into the sale and use of fireworks in 2019, which gave people the opportunity to raise their concerns. I believe it attracted more than 350 written submissions. The Committee made a number of recommendations but did not, in the end, advocate for a total ban on fireworks. I think it recognised the concern that doing so would create a black market. When we look at the possibility of a total ban, we must recognise that an extensive regulatory framework for fireworks already exists. We should also recognise that, particularly in Scotland, there have been a number of developments in

trying to regulate them. I listened with great interest to what my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow South West and Edinburgh South West said about their experiences of that system. They both talked about the horrendous injuries that police officers and other public servants have received, and why it is so important for them to get control of the issue.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West said that a lot of this is just lawlessness, he hit the nail on the head. That feels such a long way away from the displays that many Members talked about from their youth. How we have gone from that innocent, joyful experience to downright anarchy is a sad indictment, I am afraid. I also noted my hon. Friend's question about whether exclusion zones have been as effective as we would have liked. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East suggested that their application had not been as good as we would have liked. There are certainly things we need to look at from the experience of Glasgow and Edinburgh so far, to understand whether that tool is fit for purpose.

Under the Fireworks Act 2003, the Fireworks Regulations 2004 introduced a package of measures to reduce the nuisance and injuries caused by the misuse of fireworks, which forms part of the broader public concern with the problems of antisocial behaviour. As we know, there is an 11 pm curfew for the use of fireworks, with later exceptions only for the traditional firework periods of 5 November, Diwali, new year's eve and Chinese new year, as well as for local authority displays, celebrations and events. In addition, the Pyrotechnic Articles (Safety) Regulations 2015 include a 120 dB noise limit on the fireworks available to consumers. It should be said that the majority of people who use fireworks do so appropriately and have a sensible and responsible attitude to them, but, as we have heard this afternoon, too many people use them in a dangerous, inconsiderate or antisocial manner.

The police, local authorities and other local agencies have a range of tools and powers that they can use to respond to antisocial behaviour, including the antisocial use of fireworks offence through the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Going even further back, the Explosives Act 1875 made it an offence to throw, cast or fire a firework into a highway, street, thoroughfare or public place, demonstrating that it is sadly not a new problem.

Members have referred to the different categories of fireworks. It is worth setting out the fact that retailers must not sell low or medium-hazard fireworks, known as F2 and F3 fireworks, to anyone under the age of 18. Category F1, classed as very low hazard, cannot be sold to anyone under the age of 16. F4 fireworks are the most hazardous and can be sold only to those with specialist knowledge who have undertaken training recognised in the fireworks business and who hold a valid liability insurance. It is also an offence for anyone under the age of 18 to possess an F2, F3 or F4 firework in a public place, or for anyone to possess an F4 firework unless it is for specified professional reasons. Those offences can attract a £90 on-the-spot fine or, on summary conviction, up to six months' imprisonment or an unlimited fine.

Retailers are restricted to selling consumer fireworks during a limited period around each of the seasonal celebrations that I have mentioned. Retailers may supply

fireworks to the public outside of those periods only if they obtain a licence from their local licensing authority, so fireworks are less available to purchase outside those seasons. There are storage limits and strict rules around how and where fireworks are stored in business premises—the experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth is not an example of how they should be adhered to.

Sarah Owen: I welcome the Minister's thorough response. On the point about loosening the licensing laws to accommodate other sellers so that they can sell fireworks at times when people actually want to buy them—such as for fireworks night and new year—does that not seem a perverse way of doing things? If people are buying fireworks, they should be doing so from licensed, reputable sellers.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I think I have already recognised and acknowledged that there is a slight incongruity about how it works, which is something we will consider as we move forward.

Local authority trading standards work with retailers to ensure that fireworks are sold safely, and they have powers to enforce. Again, we have heard questions about whether that is currently sufficient. Trading standards can also enforce against those selling fireworks without an appropriate licence—for example, outside the normal selling period. But it is clear from the debate that some Members feel the current legislation is not only inadequate but is not being enforced properly.

Some Members mentioned the issue of noise. We recognise the impact of fireworks on vulnerable people, including veterans and those with post-traumatic stress disorder, and animals. That, along with antisocial use, is a key concern, as I have heard on a number of occasions. This year I launched a fireworks campaign to provide guidance on minimising their negative impacts. The campaign was well received on social media and shared by our key enforcement partners. But of course those who were determined to cause trouble and those who do not have any respect for others will not take heed of that.

Various animal charities have published guidance on how to protect animals during the fireworks season. We will continue to work collaboratively with animal welfare organisations, alongside other charities, to ensure that the messaging reaches the public.

Dr Arthur: I thank the Minister for giving way when time is moving on. It is really good to hear about that campaign, but it would be good to get a commitment to publish any analysis of how it went. If the campaign has not worked, perhaps we need to go even further next year.

Justin Madders: This is the first time in several years that the campaign has taken place. Hopefully there will be a baseline of evidence that we can look to. I will commit to write to my hon. Friend to see what we can elicit from officials in that respect.

As I say, UK fireworks retailers support the voluntary fireworks code, which contains advice on safety and considerate use. Many lower-noise firework products—those around 90 dB or below—are already on the market, with consumers recognising that as an option. I hope

[Justin Madders]

that market continues to grow. Intelligence has been shared that shows that some considerate supermarket retailers are now stocking lower-noise fireworks, and some refuse to stock fireworks altogether. Testing commissioned by the Office for Product Safety and Standards found that consumer firework products have a very high compliance with the 120 dB limit set out in law, so the issue is not with the products but with where the law sets the limit.

Many Members raised concerns about the noise and disruption that fireworks cause, but acknowledged that displays have a contribution to make to community groups up and down the country as they often raise money for good causes. In 2019, the Petitions Committee noted that point and stated that

“these community displays have widespread local support and increase community cohesion.”

It also noted that a ban on fireworks could have unintended consequences, such as a “substantial economic effect” on the industry and the risk of a black market, which the National Fire Chiefs Council and the National Police Chiefs’ Council raised in their evidence to the inquiry. There is a lot to consider, but we recognise the strength of feeling about fireworks and their negative impact on some groups in society. I also recognise the need for effective regulation in this area.

We must recognise the place of fireworks in cultural and community celebrations and consider carefully any unintended consequences. I acknowledge that, as has been said, there is a paucity of evidence about the effectiveness of the current regulations. I am committed to engaging with all stakeholders, including businesses, consumer groups and charities, to understand the issues and inform any future decisions in this policy area. The safety of the public and the impact on people and animals will be paramount in those considerations. I hope this dialogue will continue.

6.56 pm

Robbie Moore: On behalf of the Petitions Committee, let me say how grateful we are to Chloe Brindley and Alan Smith for very kindly bringing forward the petitions,

which gathered so much support in a relatively short period—thank you. I also extend my condolences once again to Alan, who is in the Public Gallery, for the tragic circumstances in which his mother lost her life.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. We have heard from Members from across the country—from Glasgow and Edinburgh right the way down to Luton and, of course, from Keighley and Ilkley. Our constituents contact us about this issue because when fireworks are misused, they impact us all—parents with a newborn, working people who just want to get a decent night’s sleep, veterans suffering anxiety issues, and pets and wildlife.

Everyone who spoke mentioned the challenging circumstances around antisocial behaviour. As the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles) said eloquently, fireworks are explosives that can be purchased. A common theme of all Members’ speeches was that we must push the Government for stronger licensing, noise reduction and restrictions on sale, and for more enforcement powers to be given to our police and local authorities so that they can properly enforce the existing legislation and anything that comes down the line.

It is my duty, on behalf of the Petitions Committee and the petitioners, to urge the Government to act. We heard very kind words from the Minister—he said the Government are listening and reviewing, and he summarised the existing legislation—but we want the Government to go much further on the five points that have been raised. We urge the Government and the Minister to have further exchanges with the petitioners and Members from throughout the House, and I hope they will listen to the points that Members made very strongly today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 639319 and 700013 relating to the sale and use of fireworks.

6.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 9 December 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Business Growth Service

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): Small businesses are the beating heart of our high streets and our communities and are essential to our economic success. There are 5.5 million small businesses in the UK—99.8% of all businesses—accounting for 16.6 million jobs and £2.8 trillion annual turnover. Small businesses exported £107.9 billion of goods in 2023. They are also fundamental to regional development and our ability to secure growth and good jobs.

That is why I am delighted to announce that my Department will launch the Business Growth Service in 2025. The Business Growth Service will make it simpler for businesses across the UK to get the help they need to grow and thrive in today's economy and into the future.

Inspired by successful international examples, the Business Growth Service will simplify a fragmented array of SME support under a single, trusted banner to give firms an easy path to the help they need.

This Government were elected on a promise to restore economic stability and deliver the change people need in their local communities. Working in partnership with local and devolved governments across the UK, and partners such as the Growth Hubs network, Innovate UK, and the British Business Bank, the Business Growth Service will provide direct support and introduce SMEs to other relevant services and providers they need to grow.

The Business Growth Service will work with the Government's international network to support and advise companies on how to grow overseas.

My aim is for the service to be up and running in the first half of 2025.

There is a wide range of support available for businesses across the UK, but all too often small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are faced with barriers when they try to access it. The Business Growth Service will remove these barriers, providing businesses with the help and support they need to unlock their potential for future growth.

In the coming months, my Department will be consulting widely with businesses, representative bodies, experts, the devolved governments and local government in the design, development and implementation of the Business Growth Service.

I will update Parliament on progress again in due course.

[HCWS287]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Hydrogen to Power Business Model: Consultation Response

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): I am tabling this statement to inform Members of the publication of the hydrogen to power market intervention consultation response on 9 December 2024. This response commits to delivering a hydrogen to power business model to support the accelerated deployment of hydrogen to power as low-carbon long-duration flexible electricity generating capacity.

Making Britain a clean energy superpower by 2030 is one of the Prime Minister's five missions. Unabated gas currently provides the majority of flexibility in Great Britain and so the deployment of hydrogen to power—the conversion of low-carbon hydrogen to produce low-carbon electricity—will play an important part in displacing unabated gas generation from the power system, to support the clean power mission, and the Government's legally binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

Low-carbon hydrogen can make our energy system more flexible, resilient, and independent. When connected with large-scale storage, hydrogen to power can provide electricity to cover longer periods of lower renewable output, while also creating a decarbonisation pathway for unabated gas power plants. The hydrogen to power business model will de-risk investment in hydrogen to power by mitigating the deployment barriers we identified, through a dispatchable power agreement-style business model, helping to support the unlocking of investment in hydrogen to power and improving the pipeline of projects.

The response document commits to:

Delivering a Hydrogen to Power Business Model based on a Dispatchable Power Agreement-style mechanism to support the deployment of hydrogen to power.

Publishing a Hydrogen to Power Business Model market engagement document in 2025 outlining further detail on the proposed design of the Hydrogen to Power Business Model and plans for launching the first allocation round.

Establishing a hydrogen to power industry expert working group. This will provide a key forum for Hydrogen to Power Business Model design and strategic policy considerations.

Enabling hydrogen to power to participate in the Capacity Market as soon as practical.

This publication is an important step towards supporting the deployment of hydrogen to power, a key low-carbon flexible technology, and therefore facilitating a clean power system. It will build on the positive stakeholder feedback received through the consultation and provide industry with clarity on Government's position on the technology and the next steps for implementing the market intervention.

[HCWS288]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Avian Influenza Outbreak Response

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Baroness Hayman of Ullock), has made the following written statement today.

Avian influenza (“bird flu”) is once again threatening both wild and kept birds across Great Britain with two strains of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) (H5N1 and H5N5) now circulating in our wild bird population.

DEFRA recognises the unprecedented outbreaks of avian influenza in recent years have been an incredibly difficult time for bird keepers who are on the frontline of this terrible disease and in particular that the poultry and egg sectors have been under serious pressure. Practising good biosecurity at all times remains vital to protect flocks across the country from avian influenza and all bird keepers are being urged to remain vigilant and take action to protect their birds.

In response to the cases of HPAI this winter DEFRA and the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) have stood up their well-established outbreak structures to control and eradicate disease, restore normal trade, and assist local communities’ recovery. DEFRA and APHA’s approach to avian influenza considers the latest scientific and ornithological evidence and veterinary advice, and is set out in the notifiable avian disease control strategy for Great Britain supported by the mitigation strategy for avian influenza in wild birds in England and Wales. Current policy reflects our experience of responding to past outbreaks of exotic animal disease and is in line with international standards of best practice for disease control.

Government action on animal disease control is led by APHA, who carry out routine surveillance of disease risks in the UK and globally, to help the Government anticipate future threats to animal health. To support this work, in Great Britain members of the public are encouraged to report findings of dead wild birds using the online reporting service or by calling the DEFRA helpline: 03459 335577.

The latest cases of HPAI have followed recent detections through APHA wild bird surveillance programme of HPAI H5N1 and HPAI H5N5 in wild birds in the area surrounding the infected premises. Reporting dead wild birds helps DEFRA and APHA understand the risk of avian influenza and other diseases to different species groups of wild birds, the risk posed to poultry and other captive birds, and the risk of overspill into mammals. The risk of incursion of HPAI H5 in wild birds in Great Britain is currently assessed as high—event occurs very often. The risk of poultry exposure has also increased and is now assessed as low—event is rare but does occur—where good biosecurity is consistently applied at all times, but medium—event occurs regularly—where there is suboptimal or poor biosecurity.

Upholding high biosecurity standards is paramount to food production and food safety, for human and animal health, protecting biodiversity and to support our economy and trade. The UK has robust disease control measures in place to prevent disease outbreaks spreading, and a strong track record of controlling and eliminating outbreaks. Animal disease outbreaks cause animals to suffer, damage businesses and cost the UK taxpayer significant sums of money. Together the Government and animal keepers must do everything we can to keep disease out and protect animal health and welfare.

Supporting bird keepers, the public and conservation bodies to prepare and respond to the threat of avian influenza continues to be one of DEFRA’s priorities. Government are clear that all farmers, producers and

animal keepers should implement strong biosecurity measures and report suspected disease immediately. DEFRA and APHA will continue to work closely with industry to ensure good flock management and husbandry practices are implemented on all farms regardless of size or scale. While also working closely with the UK Health Security Agency and the Health and Safety Executive with regard to the protection of human health from this zoonotic pathogen.

While there have been no cases of HPAI confirmed in Wales or Scotland during this outbreak, following the case in poultry in England, in line with WOAHP rules, Great Britain is no longer free from HPAI. There have been no cases of avian influenza in Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland retains its self-declared zonal freedom from HPAI. However, there are some restrictions on exports of affected commodities to third countries from the UK. To facilitate trade, it remains DEFRA’s objective to achieve WOAHP HPAI freedom across the UK at the earliest opportunity.

In addition, while vaccination of poultry and other captive birds against avian influenza, excluding those in licensed zoos in England, is not currently permitted and will not be a viable option for the 2024-25 season, DEFRA continues to invest in avian influenza research and the UK is committed to exploring opportunities for preventive vaccination for poultry and other captive birds.

With regard to vaccination to protect public health, while avian influenza is primarily a disease of birds, the UK Government have agreed a contract for more than five million doses of human H5 influenza vaccine to boost the country’s resilience in the event of a possible H5 influenza pandemic. This purchase has been made as part of long-established plans to boost the UK’s access to vaccines for a wider range of pathogens of pandemic potential. However, it is only if an avian influenza virus were to start spreading among humans, of which there is no evidence at this stage, that the human H5 influenza vaccine would be used. This procurement will strengthen the UK’s preparedness for a H5 influenza-originated pandemic by ensuring that vaccines are immediately available, while a pandemic specific vaccine is made ready. The UK Government already have an advance purchase agreement for pandemic vaccines if or when they are needed, that would be tailored to combat the specific pandemic influenza strain identified at the time.

Avian influenza risk levels are regularly reviewed and our response adapted accordingly. We publish our risk assessments online and share the evolving picture directly with our expert stakeholder groups. It is too early to predict the outlook for future seasons and risk levels may increase further this winter, associated with the migratory pattern of waterfowl and environmental conditions becoming more favourable for virus survival. Practising good biosecurity at all times protects the health and welfare of kept birds and for commercial keepers will help protect their business from HPAI and other diseases. The need for avian influenza prevention zones (AIPZ) mandating enhanced biosecurity will be kept under review.

All bird keepers must register their poultry and other captive birds, even if only kept as pets—with the exception of certain psittacines and passerines. Registered keepers will receive regular updates and guidance to help protect their birds from avian influenza. Having a good register also saves taxpayer resources when infection is found,

because we already know where birds are kept. In addition, anyone can subscribe to APHA's free animal disease alerts service for the latest information on updated risk levels, guidance and new cases in Great Britain regardless of whether they keep birds. Further information on the latest situation and what can be done prevent avian influenza and stop it spreading and how to spot and report suspicion in kept or wild birds or mammals can be found in DEFRA's guidance at www.gov.uk/birdflu

[HCWS289]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Anti-Corruption Champion: Appointment

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): My hon Friends, the Minister of State for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories (Stephen Doughty), the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Tulip Siddiq) and I, are today pleased to announce the appointment of Baroness Hodge of Barking as the Prime Minister's new anti-corruption champion.

Corruption and the illicit finance that stems from it undermine this Government's objectives at every turn, both domestically and across the world. Corruption weakens the rule of law and undermines economic growth. It

fuels crime on British streets by enabling drug dealers and smuggling gangs. It inflates UK property prices. Today's appointment is another way in which this Government are proving their commitment to tackling these pernicious harms.

As champion Baroness Hodge will have three core responsibilities:

Helping the Government to drive development of a new Anti-Corruption Strategy and provide a challenge function for its delivery, once agreed.

Acting as a Government entry point on anti-corruption issues for Parliamentarians, private sector representatives and civil society.

Where required, engaging internationally to help drive progress on UK priorities.

We believe that the appointment of a champion will be beneficial in driving forwards and supporting the anti-corruption agenda. We recognise that this has been a long-awaited announcement since the previous champion stood down from his role. Baroness Hodge brings experience as a leading parliamentary and public campaigner on anti-corruption, strong relationships with key stakeholders and a background in public service to this role. We look forward to working together to deliver an ambitious Government-wide agenda to tackle the devastating impacts of corruption and the illicit finance that stems from it, both at home and overseas.

[HCWS290]

Petition

Monday 9 December 2024

OBSERVATION

TRANSPORT

National bus fare cap

The petition of residents of the constituency of Coventry South,

Declares that when the £2 bus fare cap was introduced in January 2020, it became a crucial lifeline for people across the country who rely on buses to get to work, attend medical appointments and visit family; further that this cap was introduced specifically to address the cost-of-living crisis, ensuring that bus travel remained affordable and accessible as households felt financial pressures intensify; further that despite the cost-of-living crisis being far from over, the government now plans to raise the fare cap to £3 from January 2025; further that a £1 increase could add hundreds of pounds to annual costs for daily commuters and may isolate others entirely from essential services and community support; and notes the positive impact of the £2 fare cap on people, especially for those in rural areas, where public transport options are more limited.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reconsider changes to the £2 bus fare cap, and to provide adequate support through 2025 to ensure that public transport is made easier, cheaper and more accessible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Zarah Sultana, *Official Report*, 29 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 1090.]

[P003021]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):

The Government know how important affordable and reliable bus services are in enabling people to get to education and work and to access vital services. On 28 October, the Prime Minister confirmed that the Government intend to introduce a new £3 cap on single bus fares in England outside London from 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025. This will replace the existing £2 cap, which was launched in January 2023 and will run out at the end of this year.

Under the plans of the previous Administration, the current cap on bus fares had been due to expire on 31 December 2024, and prior to the Budget on 30 October, there was no further funding available to maintain the cap beyond this point. We were able to secure over £150 million to deliver the £3 cap for the entirety of next year, to ensure millions of people can continue to access affordable bus fares and better opportunities all over the country. The cap could particularly benefit passengers in rural communities and towns, who could still save up to 80% on some routes compared to the commercial fare.

The introduction of the £3 cap does not mean that all single fares will rise to £3. Routes where fares are less than £3 will only be allowed to increase by inflation. Local authorities and mayors in combined authorities can also fund their own schemes to keep fares down, as is already the case in West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester.

This funding is part of a £1 billion boost for buses set out at the Budget to help local areas deliver high quality, reliable bus services and protect the vital routes that so many people rely on in the next financial year. This includes £712 million of funding for local authorities in England outside London to support and improve services, of which West Midlands combined authority has been allocated just under £50 million. This funding could be used to support the introduction of further fare initiatives.

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