

**Wednesday
18 December 2024**

**Volume 759
No. 66**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 18 December 2024

House of Commons

Wednesday 18 December 2024

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Future Earnings: Impact of Socioeconomic Disadvantage

1. **Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle the potential impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on future earnings. [901922]

2. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle the potential impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on future earnings. [901923]

8. **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle the potential impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on future earnings. [901929]

10. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle the potential impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on future earnings. [901932]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): This Government are determined to break the link between background and success. Through the opportunity mission and the child poverty taskforce, we will break down the barriers to opportunity for all, by setting up every child for the best start in life, helping them to achieve and thrive, and building skills for opportunity and growth, so that background is no barrier to success.

Sarah Smith: Research from the Bloody Good Period campaign shows that one in five women and girls is now experiencing period poverty, so not only is there a socioeconomic disadvantage, but a further gender penalty. This gender-based injustice costs the UK billions—some £3.3 billion—in lost work annually. Will the Minister tell the House what the Government are doing to tackle period poverty, and are there plans for the taskforce on this to reconvene?

Bridget Phillipson: We are tackling the root causes of poverty through measures to make work pay by boosting the living wage and investing in our public services, so that no one, including women, have to go without the essentials. There are also lots of great programmes that support women and girls with period products, such as the scheme in my own Department, which provides free products in education settings.

Euan Stainbank: Proper paternity and maternity pay are essential for breaking the link between current income and further life opportunities for families. Currently, one in five fathers does not take the paternity leave available to them because it is financially inadequate. Inadequate paternity leave drives family inequality, increases the gender pay gap as women pick up greater caring responsibilities, and lowers household income. Does the Minister agree that, while the Conservative party might think that paid parental leave is too high, we on the Labour Benches recognise its crucial role in giving children the best start in life? What actions are Ministers considering to better support parents and families?

Bridget Phillipson: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that, while the Conservatives have said that they think parental leave is excessive, we want to give families more choices. Through the Employment Rights Bill, we will make paternity leave available from day one in a new job and enable it to be taken after shared parental leave. We are also committed to reviewing the parental leave system to ensure that it better supports working families.

Natasha Irons: Independent research from the Social Mobility Foundation highlights a stark class pay gap, with professionals from working-class backgrounds earning, on average, 12% less than their more privileged counterparts in the same roles, and one in 10 people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds finding it difficult to get higher-skilled managerial and professional occupations. Despite the fact that socioeconomic background remains one of the biggest determinants in chances for life for young people in this country, few large organisations monitor it. Will the Minister consider mandating larger organisations to monitor socioeconomic backgrounds, so that we can properly highlight social mobility and give it the attention that it deserves?

Bridget Phillipson: I share my hon. Friend's concern in this area, which is why we are committed to enacting the socioeconomic duty of the Equality Act 2010, and we shall give more information on this in due course. I also encourage businesses and organisations to collect data where they can, so that we can take action to tackle some of those deep-rooted inequalities that my hon. Friend describes.

David Williams: Merry Christmas to you and yours, Mr Speaker.

There is a clear link between low household income and poorer educational outcomes leading to reduced future earnings. In Stoke-on-Trent, median pay is nearly £70 less per week than the England average. Does the Minister agree that tackling regional income inequalities is critical if we are to promote social mobility and to enable all of our people to succeed in life?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is absolutely crucial that we take action on regional inequalities. He champions that cause very strongly on his constituents' behalf. He will know that we have set out an ambitious plan for the future of the minimum wage, and we are taking action to make sure that all workers receive more money in their pockets to spend. He also draws our attention to the importance of children having a great start in life, which is why we as a

Government are committed to making sure that more children than ever arrive at school and get the support they need, so that, by the end of reception, they are ready to move on to the next stage in their journey.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): In the City of London, one of the big remaining challenges is to ensure that the maximum number of people from the widest socioeconomic backgrounds can get into that industry. Recently, I met people from Progress Together. Vincent Keaveny, a recent Lord Mayor of the City of London, has made massive progress to understand that the data collection process does not need to be expensive. Will the Secretary of State get in touch with her ministerial colleagues and the Financial Conduct Authority to alert them to the opportunity to collect data at little expense, which would really raise the profile of the remaining challenge?

Bridget Phillipson: I am more than happy to do that. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his work in this area and the attention that he has drawn to it, because it is a cause that we can all get behind. There is more that employers can be asked to do, as he describes, and more that we can do as a Government. That is why it is important that all young people have access to good work experience and careers guidance, so that they understand the full range of opportunities out there in the world.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Women carers are far more likely to reduce their working hours or give up work entirely to look after their loved ones, putting them at a significant financial disadvantage. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Lib Dem policy to reform social care and introduce free personal care would keep more women in work for longer?

Bridget Phillipson: I understand the hon. Lady's important point. She will know that in the Budget we increased the threshold for the carer's allowance and delivered a big boost to the payments that people can receive, but I understand the wider challenge that she sets out around social care. That is why the Health Secretary is taking action to ensure that we transform social care across our country. I am sure that Ministers would be happy to discuss that with her further.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, introduced to the House yesterday, sets out to unpick every aspect of the school reforms that have led English school children to rocket up the international league tables in English, maths and science. How can the Government possibly say that they want to break down barriers to opportunity when they are reversing reforms that have transformed the lives of the most disadvantaged students?

Bridget Phillipson: I do not know which Bill the hon. Lady has been reading, but it is not the Bill that we presented to the House yesterday. I am determined to drive high and rising standards right across our schools system. She might be satisfied that one in four disadvantaged children leave primary school without reaching a good standard in English and maths, but I am not happy about that. Nor am I happy about the fact that one in five children are persistently absent from school and

that we inherited a special educational needs and disabilities system in crisis. We will turn that around, and deliver better life chances for all our children.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Low-earning women are far less likely to have sufficient private pensions than their male counterparts. Is that why the Secretary of State decided that governmental responsibility ends when working age ends?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady raises an important point about some of the differences in pensions. I am more than happy to pick that up with the relevant Minister to ensure that she receives a full response.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker. Here's to festive tipples in our locals, but it is certainly not a cheery Christmas for the Women Against State Pension Inequality, whom Labour has betrayed.

Hospitality is at the heart of our economy, with a diverse workforce: 17% of the sector's workers are disabled under the Equality Act 2010; 20% are from ethnic minority groups; and over 54% are women. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what conversations have taken place between her and the Chancellor on the chilling effect on future earnings of the Labour Government's jobs tax and higher business rates, underpinned by £3.4 billion of increased costs according to UKHospitality, which will drive down future earnings?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that the hospitality sector is crucial to our economy, and at this time of the year, when many people will be working across Christmas, I pay tribute to them for their work and thank them for their contribution to our economy. On her wider question, the hon. Lady knows as well as I do that the Government inherited a £22 billion black hole from the Conservative party. We have had to make some difficult decisions in order to stabilise our economy and get it back on track.

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

3. **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [901924]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker. The Government are relentless in our efforts to halve violence against women and girls. In just five and a half months in office, we have launched domestic abuse protection orders in selected areas, outlined new measures enhancing our response to stalking, and announced £30 million in extra funding for victims of domestic abuse and their families in safe accommodation services—and that is simply the beginning. We will continue at that pace.

Jacob Collier: Violence against women and girls remains a serious issue, worsened by online abuse, misinformation and a harmful rhetoric that risks increasing violence. In my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter, the Sexual Abuse Rape Advice Centre provides vital support to survivors, while working to challenge those attitudes

and promote cultural change. Given the crucial role of charities like SARAC, what steps is the Minister taking to support such organisations, and will she visit SARAC with me so she can see its amazing work?

Jess Phillips: At these questions I always end up halfway around the country, but I would be delighted to come. Having worked in this sector, I know that we will not tackle violence against women and girls without a strong and sustainable model that ensures our specialist services are protected. That is what we will work on in the long term, rather than what has always been a short-termist approach.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Ultra-realistic deepfake porn is increasingly being used to target women, and I know the Government agree because they committed to criminalising it in their manifesto. For the sake of victims, intimate image abuse needs to be tackled without delay, so why on earth did the Government not back Baroness Owen's Bill in the House of Lords to ban it last Friday? The Minister is a great talker; she talks a good game, but for the sake of women, when will she deliver?

Jess Phillips: As somebody who went into the Home Office and found a load of things that were said at this Dispatch Box dwindling and left undone for three years, I take umbrage. The Government will do exactly what we said we will do and will ban deepfakes in this Session. As a victim of it myself, I understand the importance.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

Violence against women and girls takes many forms—verbal, physical, emotional, financial—and at all ages, but one of the most insidious forms is online abuse. With technology developing faster than legislation can respond, the ways it is being used, such as deepfakes, are also developing faster than legislation can respond, and the use of generative AI to create fake intimate images leaves many women vulnerable. I know the Minister cares deeply about this, so can she tell us what steps the Government will take to ensure that it is tackled properly? Will she work with Cabinet colleagues to create a new online crime agency to deal with that threat?

Jess Phillips: Funnily enough, I am meeting Cabinet Office colleagues later today to talk exactly about how we ensure the violence against women and girls strategy is across different Departments. Without doubt, one of the most important pillars of that strategy is how we will deal with the online harms. We all wait with bated breath to see how the legislation and the new regulations play out, but we will not draw the line at the legislation that already exists, and where we need to adapt, we will.

Banning Conversion Practices

4. **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ban conversion practices. [901925]

11. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow and Gateshead East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ban conversion practices. [901933]

The Minister for Equalities (Dame Nia Griffith): Conversion practices are abuse. They have no place in society and must be stopped. The Conservatives promised to ban conversion practices six years ago and failed to deliver. They then dropped it from their manifesto this summer. We are getting on with the job and working hard on legislation to deliver a trans-inclusive ban that offers protection from those harmful practices, while preserving the freedom of individuals to explore their identity and respecting the important roles of those supporting them. We will publish our draft Bill later this Session, as outlined in the King's Speech.

Dan Aldridge: Conversion practices trade and prosper on fear, prejudice and intolerance. Charities in Weston-super-Mare and across this country do amazing work to bring communities together to promote tolerance and tackle prejudice. Will the Minister outline what support the Government are providing to help charities deliver that vital work in constituencies like mine?

Dame Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend is right that civil society plays a unique role in challenging prejudice and enabling more people to access the opportunities they deserve. A good example is Galop, the UK's leading LGBT+ anti-violence charity, which provides a number of Government-funded support services, including on conversion practices. Its helpline is confidential and available to anyone who is at risk of, is experiencing or has been through a conversion practice.

Kate Osborne: Last week, I held a meeting in Parliament with a panel of trans people talking about their experiences of so-called conversion therapy, and their evidence was harrowing. I thank the MPs and the Minister who attended that meeting to listen to them. I am leading on a report for the Council of Europe to ban those abhorrent practices across Europe, and I am pleased to hear from the Minister that we will soon be setting out the legislation. Will the legislation be fully inclusive, without any exceptions, so that we can refer to it as best practice for all countries to use?

Dame Nia Griffith: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work in this field, including on the Council of Europe. I can assure her that we will deliver on our manifesto commitment to bring forward a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, protecting LGBT+ people from abuse. We are committed to listening to all viewpoints and concerns with respect, and to engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, organisations and all LGBT+ communities. I was very pleased to join her at the event she mentioned. We will engage further with parliamentarians and stakeholders in the new year.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): The previous Government committed to a parent-first approach to guidance. As part of the Government's review of the statutory relationships, sex and health education guidance, will the Minister make it clear that parents should be involved in decisions that affect their children, including if their children are gender-questioning?

Dame Nia Griffith: As the hon. Lady will be well aware, we are looking at the consultation responses and will respond fully as is appropriate.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In rolling out any legislation, will the Minister ensure that mature adults who, of their own volition, want to take part in discussions of gender issues in faith-based settings will not be restricted or inhibited from so doing?

Dame Nia Griffith: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are looking carefully at how to describe the sort of behaviour that would not be criminalised by the ban.

Discrimination Against Ethnic Minorities

5. **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help end discrimination against ethnic minority people. [901926]

The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra): The Government are committed to breaking down the barriers of opportunity for all, and to race equality throughout Government, so that our missions deliver for everyone. We are working on our plans to legislate to introduce mandatory ethnicity pay group reporting for large employers, and to enshrine in law the right to equal pay for ethnic minority people. Those measures were announced as part of the draft Equality (Race and Disability) Bill, on which we will consult early next year.

Jas Athwal: I commend the Government for their commitment to tackling discrimination by introducing ethnicity pay gap reporting for large employers, for example. Nearly 80% of my Ilford South constituents are from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and the community is disproportionately impacted by conditions such as diabetes. What are the Government doing to tackle health inequalities and disparities among minority ethnic individuals?

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend raises a vital issue on behalf of his constituents. The cross-Government approach that we are taking to tackle the root causes of health inequalities is central to our health mission, and includes prioritising prevention and shifting care closer to communities. On type 2 diabetes, the NHS has developed a focused engagement campaign to raise awareness among groups that are most likely to develop that condition. He may wish to connect with that campaign.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I wish you a merry Christmas and a good new year when it comes, Mr Speaker.

I was astonished that the vacillating Prime Minister did not take the opportunity to definitively rule out blasphemy laws, which have no placed in modern British society. This is the land of “Monty Python’s Life of Brian” after all. Will the Minister take the opportunity to do what the Prime Minister would not by completely ruling out the introduction of blasphemy laws?

Seema Malhotra: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

Following this summer’s racist riots, the Runnymede Trust reported that Islamophobia is reaching fever pitch, with mosques attacked and threatened, and cars vandalised with Nazi swastikas. All that has left many Muslims feeling unsafe, but it is especially true for women, who have reported having hijabs pulled off, suffering racist abuse and being threatened with physical violence. We will all have heard of such incidents from our constituents, but the extent to which Islamophobia and misogyny are systemic in the structures that we rely on mean that Muslim women bear the brunt of the intersectional hatred of the far right and sometimes, sadly, the mainstream media. Does the Minister see the need for an agreed definition of “Islamophobia” that understands its impact on Muslim women?

Seema Malhotra: Islamophobia, sexism and racism have no place in our society, and my hon. Friend will be aware that we have committed to strengthening protections against dual discrimination. The Minister for safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), is working on addressing hate crime against Muslim women. I am also pleased that my hon. Friend’s Committee will be undertaking work on the specific challenges facing Muslim women in the UK today, and I look forward to following that work.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I recently met a group of women from Bangladeshi origins in my constituency who are desperately trying to find work, which is not easy, especially after the decimation of the textile industry in Leicester South. As English is not their first language, and as not all potential employers have the capacity or time to meet the Department for Work and Pensions’ demands for written proof of job applications and interviews, they are finding it extremely stressful and it is affecting their mental health, especially when they are threatened with sanctions. Does the Minister agree that more empathy needs to be built into the system?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point, and I will ensure that he has a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): The Minister for Women and Equalities has said that background should be no barrier to success, but what message does it send to our young people when they are told that there are some job opportunities they cannot apply for solely based on the colour of their skin? Equality in this country must mean equality of opportunity, not putting some people in society on a pedestal above others, so will the Minister write to all public bodies to make it crystal clear that the state should not be sanctioning race-based hiring policies?

Seema Malhotra: The right hon. Lady will be aware that it is illegal to discriminate in the way she has described. I will certainly ensure that her question is followed up with the relevant colleagues.

Topical Questions

T2. [901938] **Rosie Wrighting** (Kettering) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): Earlier this month the Government set out our “Plan for Change”—a plan to raise living standards for everyone. Everyone should have access to warm homes, a revitalised NHS and opportunities to thrive at work, and they should feel safe on our streets. I am proud to be driving our mission to ensure that background is no barrier to success and that every child has the best start in life. This week marks the end of Disability History Month, during which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Social Security and Disability has met disabled people and disabled people’s organisations and set up a network of lead Ministers for disability across every Government Department.

Rosie Wrighting: Last week I visited Northamptonshire Domestic Abuse Service, where we discussed estimates that reported incidents of domestic abuse in the UK spike up to 20% during the Christmas period. What are the Government doing to ensure that those affected by domestic violence can get support at this time of year?

Bridget Phillipson: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question, and I pay tribute to the work of Northamptonshire Domestic Abuse Service and everyone working across domestic violence and sexual abuse services this Christmas. I know from my own experience of working in such services over the Christmas period how busy it can be, but I want to send a message to all victims that support is always there when they need it, even at Christmas, and the police will always respond when called. Where there are serious concerns, people should know that they are not alone at Christmas, and that help and support is always available.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): Turning a blind eye to the risks faced by vulnerable people in the name of inclusivity is anything but compassionate. We know that cousin marriage significantly increases the risk of birth defects and locks women into coercive relationships. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) has tabled sensible legislation to ban this practice. Why will the Government not support it?

Bridget Phillipson: The Government will of course always keep such issues under review, and I will ensure that the Minister in the relevant Department speaks with the right hon. Lady on this topic.

T6. [901942] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Merry Christmas. I recently attended a Royal National Institute of Blind People event highlighting the challenges faced by blind and visually impaired people navigating past parked cars, forcing them to walk into the road. My inspirational wife is one of those people, who takes her life into her own hands every time she walks into the road. What will the Government do to help make our streets safer and more navigable in future?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): My hon. Friend raises a good example of the kind of topic we need to work on across Government, and I was pleased to chair the first meeting of the cross-Government disability lead Ministers yesterday. The Department for Transport has consulted on this problem, which can be very serious for people with a sight impairment, and is considering the options for tackling it. I very much hope that my hon. Friend will let me know what he finds out in his walk around his constituency shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call Gregory Stafford.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

T3. [901939] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is always nice to get a cheer, Mr Speaker.

As a former treasurer of the Oxford Union, I was disgusted that three weeks ago a debate descended into a mess of antisemitism, when a majority of the students voted that they would not have reported Hamas’s plans if they had known of them prior to the 7 October attacks. Will the Minister write to the Oxford Union and say that antisemitism has no place in our society, especially not in our universities?

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Anneliese Dodds): The Government could not have been clearer about our position on antisemitism: there is no place for antisemitism in our society, nor for any form of racism. That applies whether it is in educational settings or in any other part of our society, and that has been made very clear indeed.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901907] **Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 18 December.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Yesterday I met the brave men and women serving on HMS Iron Duke and the troops serving in Operation Cabrit in Estonia. This Christmas, as every Christmas, members of our armed forces will be serving overseas, working day and night to protect Britain’s national security. I know that the whole House will join me in sending our deepest thanks to them, to our emergency services and to everyone working to keep the country safe over the festive period.

Mr Speaker, may I also take this opportunity, at the end of the year, to thank you and the House staff for all your hard work this year, and can I wish everyone across the House a merry Christmas and a happy new year?

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Chris Hinchliff: May I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks?

In 2021, Ceri and Frances Menai-Davis, who live in my constituency of North East Hertfordshire and are in the Gallery today, tragically lost their son, Hugh, at the age of just six to a rare form of cancer. Now they are courageously campaigning to ensure that every parent who must leave work to look after a sick child in hospital gets the financial support they need from day one. Will the Prime Minister meet them and me to discuss implementing Hugh's law, and giving their son a legacy that improves the lives of families at the most difficult time imaginable?

The Prime Minister: Can I pay tribute to Ceri and Frances—it is a heartbreaking case—and commend them for their campaign on behalf of other families? I know that the Minister for Social Security and Disability met the family yesterday, but no parent should endure losing their child to cancer, particularly at such a young age. We are investing £1.5 billion for new surgical hubs and scanners, and £70 million for new radiotherapy machines, and we will set out our next steps on the children and young people cancer taskforce shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Can I send my warmest wishes to our armed forces at home and overseas, to the emergency services, and to everyone who will be working over Christmas? Can I wish you, Mr Speaker, the House staff and all Members of this House a very merry Christmas?

For years, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet played politics with the WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. The Deputy Prime Minister said the Conservatives were stealing their pensions. She promised to compensate them in full—another broken promise. Now, they admit that we were right all along. But let us ask about another group of pensioners whose trust was broken. Since the Chancellor cut winter fuel payments, how many extra people have applied for pension credit?

The Prime Minister: The No. 1 job of this Government was to put the finances back in order after the last Government lost control. They left a £22 billion black hole and we had to take tough choices. We made sure that the most vulnerable pensioners do get the winter fuel payment, and we have been encouraging them, driving up eligibility for pension credit and people signing up to their entitlement. The Leader of the Opposition should join that campaign. Here is the difference: because we have stabilised the economy, we can commit to the triple lock. That means that next April pensioners will get another £470. Here is the difference: two weeks ago, the shadow Chancellor said that the triple lock is “unsustainable”. Their position is that pensioners would lose out under the Tories yet again.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister did not answer the question because he does not know the answer. There are 850,000 eligible pensioners not claiming pension credit. If they sign up, that will cost the Treasury £2.3 billion, wiping out the savings that the Chancellor claimed she would make. Before the election, the Prime Minister's Chief Secretary to the Treasury told the

public that Labour had no plans to cut winter fuel payments, but they did have plans, didn't they? Age UK says:

“Cutting the Winter Fuel Payment, with very little notice...will potentially jeopardise the health, as well as the finances, of millions of older people”.

Does the Prime Minister agree with Age UK that this is the last thing that pensioners and the NHS need?

The Prime Minister: We have been driving take-up with the campaign for pension credit. It is important that everyone who is entitled to it claims that pension credit. The Leader of the Opposition should not claim as some great victory that the record of her Government was that people had not signed up. We are the ones with the campaign, and the Tories should be supporting it. Because of the triple lock, pensions will be going up by £470 next April. She has not answered the question. Her shadow Chancellor says that the triple lock is “unsustainable”, so she needs to explain how pensioners would be worse off under a Tory Government.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is Prime Minister's questions.

Mrs Badenoch: We protected the triple lock during all our time in government. Meanwhile, energy bills are increasing, despite the Prime Minister's promise to cut them by £300. In Scotland, his party leader wants to restore the winter fuel payment. Across England, councils are scrabbling together funds for struggling pensioners. The tragic reality this Christmas is that pensioners will suffer and may even die as a result of this cruel policy. Did the Chancellor consider the impact on councils and on the NHS, or does she just not know what she is doing?

The Prime Minister: The household support fund was set out in the Budget, as the Leader of the Opposition knows. We are pushing up pension credit. She now says that the Conservatives are committed to the triple lock. Her shadow Chancellor says that they are not and that it is “unsustainable”. Perhaps over a sandwich or a steak they could sort it out and come back and tell us what their policy actually is.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister needs to misrepresent me in order to make his point; I do not need to misrepresent him in order to make mine. The truth is that he did not think this through. Cutting winter fuel payments is not just callous; it may not make savings and it could actually cost us all more. It is not the only policy that is making things worse. The Chancellor's Budget is a body blow to family businesses and charities. Marie Curie has warned that Labour's Budget will cost it nearly £3 million a year. That is a cancer charity saying that it has no option but to reduce services. Did the Chancellor tell the Prime Minister that her jobs tax was going to hit charities?

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition has asked three questions about winter fuel—[*Interruption.*] I will come to that. She has changed her mind. She used to say that the payments were a “dead weight”. She said that she had constituents who did not need them. They all stood in 2017 on a Tory manifesto that committed to getting rid of the universal winter fuel payment for pensioners. We can see what their real commitment is—[*Interruption.*] As for the Budget, we are driving up productivity across—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to have to ring the hon. Gentleman's mother.

The Prime Minister: We are driving up productivity, prosperity and living standards. That is a pay rise for the 3 million lowest-paid—the Tories should welcome that—a pay rise for those working in the NHS, and better than expected wage growth just before Christmas. What unites all three is that they are delivered by Labour but opposed by the Tories.

Mrs Badenoch: I do not know what world the Prime Minister is living in. The economy is shrinking, and the Government did not think this jobs tax through or who it would impact.

Another area affected is the hospice sector. Hospices believe that the Budget will cost them an extra £30 million. Yesterday, Conservatives voted to exempt social care, nurseries, charities and hospices from Labour's jobs tax. Labour voted that down. Can the Prime Minister at least agree to fund hospices so that they can continue their invaluable work helping people at the end of their lives?

The Prime Minister: We have put a record amount into the NHS in the Budget to deal with the problem that the Conservatives left. We will set out the funding arrangements for hospices in the new year. But it is the same old, same old: they want all the benefits from the Budget, as she has said herself, but she does not want to pay for any of them. That is what got us into the problem in the first place.

Mrs Badenoch: I did not hear a commitment to help hospices, which is a shame. The truth is that this winter people will be suffering because of the Prime Minister's choices. The economy is shrinking, inflation is going up and jobs are being lost because of his Budget. Pensioners will be unable to heat their homes because of his Government's decisions. They raised people's hopes but then smashed them with broken promises. And now we learn that he is about to give away our hard-won Brexit freedoms—[*Interruption.*] Yes—the truth is that Labour is punching the British people in the face—literally, in the case of one of his MPs. He will pretend this is about the past, but we all know that these are his choices—bad choices. If he is looking for a new year's resolution, why does he not start with telling the truth?

The Prime Minister: I will do it now. A £22 billion black hole left by the Conservatives, record numbers on the waiting lists—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not a good time to leave the Chamber, is it?

The Prime Minister: A £22 billion black hole, record waiting lists in our NHS—Conservative Members should hang their heads in shame—and immigration completely out of control, with nearly a million net migration. The Leader of the Opposition was the cheerleader for all of that. She wants the truth—that is the truth. That is why the Conservatives are sitting on the Opposition Benches.

While Conservative Members carp from the sidelines, talking the country down, this Government are getting on with the job: record funding for the NHS; money for

our trains, buses and, yes, potholes; pay rises for 3 million of the lowest-paid; wages growing faster than inflation; planning laws reform; and Great British Energy set up. We are only getting started. Next year we will continue to rebuild, no matter what the blockers opposite say.

Q4. [901910] Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I echo the Prime Minister in thanking you, Mr Speaker, and all the staff in this place, alongside our armed forces and emergency services, and wishing them a merry Christmas.

March 2025 marks 20 years since the death of the only Member of Parliament to have held all four great offices of state: Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Chancellor and Prime Minister. James Callaghan was a true Portsmouth great who went to the same school as another true Portsmouth great: my dad, Terry Nolan. Does the Prime Minister back my bid for a plaque to be added to his former home in Copnor? Will he come along to Portsmouth next year to unveil it?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Jim Callaghan was a giant of the Labour movement and a great public servant. He left school at 17 and served in our Royal Navy before becoming Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Chancellor and, of course, finally Prime Minister. I am sure that he, as a proud son of Portsmouth, would be honoured to be remembered in such a way. [*Interruption.*] Happy Christmas.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me just say to Mr Mayhew that I keep hearing you. I heard you the other week when you were sat to my side, and I am hearing you again over there. It not a good time to push your luck. I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I join the Prime Minister in his praise and best wishes for our armed forces and emergency services, and I join others in wishing you, Mr Speaker, a happy Christmas, along with all the staff of the Commons and everyone across the House [HON. MEMBERS: "Sing it!"] I will sing in a minute.

I have had the great joy of spending time recently with some amazing young people from the Bath Philharmonia young carers choir. They are a brilliant example of the power of music to make a difference in young people's lives. One member, Caitlyn, has even developed a special new project to spread the joy of music to young people in our schools and communities. Will the Prime Minister meet Caitlyn to hear more about her exciting project, and will he work with us and others to support music in our schools and communities?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments. As he will know, today we are introducing the landmark Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to enable all children to succeed, including young carers. We increased pupil premium funding to over £2.9 billion, which can be used to support pupils, including carers, with identified needs. As he knows, now that young carers are on the school census—and have been since 2023—they have greater visibility, and schools will be better able to identify and support them.

The right hon. Gentleman talked of singing; there were carols outside our front door on Monday, and my family were surprised to see him shamelessly plugging his song. We have strict rules about antisocial behaviour, but in the spirit of the season, I simply say, “Happy Christmas”.

Ed Davey: I wish the Prime Minister a happy Christmas. I thank him for allowing the young carers choir to sing outside No. 10, and I hope that he and the staff enjoyed it. Our song is called “Love is Enough”, but the hard truth is that for many young carers and young adult carers, love is not enough. These amazing young people need real action to help them with the challenges that they face. In addition to the measures that the Prime Minister just talked about, will he support the Carers Trust’s young carers covenant, to ensure that, across local authorities, we give these young people all the support that they deserve?

The Prime Minister: We should support these young people, and we continue to work across the sector to ensure that all schools identify, support and record data on young carers. We boosted the carer’s allowance in the Budget. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on those young carers.

Q5. [901911] Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks and wish everyone a very happy Christmas, but for many of those in temporary accommodation in my constituency and across the country it will not be a happy Christmas. On the Tories’ watch, temporary homelessness more than doubled, so what are the Government doing to support families and children living in temporary accommodation, particularly this season?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right about the appalling inheritance, which included record numbers sleeping rough and almost 160,000 children living in temporary accommodation. We are delivering nearly £1 billion to councils to tackle homelessness, including increasing funding in Bolton over the next year. That includes dedicated support with housing, mental health and employment. We are also committed to tackling the root causes, which is why we are building 1.5 million new homes and abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions—something the Conservatives said they would do and repeatedly failed to.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): In 2022, the Prime Minister supported calls for fair and fast compensation for 1950s women impacted by the changes to the state pension. Yet, just yesterday, his Government rejected those same calls out of hand. Is that what the Prime Minister meant when he promised to lead a Government of change?

The Prime Minister: This is a serious issue. Between 2005 and 2007, there was a 28-month delay in letters to women born in 1950s about changes to pension age—that was unacceptable, and it was right that the Government apologised. In 2011, the former Chancellor George Osborne then accelerated those changes with very little notice. That, equally, was unacceptable, and Labour opposed it at the time. *[Interruption.]* It is a serious issue, and a complex one. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the research shows that 90% of those impacted

knew about the changes that were taking place. I am afraid to say that the taxpayer simply cannot afford the tens of billions of pounds in compensation when the evidence shows that 90% of those impacted knew about the changes. That is because of the state of our economy.

Q7. [901913] John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): Recent data shows that almost 11,000 Scots have been waiting more than two years for hospital treatment since their referral. The equivalent number in England is around 113. Does the Prime Minister agree that that shows the catastrophic damage the SNP Government have done to the Scottish NHS?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that the SNP is letting down patients in Scotland. As the Scottish Auditor General says, “greater leadership” is needed in the Scottish NHS. Waiting list targets are being missed, spending on agency staff is skyrocketing, and delays to patient discharge are hitting record levels. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members seem to be proud of that appalling record. We have provided the money, and they have the powers—they have run out of excuses.

Q2. [901908] Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Since the summer, thousands of commuters using Harlington and Flitwick stations have had to put up with nearly 8% of trains being cancelled in the evening peak, while nearly a third of trains that do arrive are more than five minutes late. Is it a mere coincidence that such poor performance follows this Government’s decision to pay off their union backers with no strings attached?

The Prime Minister: The trains and all travel were in an appalling state under the previous Government, and we are clearing that up. We are fixing it, and the hon. Gentleman should welcome that.

Q9. [901915] Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Ind): The parliamentary ombudsman concluded that an injustice was done to 1950s-born women and ruled that they are owed compensation, and asked Parliament to intervene to deliver justice. I have more than 5,000 women affected in my constituency. Alongside a great many Members in this House, I believe these women are owed compensation for the injustice done to them at the hands of the state. Will the Prime Minister give Members the opportunity to vote on whether they believe WASPI women are owed compensation?

The Prime Minister: I have just set out the factual background and the percentage who knew about the change. The simple fact of the matter is that in the current economic circumstances, the taxpayer cannot bear the burden of tens of billions of pounds in compensation. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members are chuntering away, but, in 14 years, they accelerated the changes and never once spoke about compensation.

Q3. [901909] Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): My constituents Caroline and Savannah are just two of thousands across Devon, Cornwall and beyond who are living with postural tachycardia syndrome and have been unable to access adequate treatment since the retirement of the only consultant available to work with them in July. What actions can the Prime Minister take to help me secure the treatment that my constituents need, and will he agree to meet me and them to discuss the treatment of POTS in more detail?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue on behalf of her constituents. It underlines the critical nature of the NHS workforce plan that we will deliver next summer to ensure that the expert workforce is in place and get the NHS back on its feet. I am proud that we are investing an additional £22.6 billion to fix our NHS. I will of course ensure she gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to deal with the issues of concern to her constituents.

Q11. [901917] **Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

I associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments and express my gratitude to all those who serve our communities over Christmas. I give special credit to foster carers in Nuneaton and across the UK for the incredibly important role that they play. We know that their care transforms lives. However, foster carers in Nuneaton tell me that there is simply not the support that there used to be, and that more than 17% of children are waiting more than four years for care. I was recently made aware of one child who had had nine home placements before the end of key stage 1. Can the Prime Minister ensure there will be a robust system to provide consistent and swift care when needed?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue, because every single child deserves the best start in life and there are far too many shocking cases of children being let down. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is being introduced today. That puts children's interests at the heart of Government policy and I hope it will be supported across the House.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Labour promised not to raise taxes on working people, but farmers are some of the hardest-working people I know. Peter Douglas from Jedburgh has looked at the details of this policy and he says that Labour's inheritance tax increase will prevent him passing on his family farm to his son and daughter. They say Labour has betrayed them and cannot trust the Prime Minister to keep his word. They've got a point, haven't they?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman would kindly pass the details of the individual case he has raised to my team, we will look into it. As he knows, we put a record £5 billion into farming over the next two years in the Budget. Just two weeks ago, £350 million was put in to support farmers. That contrasts with the £300 million underspend of the last Government on farming. In a typical case, the threshold is £3 million, which means that the vast majority of farmers will be unaffected, but I will look into the individual case he has raised with me.

Q12. [901918] **Jo White** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I recently spoke to a man in Worksop whose son's arm was badly broken when he was knocked off his bicycle by an off-road biker speeding on the pavement—dressed in black, no number plate, totally unidentifiable. The young boy no longer goes out to play. His experience is not unique. What action is being taken to smash the bikes, and put police back on our streets?

The Prime Minister: I am glad my hon. Friend has raised that, because off-road bikes were a complete nuisance under the last Government and got completely

out of control. We are introducing new respect orders to crack down on off-road bikes, strengthening police powers in relation to dealing with this big problem that got out of control under the last Government. We will also deliver 13,000 more neighbourhood police to ensure that we keep control of our streets—something that was lost under the last Government.

Q8. [901914] **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): Last week, the royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead announced plans to hike council tax by an unprecedented 25%. That would require the Government's permission. Does the Prime Minister agree that this outrageous request should be rejected, that the borough might be a candidate for accelerated local government reorganisation, and that my constituents should not be footing the bill for the persistent weak financial control and political failure locally?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue on behalf of his constituents. We are, as he knows, committed to fixing the foundations of local government and keeping taxes as low as possible for working people. The Budget announced a real-terms increase for local government, with over £4 billion of added funding. We will put that support in place, and he is right to raise that issue.

Q13. [901919] **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): We have in our NHS many brilliant émigré and refugee surgeons from the greatly troubled middle east, and I have been privileged to work alongside some of them from Iran, Iraq and from Syria, which we think especially now. What practical measures can the UK take to help ensure that Syria now has the best chance of becoming an open society and the second functional democracy in the region?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the people of Syria and to the health workers of all backgrounds who do vital work in our NHS. The fall of Assad's brutal regime is to be welcomed and should be welcomed, but we must be cautious about what comes next. We have provided £50 million of extra support to vulnerable Syrians and I have spoken to G7 leaders to work towards a Syrian Government that respects international law, universal human rights and protects all citizens across all sectors.

Q10. [901916] **Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Before the election, this Prime Minister said he would lower energy bills by £300. Since he took office, they have gone up by £149. He said he would protect the winter fuel payment, but now he is in power he has stripped it off our pensioners. And he lined up for many photos with WASPI women, saying he would have their backs, and he has just betrayed them in the most scandalous way possible. This is now the defining characteristic of this one-trick phony Prime Minister who says one thing and does another. In Scotland, the SNP is 16 points ahead in the polls. Does he understand why the people of these islands, especially those of us in Scotland, treat him with such contempt?

The Prime Minister: Scottish National party Members used to ask those questions from an area that contained a great many MPs not so long ago, but all that changed

in July. Now the hon. Gentleman is carping right up there at the back, and we can hardly hear him.

Q14. [901920] Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Let me first wish you, Mr Speaker, all Members on both sides of the House and especially the House staff a very merry Christmas. Let me also associate myself with those who have thanked our emergency services and armed forces for their service.

Christmas is a time for peace and good will. Given that there are more conflicts now than at any time since world war two and that all wars end with a peace, what is the Prime Minister's resolution to work with others for a more peaceful world in 2025?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that colleagues on both sides of the House support the values of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace—with which I know my hon. Friend is involved—and its work to support human rights across the globe. That, I think, is the sentiment that we take into this festive period.

Q15. [901921] Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It was good to hear that the Prime Minister visited British soldiers in Estonia yesterday, before they have to spend Christmas away from their families. We would all like to see a lasting peace emerge for Ukraine in the new year, but Putin may take any deal brokered by Trump as a break in which to re-equip and rearm. What will the Government do to deter Russia from restarting its imperial war of aggression following any peace deal?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment to the Intelligence and Security Committee, and thank him for raising the question of our troops in Estonia, who, as he says, will be there over Christmas without their families. They are right on the frontline, with a very clear sense of purpose, as part of our NATO contingent, and we thank them. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we must continue to support Ukraine—that was the subject of our discussions in Estonia yesterday—and ensure that it is put in the strongest possible position, whether in negotiations or not. We must also make it absolutely clear that this conflict could be ended straight away if the aggressors, Russia, backed off.

Mr Speaker: I call the Mother of the House.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The WASPI women fought one of the most sustained and passionate campaigns for justice that I can remember, year in year out, and we did promise them that we would give them justice. I understand the issue of the cost, but does the Prime Minister really understand how let down they feel today?

The Prime Minister: I do understand the concern; of course I do. I have set out the history, but the research findings make it clear that 90% of those impacted did know about the change. In those circumstances the taxpayer simply cannot afford the burden of tens of billions of pounds of compensation, but, as I have said, I do understand the concern.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I know that the Prime Minister is aware of the case of my constituent Sara Sharif, who was brutally tortured and appallingly murdered by her father and stepmother. I want Sara's legacy to be one in which she is the last vulnerable child to be killed by people who should have looked after her. Will the Prime Minister ensure that an independent inquest and review of Sara's death is held at the start of the new year, so that we can learn why public authorities failed and ensure that it never happens again?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that absolutely harrowing case. It is important that all the lessons are learnt. An independent process is taking place, but we must be clear about the need to overhaul children's social care to keep young people safe, and to look again at the framework for home schooling, among other things. We do need to learn those lessons, and we are taking steps. There is a process going on at the moment, and I will update the House in due course.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for the leadership that he has shown in securing the half-a-billion-pound deal to secure the future of the Hitachi rail factory in my constituency—a factory left in the lurch by the Conservative party for years? Does he agree that what we also need is a long-term plan for our proud high-tech rail manufacturing to drag it out of the mire that it was left in by the Tories?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Conservatives really should not groan. I went up to the Hitachi factory earlier this year, before the election. The workforce were extremely anxious about the situation, because they feared that there would be a gap between contracts—[*Interruption.*] That gap would have meant that people were going to get laid off, and the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) is chuntering from a sitting position, unable to understand the impact on working people.

The workforce were extremely anxious about the situation when I saw them, because they knew that if their colleagues were laid off, it would be bad for their colleagues and their community, and it would mean that they might go and get other jobs and not be able to come back if there was a new contract. I said then that I would do everything I could to ensure that we filled that gap, and I am very pleased that just the other week we were able to say that we have and that there is a contract. I went back up there to speak to the same workforce, and they were very pleased that they now do not have those anxieties. The Conservatives should be ashamed of their chuntering.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): As it is Christmas, will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Chris Middleton, who wrote a charity song to support Age UK that has already raised £10,000? What is even better is that it is likely to beat the leader of the Lib Dems' single to No. 1 this year, proving yet again that the Lib Dems cannot win—something that I hope we can both agree on.

The Prime Minister: I am not going to adjudicate between the contending singles for the top of the charts, but I end this Question Time by wishing a happy Christmas and a peaceful new year to everyone across the House.

British Indian Ocean Territory: Sovereignty

12.38 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will provide an update on the negotiations between His Majesty's Government and the Government of Mauritius over the future sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. We welcome yesterday's reiteration by Prime Minister Ramgoolam of his willingness to conclude a deal with the UK. We are confident that the agreement is in both sides' shared interests, and we will continue working with the new Mauritian Government to finalise the deal. Prime Minister Ramgoolam's comments follow his commitment to completing the negotiations, following his election, in an exchange of letters with the Prime Minister.

As part of the usual Government-to-Government engagement, the Prime Minister's BIOT envoy, Jonathan Powell, met PM Ramgoolam in late November to start the process, and that was followed last week by a visit to Mauritius by the UK's chief negotiator Harriet Mathews and other officials for the talks. Those talks were productive, and it is completely understandable that the new Mauritian Government will want time to study the details.

It would not be appropriate or usual for me to give a running commentary on what was discussed during routine and private engagements, nor on any potential future engagements. I am confident, however, that we have agreed a good and fair deal that is in both sides' interests. It protects the base at proportionate cost; it has been supported across the national security architecture in the United States and by India for those very reasons. As I have said a number of times in this House, the treaty will contain clear commitments on robust security arrangements, including preventing the presence of foreign security forces on the outer islands and ensuring the base can continue to operate securely and effectively.

The agreement is subject to finalising a treaty. Following signature, the Government will bring forward a Bill to enable implementation of that treaty. Both Houses of Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise that treaty before ratification.

Priti Patel: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. Once again Ministers have been reluctantly dragged to the House—in fact, I have just seen the Foreign Secretary leg it. In a world of increasing danger, change and uncertainty, why are they so keen to surrender this strategic asset? We have been repeatedly told by Ministers that this is a good deal and that it has the support of the national security apparatus—we keep hearing that, but where is the evidence to justify those hollow claims?

If the deal is so good, why have the Government been so secretive about the details? Can the Minister explain? I am sorry that the Foreign Secretary has abandoned the House and not even come to this statement, because yet again we are responding to media reports. Can the Minister confirm that we will be able to extend the lease on the military base after 99 years, as reported? Will we

and the US still have full autonomy of operations? What safeguards will be in place to stop other countries, including China, trying to establish themselves on the base or near the military base on Diego Garcia? How much is the British taxpayer going to be liable for each year and in total over 99 years, now that we know we will be paying for the privilege of giving away these islands? What exactly is our money going to be paying for?

The Government claim that they cannot disclose information about the lease, but surely the Minister can at least say—explain and be honest—where on earth the budget is coming from. If it is accounted for in the Budget forecast presented in the autumn—we all heard about those Budget forecasts recently—will the Minister tell us what the funding will be for the economic partnership and the trust fund for Chagossian people? Can the Minister also tell us what aspects of the deal the new Mauritian Government want reconsidering in the response? What consideration is being given to provide more funding or to weaken any protections that may be in this lease? Importantly, can he explain why the views of the Chagossian community have been so ignored?

When the whole world can see that this proposed deal was falling apart, the Foreign Secretary and this Government have tried to flog it constantly. Not only is this a monumental failure of statecraft from this Labour Government, but it is also a significant humiliation for the Foreign Secretary and his credibility and for the Prime Minister. Why are Labour putting our security at risk, ignoring Chagossians, and letting our standing go into freefall in this world?

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that these contributions should take no longer than two minutes.

Stephen Doughty: We are absolutely not damaging our security; we are protecting it through this deal, and that is why this deal has been agreed—to protect the operation of that base; to protect it against the legal uncertainty; and to ensure it is on a safe footing well into the next century.

The right hon. Lady constantly refers to our somehow giving up the base on Diego Garcia, but the deal does exactly the opposite—[*Interruption.*] It protects the base on Diego Garcia. [Interruption.] It protects the base to continue operating—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Gemmell, we had enough all the way through Prime Minister's questions. If I hear any more, you are out. I seriously mean that; I am not putting up with it.

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Lady constantly talks as if somehow we are giving up the base on Diego Garcia. That is the exact opposite of what this deal does—unlike the failure to secure the deal under the last Administration, which I might remind the House went through 11 rounds of negotiations yet failed to secure a deal to protect our base. This deal protects the base.

The right hon. Lady asked a series of other questions. She asked whether we would be able to extend the lease, and the answer is yes. Would we continue to have autonomy for our operations and those of our allies? Absolutely, yes. Are there safeguards in place to prevent foreign forces or others on the outer islands? Absolutely, yes.

[Stephen Doughty]

I have answered the questions on costs a number of times in the House. We are very clear that it is not normal practice for the United Kingdom to confirm the value of its payments for military bases anywhere across the globe. We have not done that in the case of any other base, such as the one in Oman, and the United States itself has not confirmed the value of its direct payments for bases, including in Djibouti and the Marshall Islands.

The right hon. Lady spoke about the Chagossians and, having engaged with Chagossian communities over many years, I am confident that this deal has clear benefits for Chagossian communities and will allow the resettlement of the outer islands and the restarting of visits. She also mentioned the trust fund.

The right hon. Lady referred to media reports, and there is a huge amount of speculation. Let us get back to the actual facts. The Mauritian Prime Minister himself has confirmed to his Assembly that he is willing to conclude this deal with the United Kingdom. Those are the facts, and we will protect our national security and our interests.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): Under the Mauritian criminal code, anyone who questions the integrity of Mauritian territories, including the Chagos archipelago, is potentially subject to 10 years' imprisonment. Most British Chagossians have, at one time or another, effectively given that level of disconsideration to the Mauritian Government. What conversations has the Minister had with the Mauritian Government to ensure that this part of the code is removed so that it is possible for British Chagossians to visit Chagos, in the event that the deal goes through?

Stephen Doughty: As I said, we take the interests of Chagossian communities incredibly seriously. The deal provides for Chagossians to return to the outer islands and to resettle them if Mauritius decides to pursue a programme of resettlement. Most importantly, we will get on with getting those visits going so that they can go back and visit the islands, including Diego Garcia, with the appropriate protections in place.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Foreign Secretary told this House on 7 October that his deal is in the UK's "security interests". The chaos we have seen since then does nothing to assure our allies or to repel our enemies. In retrospect, does the Minister think it was wise to announce an agreement just weeks before elections in Mauritius and the US? Does he agree it would be wise for any future agreement to come before this House for scrutiny and a vote before signature?

It is important that any agreement complies with the opinion of the International Court of Justice, but self-determination remains an important principle, too. Now that negotiations have reopened, can the Minister say how the Chagossian people will be represented in those talks?

A court ruled this week that Tamil asylum seekers were illegally detained, in terrible conditions, on Diego Garcia. Will the Minister apologise for their treatment

and assure the House that the camp in which they were held is now closed for good?

Stephen Doughty: As I have repeatedly said in this House, the interests of the Chagossians have been absolutely at the heart of this deal, and I am sure they will be confident that there are a number of provisions that will satisfy the concerns that Members are raising in good faith, and that Chagossians have raised with me directly. This was a treaty negotiation between the United Kingdom and Mauritius. The hon. Gentleman is aware of the ICJ judgment, and I will let him read that in his own time.

The hon. Gentleman specifically asks about the situation of the migrants, and we recognise and are carefully considering this week's judgment, but I make it clear that this Government inherited a deeply troubling situation that remained unresolved under the last Administration, four years after the migrants' arrival on Diego Garcia. I believe that the shadow Foreign Secretary was Home Secretary when the migrants first arrived, and the situation went unresolved. We were absolutely clear that the situation was unsustainable, and we worked at pace to resolve it. We will carefully consider the judgment of that court.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): Those of us who have spoken to the American military know the importance of this base. Will the Minister confirm that he said that, since the agreement was announced, the American military and security services have raised no concerns with this Government?

Stephen Doughty: Yes, indeed. As far as I am aware, that is the case. In fact, the opposite is true. There has been a warm welcome for this agreement from across the United States security apparatus because it puts this base and our shared operations on a secure footing into the future. I remind the House again that that is the very reason why this Government acted and, indeed, why the previous Foreign Secretary started the process in the first place, so we are told.

Mr Speaker: Let's go over to James Cleverly, then.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the Minister answer this with a simple yes or no? Did the Prime Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), have any conversations with Philippe Sands KC about Diego Garcia without the presence of Foreign Office or other Government civil servants? Yes or no?

Stephen Doughty: I do not have details of all the Prime Minister's meetings. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman can ask the Prime Minister that question himself.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): For those of us who have served for the US military, who retain genuine and close links with the US military, and who know that this issue does not bring about the concern that others are trying to conflate with it, will the Minister say what his view is on how it is seen by our US military friends?

Stephen Doughty: I praise my hon. Friend for his service and work. I am very clear: our allies in the United States and, indeed, our other allies who rely on

the important guarantees that the base provides are supportive of the deal. It has been supported across the security apparatus at every level and that is absolutely crucial. We would not have signed up to a deal if it did not protect our interests and those of our closest ally.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Can the Minister enlighten us as to the attitude on the deal of the incoming Trump Administration? Does he know, or shall I ask the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage)?

Stephen Doughty: We very much welcome, as I have said before, the election of President-elect Trump and Vice President-elect Vance. During the transition period, there are restrictions on what conversations can go on. As I have said repeatedly in the House, we are confident that when the full details of the deal are provided by the US national security apparatus, any concerns will be allayed.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I know that the Minister is a strong supporter of the overseas territories, as are the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister. Despite this being documented already in the House and in Gibraltar, to avoid any doubt or further scaremongering, and for Members on the Opposition Benches, will the Minister once again confirm that this Government are completely committed to supporting the right of self-determination for the people of Gibraltar and the Falklands?

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for her important work on Gibraltar, as I thank you for yours, Mr Speaker. I have said this before and I will confirm again that we are absolutely and resolutely committed to the sovereignty and self-determination of Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands. Indeed, I enjoyed meeting our overseas territories family at the Joint Ministerial Council just a few weeks ago.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is truly baffling that such decent Ministers have allowed themselves to be bamboozled by the blob. Will the Minister confirm that this is not being rushed through in advance of the takeover of the White House by an incoming President in one month's time? If, in one month's time, that new President says that this is a terrible deal, will it be too late to change it?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have immense respect for him and his work in this House. I take issue with his choice of words. We have incredible officials in this Government who have loyally served Governments from parties on both sides of this House. They work incredibly hard to defend the national security and interests of this country. If anything, this was not rushed at all: there were 11 rounds of negotiations under the Government of the right hon. Gentleman's party. We got in and we got a deal done that protects our national security and our interests.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): What assurances can the Minister provide Parliament about the scrutiny that the agreements, which will be struck in due course, will receive?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said a number of times in the House, the treaty, once signed, will go through the normal procedures in the House. I confirmed that in my answer to the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel). There will be the opportunity for ample scrutiny by both Houses and legislation will be laid in due course.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister gets ahead of himself. He says the Government have moved at pace to resolve the situation; the situation is not resolved. He criticises the last Government for not securing a deal; his deal is not secured either. The last time we talked about this, we talked about the President-elect not being keen on the deal and the Chagossians not being properly consulted on it. When will he come back to the House on this situation and tell us something positive about this cack-handed deal?

Stephen Doughty: I have repeatedly stated a number of positive things, including the support for Chagossians that will be inherent in the deal. The positive fact is that after 11 rounds of failed negotiations under the previous Government, we achieved and have done a deal. We are confident that that deal will be supported by our partners and we will continue to present details of it in due course.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that confirming the legal status of the base, which was left outstanding by the previous Government, will cement our role in the Indo-Pacific and provide an important pillar in our strategy to counter Chinese influence in the area?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Despite the attempts to constantly whip up the idea about Chinese influence, the deal contains specific precautions to prevent foreign forces. I remind the House again that Mauritius was one of the only countries that did not join the belt and road initiative. Its ally is India, not China.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Government clearly want to dismantle legacies of empire. Why, then, do we think it is so important to attach the Chagos islands to Mauritius when, in fact, that link was only established when both territories were acquired by the French empire and later by the British empire? Why do we not listen to the Chagossians, instead of imposing the legacy of empire on them?

Stephen Doughty: I have engaged with many Chagossian groups. The hon. Member will know, as I have said multiple times, that there are a range of views across the Chagossian community. He is perfectly able to look at the legal judgments himself. The fact is that the Government wanted to secure the long-term operation of the base, our national security and our interests. We have engaged with our partners and secured a deal, which his Government failed to do.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): The current situation is clearly unsustainable. Most of the negotiations took place under the previous Administration. It is now becoming a political football. Has the Minister heard any other serious recommendations for the future of the island?

Stephen Doughty: No, I have not, and I certainly have not heard them from the Opposition Benches.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I will repeat the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), which the Minister studiously avoided. Clearly, the deal was not ready to be signed, so why was it announced two weeks before the election?

Stephen Doughty: When we are looking to protect the national security of this country, we will operate at the fastest and most appropriate pace that we can. This matter had been left languishing under the previous Administration, with the future of the base insecure. We have secured it.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): May I wish you a merry Christmas, Mr Speaker?

Does the Minister recognise that the issue is being raised by the Opposition again and again, despite the cognitive dissonance that it was they who opened the negotiations in the first place? I have to endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) about the scaremongering and the irresponsible way in which the Opposition have conducted the debate with regard to other overseas territories and self-determination.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am a little bit concerned, as I granted the urgent question. I have taken a judgment call; I hope we are not questioning that.

Stephen Doughty: It is absolutely right that the House scrutinises these matters and it will continue to have the opportunity to do so in a range of forums; indeed, I will meet parliamentarians later today to discuss them. There appears to be collective amnesia among Conservative Members. I have raised this a number of times. Many of them served as Ministers in the previous Government and they knew exactly what the risks were to our national security.

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): I have just returned, hotfoot, from a very full Mar-a-Lago. I spoke to several members—senior administrators, especially—of the incoming Administration, which will be in the White House in 32 days' time. Let me assure you that there is very deep disquiet among them all as to what this deal may mean for the long-term future of Diego Garcia and whether such a deal will hold, given the precedent of the deal break over Hong Kong. They also cannot understand why we would surrender the sovereignty of the islands on an advisory judgment from a pretty obscure court. This is about sovereignty, and you keep saying yourself that the sovereignty—

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot both stand. When you say “you”, you mean me. I have no ownership of this decision.

Nigel Farage: That is fair enough, Mr Speaker. If we respect the sovereignty of Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands, on the basis that it is what the people want, can we have a referendum of all the eligible Chagossians and let them decide the future sovereignty of the Chagos islands? That, surely, is the only fair solution.

Stephen Doughty: We have been very clear that these negotiations are between the United Kingdom and Mauritius, and I have set out in the past the reasons for that. The interests of the Chagossians are absolutely at the heart of this agreement, and as I have said, I have repeatedly engaged with them. The hon. Gentleman continues to speculate, but with the greatest of respect, he does not know the detail of what has been agreed. He does not know the detail of what has been shared. And he does not know the detail that the national security apparatus of the United States has considered. I am confident that his concerns will be allayed once he sees the detail of this deal.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker. The Minister says that views across the Chagossian community are mixed. In my experience, Mr Speaker, when politicians say that, they are simply choosing the views that they want to hear. Will the Minister take the opportunity that has been given by the incoming Mauritian Government to take a breathing space in which he can consult formally and in a structured way with the Chagossians to find out what they want?

Stephen Doughty: I have engaged with the Chagossian community twice in recent months, as I have made clear in answers to a number of parliamentary questions tabled by the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues. The interest of the Chagossians will continue to be at the heart of this agreement, and I take their concerns very seriously. I am being quite honest, Mr Speaker, that there are a range of views: some oppose the deal; and some are in favour of it. That is completely natural in a democratic process.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to a long-term campaigner, Jeremy Corbyn.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Having been a member of the Chagos Islands (British Indian Ocean Territory) all-party parliamentary group ever since it was founded and had a lot of interaction with Chagossians over the past 25 years, I can assure the Minister that I have met many Chagossians in this country and in Mauritius. They were abominably treated and short-changed by the deal of 1968 and then later removed from the islands. Their one unifying cause is the right of return and settlement, and I hope the Minister will confirm that that right will be upheld. I understand all the negotiations surrounding the base, but there is no reason why they should not include the right of at least visiting, if not residing on, Diego Garcia itself.

The International Court of Justice was very clear that the decolonisation process was not properly carried out by Britain in the 1960s, when Mauritius achieved its independence, and that has to be made right. That has been voted on by the ICJ, voted on by the UN General Assembly, and endorsed by the Security Council. Is any more evidence necessary to indicate that it is clearly part of Mauritius, and that Chagossians have rights within Mauritius as well as on the Chagos Islands, where hopefully they will be able to return?

Stephen Doughty: I agree with the right hon. Member's characterisation of what happened to the Chagossians in the past. It is a matter of deep regret for this Government,

and, indeed, I think that regret is shared across the House. As I have said, we will have the interests of the Chagossians at the heart of this agreement. He is right to characterise the range of views across the Chagossian communities in response to the question that has just been put to me. I can confirm that the programme of visits will include the ability to visit all the islands, including Diego Garcia, with the appropriate safeguards in place. I hope, too, for a resettlement of the outer islands. A provision certainly exists for that to happen, and I think that that is one of the most likely scenario in which Chagossians can finally return to those outer islands.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Minister is trying to say that nothing has changed on this deal, yet media reports suggest that the new Prime Minister of Mauritius believes that the deal is not good enough, and the Minister is now saying that it is the same deal. Clearly, there is something that we are not being told in this House. Either the amount of money that we are paying for the rental of the space will have to increase, or some terms and conditions have changed. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for ensuring that this House can scrutinise the position. The Minister should have given a statement to that effect, rather than having to have an urgent question. Can we therefore pause this process to allow the Chagossians to have their say and to look at what the incoming American Government have to say, and then, before we proceed with this giveaway, make sure that everyone is in agreement?

Stephen Doughty: The Prime Minister of Mauritius has made it very clear in his exchange of letters with the Prime Minister of this country and also in his statement yesterday that they are willing to conclude an agreement with us. That is very clear. Therefore, on the fundamentals, nothing has changed. We are engaged in conversation. It is only natural that, after an election, they would want to do that and to be able to scrutinise the agreement. That is entirely proper. That is why officials have been having these conversations, but I will not give a running commentary on private discussions.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I know the Minister will want to give the House the greatest possible clarity on what has brought us to this point. The Foreign Secretary has been clear that one of the central considerations for the Government was the likelihood, if not the inevitability, of a binding legal judgment against the UK in this matter. The Minister will know that the judgments of the International Court of Justice are not binding on the United Kingdom when disputes are between the UK and another state which is or was a member of the Commonwealth. That would include Mauritius. I do not expect the Minister to disclose the legal advice that the Government have received, but will he please give the House some more clarity about the nature of the legal jeopardy that the Government perceive here?

Stephen Doughty: I will not, for that very reason, go into that type of advice. The right hon. and learned Member knows that from his extensive and distinguished experience on these matters. I have to ask this fundamental question: if there was not a problem, why did his Government start negotiations on this?

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I think we can forgive our overseas territories for being a little concerned about this Government's commitment to their right to self-determination. Those of us who, like me, are a bit older and have long memories will remember when the previous Labour Government opened negotiations with the Spanish Government over the future of Gibraltar. But what I am more interested in today is having reassurance from the Minister that any decision will be well informed, so can he say which of his Ministers has visited the British Indian Ocean Territory?

Stephen Doughty: I like the right hon. Lady, but I have to say that I find it extremely unhelpful the way that the Falklands, Gibraltar and other overseas territories, which are not comparable with this situation, are constantly brought up. I have just been with the leaders at the Joint Ministerial Council—Mr Speaker, you graciously hosted a reception as well—and we were absolutely resolute in our commitment to the Falklands and Gibraltar. I have been there and said it myself directly on the Rock. The Minister of State for the Armed Forces has just been in the Falklands saying exactly the same thing to the Falkland Islanders. I can tell you, Mr Speaker, they are getting fed up with the nonsense that we are hearing about this. It is hugely problematic for their interests going forward.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Surely the Minister must accept, though, that the timing of this announcement was one of the biggest diplomatic gaffes of modern times. It came literally hours before a general election was called. There was a widespread perception in Mauritius that this Government were trying to give a leg up to a very unpopular sitting Government who subsequently scored zero out of 60 directly elected seats in the Mauritian Parliament. Does he not agree that it is wholly appropriate that the new Labour Mauritian Government would be wary of the intentions of his Government?

Stephen Doughty: I simply do not recognise the right hon. Member's characterisation.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Can the Minister update the House on the measures being taken to safeguard against the emergence of Chinese military and surveillance capabilities in the British Indian Ocean Territory?

Stephen Doughty: I have been very clear that, within the agreement, there are provisions to ensure the security of the outer islands. This deal would not have been agreed by the United States security apparatus or, indeed, by us were it to give that kind of benefit to another country. I have been very clear about the position of Mauritius in relation to China, and there are provisions and safeguards in place that should allay any fears on that matter.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Minister did not seem to answer the questions raised by the shadow Foreign Secretary, so may I ask this just one more time: from which budget do the Government plan to make the annual payments that he is proposing to the Mauritian Government?

Stephen Doughty: I have been very, very clear—[*Laughter*]. Conservative Members can guffaw all they like, but I will give the answers that relate to the facts here and that relate to the national security interests of this country. The previous Government were involved in 11 rounds of negotiations and they failed to achieve a deal. We achieved that deal. We will provide further details in due course.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Yet again, this new Labour Government rushed into an ill-judged and regrettable policy decision: to cede the British Indian Ocean Territory to Mauritius, against expert advice and with no regard to the wishes of Chagossians in this country and elsewhere. It is like the Government's awful policies on scrapping the winter fuel payment for pensioners, the heartless family farms tax, and their jobs tax. Will the Government show some leadership, admit that they have got this wrong, scrap the deal and keep this vital territory under British control, to protect UK interests, the marine environment and ultimately global security in an increasingly unstable and dangerous world?

Stephen Doughty: I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman spends a bit more time reflecting on the failures of his Administration on this and a series of other issues, from the public finances to our national security. This Government are clearing up the mess that his party left behind on not only this issue but so many others.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers; however, I am a sponsor of the British Indian Ocean Territory (Citizenship) Bill, which calls for descendants born to individuals within the British Indian Ocean Territory to be able to register as BIOT. There is now an even greater imperative because of the Chagos decision, which was made with no input from local people. What discussions will take place with those who consider themselves British? The Chagossians seem not to be assured, so what will be done to ensure that they receive all the necessary information in a timely manner, and will not get answers to their questions through news media outlets?

Stephen Doughty: I have a deep respect for the hon. Gentleman. As I have said a number of times, the Government deeply regret the way that Chagossians were removed from the islands and treated thereafter. We have always been clear on respecting the interests of Chagossian communities. I have engaged, and will continue to engage, with Chagossian communities. Their interests are at the heart of the deal, from the trust fund to the ability to resettle on and visit the islands, and a series of other measures that we have taken here in the United Kingdom. I am confident that their interests are being respected.

Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement

1.12 pm

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): The Government were elected on a mandate of change, to deliver a new era of economic growth and national renewal, and reverse the years of failure and decline that we inherited. Through the tough decisions that we took in the Budget, we prevented a return to austerity while protecting working people's payslips. The plan for change that the Prime Minister unveiled earlier this month is the next stage on the journey of reform—a plan to kick-start growth and get Britain building again, putting more money in people's pockets and delivering 1.5 million new homes, good jobs and opportunities for all.

Just this week, we announced our plans to rebuild and reform local government, and to empower local leaders to deliver that change so that the benefits are felt in every community. We cannot do this alone. We need strong, empowered local government to work with us, as equal partners in a new relationship. Public service is our collective duty, but after a decade of cuts, fiscal mismanagement and the failure of the previous Government to fix the foundations, it is a fact that councils of all political stripes are in crisis. The broken local audit system in England and the scandal of the unacceptable backlog that led to the recent whole of Government accounts disclaimer further illustrate the dire straits of the system and the legacy that we must reconcile.

The Prime Minister gets this. As a former director of a critical public service, he knows that reform is vital, and so does the Deputy Prime Minister, having worked on the frontline as a home care worker, seeing the human impact every single day. I am proud to have public service and local government in my blood too. That is why I take the responsibility to lead the Government's work to rebuild the sector with the seriousness that is due and the urgency that is required. The work has already begun, and today marks a major milestone in our mission to rebuild local government and put councils on a firmer financial footing, as we publish the provisional local government finance settlement for '25-26 and launch our consultation on these proposals, alongside our consultation on wider funding reform.

In the autumn Budget, the Government announced £4 billion of additional funding for local government services, of which £1.3 billion would come in the settlement presented today, but we know that we need to rally. That is why I am announcing over £700 million of additional grants. That includes over £200 million of extra funding for social care since the policy statement. I also confirm that the new funding includes £515 million that will be made available in the final settlement to support councils with the increase in employer national insurance contributions. The package in the provisional settlement will enable local government to invest in the vital services that people rely on, making £69 billion available—equivalent to a 3.5% real-terms increase in councils' core spending power when compared with '24-25. I confirm that this will increase even further in the final settlement.

Today is the start, not the end. Taken together, the additional funding made available in this settlement and the Budget will deliver over £5 billion of new

funding for local services over and above local council tax. Alongside that, every authority in England will receive a one-off share of £100 million currently held in the business rates levy account.

Together, we must ensure that public investment is used for long-term prevention and reform of local public services, rather than expensive short-term crisis responses, which often have much worse outcomes. We are determined to end the cycle of failure that we have seen for too long, and we will provide certainty by ensuring that no authority will see a reduction in its core spending power after accounting for council tax flexibilities next year. We are also ensuring that taxpayers' money goes to where it is needed the most. That includes an immediate down payment: a highly targeted £600 million recovery grant, funded through repurposing the rural services delivery grant and the services grant, ahead of broader reforms to a fairer funding system later. Today, we are launching a consultation on local authority funding reform starting in '26-27.

There will always be tough decisions to make, but we are determined to ensure that we fairly reflect the real drivers of cost, including demand, the need for public services, and importantly, the ability of councils to raise revenue locally. That is why we are making up to £3.7 billion of extra funding available through this settlement to help local authorities to meet the spiralling costs of social care. That includes an additional £200 million uplift to the social care grant, which I confirm today, taking the total increase to the grant for '25-26 to £880 million. That includes the new children's social care prevention grant, first announced in the policy statement, which I today confirm will be uplifted in a further final settlement by £13 million, taking the total to £263 million. That is the first step in our national roll-out of transformed family health services, as we double settlement investment in preventive children's social care services to over £500 million next year. I place on record my appreciation, and that of the Deputy Prime Minister, for the partnership and determination shown by the Treasury, the Education and Health Secretaries, and their Ministers and officials.

We will not do as the previous Government did and impoverish councils, and those who need support the most, then parade them around for public shaming. That helps no one. We must work together to get councils back on their feet financially. The principle stands that it is for local authorities to decide at what level they set their council tax, and they are accountable to local taxpayers; however, we are committed to keeping taxes on working people as low as possible, and we have to strike a balance, so we will maintain the previous Government's policy, as set out in the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast, of setting a 5% council tax referendum principle, made up of a 3% core principle and a 2% principle for the adult social care precept. That means that residents will have the final say over increases that go beyond that.

We have put in place a framework for 2025-26 to support those councils in the most financial difficulty. Similar to the approach taken by the previous Government, we will consider requests for bespoke referendum principles on a case-by-case basis. We expect the changes outlined today will give the respite needed and clarity on the direction of travel, but we also know that 14 years have hit hard and, for some, the recovery grant and the other

measures will still mean that additional support is required. We will put taxpayers and the impact on working people at the forefront of our decisions, and we will look carefully at councils' individual circumstances—for instance, how much they charge in council tax and the strength of their plans to protect vulnerable people on low incomes.

To recognise the impact of council tax on households across all councils, we are consulting with the sector on changes to payment instalments, which will allow annual council tax bills that are spread over 10 months to move to a 12-month schedule by right, helping household budgeting, spreading the cost for working people and mirroring how most household bills are paid.

Ensuring local government can deliver for working people in the long term requires a root-and-branch reform of the way that councils are funded. That is why through the 2026-27 settlement—the first multiyear settlement in 10 years—we will introduce an up-to-date assessment of councils' needs and resources. Today we are launching a consultation on the objectives and principles of those changes. We will consider representations from all corners of the sector to develop our understanding of the drivers of need, including deprivation, and of the impact in rural areas on service delivery—fairness for all delivered once and for all. We will redouble our work to shift power away from Westminster into the hands of those communities who know their area best. We will reduce the myriad of funding pots that councils have to contend with, giving them the flexibility they need to deliver local and national priorities.

That effort is underpinned by our strategy to streamline and simplify the local audit system in England. Local communities deserve transparency, accountability and the effective early warning system that local audits provide. We are taking immediate action by replacing the broken and dispersed system with a focused, proportionate and value-for-money local audit office, ensuring that the system is fit for purpose. This is a long-term challenge, and it will take hard work and dedication to achieve, which is why we are wasting no time in fixing the foundations, getting the audit backlog under control, overhauling the system for the long term, returning to secure multiyear settlements, and bringing forward ambitious plans for devolution, growth and reform of public services, while improving standards, accountability and efficiency. We are building for the long term to get local government fighting fit, legal and decent, and as equal partners to rebuild our country from the ground up, and ready to play its part in delivering the Government's missions through our plan for change. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

1.22 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is Christmas. The two wise men and the wise woman on the Government Front Bench have arrived bearing their gifts for local councils, but on closer inspection, while the goal is beautifully packaged, the box is somewhat emptier than people had been expecting.

It has been a challenging few weeks for local government. We have heard the Government's plans to take as much of the local as they can out of local government, and it is clear that this statement will leave our local authorities facing further challenges in doing their day jobs and

[David Simmonds]

significant uncertainty as we go into the new year. All that comes from a Government who promised just a short time ago that they would end the bidding war, as they called it, among councils. They then promptly started a new bidding war for homelessness funding, rather than addressing it through the settlement given that it is a core statutory duty of local authorities. The consequence of the Government's approach is that localism, on central Government terms only, represents just in London a £700 million net cut in the funding that councils will have available to deal with homelessness at a time when rough sleeping is at 27%.

Councils face uncertainty about the cost of funding elections. The Minister told us just a few days ago that he would be considering whether to cancel local elections in places facing local government reorganisation. Up and down the country in all those local authorities, our returning officers are booking and paying for the polling stations, hiring the staff and carrying out the canvassing. They need certainty as we go into the new year.

Of course, our councils face additional and uncertain challenges that were announced in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, as well as from various statements made by other Ministers, that clearly imply a significant increase in the cost of new statutory duties coming the way of our local authorities, with no clarity about how those may be funded. All of that is on top of bringing forward local government reorganisation proposals to a deadline early in the new year. It is not clear whose interests that serves, but for all those local authorities that may be considering that, it represents a significant additional cost pressure.

As many of our councillors go away for their Christmas break and try to digest the detail of the settlement over their Christmas lunch, they will face rumbling indigestion as they realise that their budget pressures will grow significantly, especially in rural local authorities, which face huge losses from the cancellation of funding that supported the additional and quantified costs of local government services in a rural environment.

I will be fair to the Minister: the £2.7 billion black hole that we spotted at the time of the Budget announcement has shrunk by around £700 million, but when it comes to council tax increases that will be announced by our local authorities in February, how much will they have to put up council tax to meet the shortfalls? How much will they have to put up council tax to cover the Government's new approach to asylum, which is driving up the cost of temporary accommodation? When will the Government provide clarity on the dedicated schools grant override, given the impact it has on our local authority budgets? When will they provide clarity on the election preparation costs? Given that the Local Government Association has identified a £1.766 billion shortfall just from the Government's national insurance contributions measure, when will they announce further funding to cover those costs?

Let us consider this: the cancellation of the new homes bonus means £3 million lost by Birmingham, £3.7 million lost by Buckinghamshire, £4 million from Central Bedfordshire, £5.3 million each from Ealing and Milton Keynes, £3.7 million from North Yorkshire alone, £9.5 million from Lincolnshire, £14.3 million from the rural services grant and an £18 million cut for

a rural local authority in this Budget. It is clear there are tough times ahead for local authorities as they begin to look at the detail. The new homes bonus, in particular, means the places that have built the most homes are the ones that lose the benefit. If this is fixing the foundations, I would not want to stay in the tent which is the only thing they would hold up in our local authorities.

Jim McMahon: Here we go again. I would think that after 14 years of councils being on year-to-year watch to find out what position they would be in, the Conservatives would at least welcome the preparation now for multiyear settlements. They had 14 years to get their house in order, and they could not even line up to give councils more than 12 months' certainty about what was coming. The one thing councils were absolutely certain about was that it was only going to be bad news after bad news. When there were crises in adult social care and children's services and when homelessness was rising at a rate of knots, the last Government were completely missing in action—that was what councils were facing. How many councils went bust on their watch? Councils were lining up saying to the Government that they could not afford—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Birmingham.

Jim McMahon: Let us talk about Birmingham, because the Opposition referenced the £3 million new homes bonus. The new recovery grant—£600 million of brand new money targeted at those councils with high deprivation and low tax bases—just for Birmingham is £39 million. That will start the repair work of rebuilding the foundations.

When we talk about fair funding and why it is needed, we will not do what the previous Government did, where they put party politics ahead of the national interest. Let me remind the Conservatives of what the previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), said in Tunbridge Wells in 2022:

"We inherited a bunch of formulas from Labour that shoved all the funding into deprived urban areas and that needed to be undone. I started the work of undoing that."

That is a record of shame. It is nothing to preach about. To right the wrongs of the past 14 years and finally get money where it is needed, this Government will work for public service, not party interest.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for outlining this much-needed funding uplift. I agree with him that councils up and down the country, regardless of their political persuasion, need the Government to support them, not to criticise and denigrate them, which is sadly what we have had in some cases over the past 14 years. He mentioned some of the authorities that still face those pressures, including Birmingham, Nottingham and Woking, which have already effectively faced bankruptcy. The Local Government Association has outlined that up to one in four councils is likely to require additional emergency support.

A Sky report has today outlined that families are stuck in temporary accommodation for an average of five and a half years. We should not be calling that “temporary accommodation.” Imagine spending the entirety of your school life in temporary accommodation because you do not have your own home. The funding that the Minister has announced for tackling homelessness is welcome, but it is a sticking plaster, if we are honest, because it does not give councils the tools to build social housing. Homelessness will end only if we build new homes, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that councils have those powers?

In the short term, the £18 billion boost to the homelessness prevention grant is a step in the right direction, but the Government must consider the unintended consequences. Local authorities are already reliant on that funding to plug gaps in temporary accommodation—many use up to 75% of it for that purpose—but the new rules mean that only 49% of the grant may be used in that way. How will that change not lead to a further reduction in funding for temporary accommodation, at a time when, as we all know, the system is broken?

Jim McMahon: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her question. We are all getting ready for Christmas and looking forward to time with our families and our own respite, but in the end it is hard to enjoy that moment given the prospect of just how many children in this country are in temporary accommodation. Some 159,000 children do not have a secure, affordable place to live and so are in temporary accommodation. In my own town, there are 500 such children. We do our best—we martial for the Christmas parties that charities put on—but it is no replacement for a secure family home.

There will be lots of differences in the exchanges that take place here, but we need to focus on why we are doing what we are doing. The reason we are building 1.5 million new homes is of course economic, and about decent, well-paid, working-class jobs—we talk a lot about that—but in the end it is about sorting out the housing crisis. If we sort out that crisis, we sort out the temporary accommodation crisis and the financial crisis in local government. If we sort out the crisis in adult social care, of course we sort out the financial crisis, but we will finally deliver on the promise of the state looking after the generation who gave so much. If we sort out the crisis in children’s social care, we finally deliver on the state promise to invest in the next generation.

Repairing the foundations is, of course, about financial foundations—that is important—but it is also about people and communities, and in the end that is what we are all here for.

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

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as I am a Member of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council. Local government was brought to its knees under the last Conservative Government, with funding slashed and responsibilities piled on its depleted and exhausted workforce. I thank the local government workforce and wish them a happy Christmas.

I and my local Liberal Democrat colleagues welcome the move to multi-year settlements—something we have long called for—and the funding announced today for homelessness prevention. I agree with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister that we must eliminate the use of B&Bs, especially for families at Christmas. I also welcome the announced consultation on changing the funding formula, as listening to our local leaders is absolutely crucial.

However, we remain really concerned about the removal of the rural services grant, which suggests that the Government do not understand the nature of rural communities, including the difficulties of providing services over sometimes vast areas, subsidising public transport, and identifying hidden poverty, often among older populations—that costs an awful lot.

On special educational needs, it is deeply worrying that councils—particularly those that may literally run out of money, such as Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council—still have no idea about what will happen to the statutory override. How are they supposed to set their budgets in February without that certainty? Can the Minister confirm that no council will be forced to join the Safety Valve scheme, for example, which would put at risk the support provided to some of the most vulnerable children?

As we go into winter, the impact on social care is of the greatest concern. Dorset council shared with me a letter sent to the Dorset Care Association in which the director of adult social care states:

“We simply will not have the resources to meet the national insurance contributions for providers.”

Indeed, the Minister told me, in response to a written question, that only direct national insurance costs would be covered. What does he say to providers and to staff in charities such as Diversability, who fear for their jobs this Christmas?

Jim McMahon: It is important that we have a debate on local government finance based on the numbers. I have said already that, when taking into account council tax, no council will see a reduction in its core spending power. That means that before the final settlement, and not including extended producer responsibility and live parts of the grant, the hon. Lady’s own council will see an increase of at least 5.8%. We are covering the national insurance contributions made there, and in addition we are funding an extra £880 million through the social care grant. We have heard representations through the sector.

We are not saying that all this will fix everything today—it cannot. We are less than six months into the new Government and we have 14 years to reconcile. I hope the hon. Lady does not mind, but I remind her that a number of those 14 years were under the coalition Government. What we missed then and are trying to make up for now is that if we take away community and preventative services, which we all know make a big difference—not just in cost but in outcomes—we end up paying more and more at the back end, but for worse outcomes. The cruelty is that the Liberal Democrats’ moment in government, which I accept was short, was the time to invest in reform and prevention. That time was not taken and that opportunity was missed, and 14 years later we are reconciling that and fixing the system from the ground up. We will do that.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this commitment to local government and recognise that the Minister has a big job to do in addressing the challenges that have arisen because of the last 14 years—not least in local government audit. I welcome what seems to be a commitment to embracing the Redmond review. Will he give more detail about what will replace the Office for Local Government?

Jim McMahon: Most in the sector would agree that Oflog—the Office for Local Government—had a vague remit that was an expensive way of gathering data. In the end, if it were to be developed, we could risk mission creep whereby its remit would verge into the areas that local authorities so disliked about the former Audit Commission. We are trying to get the right balance between the early warning system that enables us to see which individual councils are under stress, and, importantly, noting any developing systemic threats or themes for which central Government might have to take much earlier action. We want to rebuild that early warning system.

However, we are absolutely clear that we are not replacing the Audit Commission. For one, it was hugely expensive, and we need to ensure that any money goes to the frontline of local public services. Honestly, councils do not need inspectors going in to mark their homework when they should be trusted to get on and do the job well. People understand what the National Audit Office is, so we hope that they will understand and see the benefit of a local audit office, and that it will be embraced by the sector.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Minister set out how he expects local authorities such as mine in Buckinghamshire to absorb with such little notice multimillion pound impacts from significant changes to the social care funding formula, and the effects of the NICs rises on commissioned services and suppliers, particularly charities such as Mind, which will be greatly affected by the changes?

Jim McMahon: Again, the hon. Lady's council will see a core spending power increase of 5%, and that is only this part of the settlement—it does not include extended producer responsibility or billions of pounds in other grants that will come. This is a genuine attempt to make sure we give councils the funding that is needed, and I think we have succeeded in a very difficult context, but it is a matter of fact that some councils' local tax bases are stronger, for reasons that go back many years and, in some cases, many centuries. That is not because of the efforts of the local council—it is what it is—and for too long, councils in deprived communities with lower tax bases have done everything that has been asked of them. They have raised council tax to the maximum, so local communities are paying more and more, but increasingly they are getting less and less. They are seeing their neighbourhood services diminish.

There are tough choices, and we do not shy away from that. We have been very honest in the oral statement about the trade-offs that have had to be made, but the increase of 5% in the core spending power of the hon. Lady's council will help deal with the issues she has raised.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I would prefer to see the wise men and women on Labour's Front Bench than Ebenezer Scrooge and Jacob Marley on the Conservative Front Bench. Does the Minister agree that the statement he has made today is in stark contrast to the legacy left by the Conservative party, which left local government in dire straits?

Jim McMahon: That is the point: the previous Government knew just how bad the situation was, but they put off the tough decisions. For example, how many times in 14 years did the previous Government promise that they would go back to multi-year settlements so that councils knew where they were, but failed to do so? How many times did the previous Government say that they would bring in a fair funding review, but failed to do so? How many times did the previous Government say that they would deal with the audit backlog? They did not just fail to do that; the backlog got worse. If we had not taken action, it would have been 1,000 sets of audited accounts, and that was not due to covid, because those accounts went back to 2015. That failure was systemic, and it was all on the watch on the previous Government. What that meant in practice was £100 billion of public money that they could not account for, so they did not really know the state of the sector, because they completely gave up on monitoring it.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) and the Minister's answer, can I assure him that there are areas of deprivation in rural communities such as Buckinghamshire? Further to the point made by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), while the devil is in the detail, it already looks from the figures like Buckinghamshire will take a multimillion-pound hit from the loss of various grants. Can the Minister give an assurance that rural communities will be treated equally to urban ones, and will not be left behind?

Jim McMahon: Either the hon. Gentleman does not know the status of the rural services delivery grant, or he is trying to mislead the House. A large share of large rural authorities should have got the rural services delivery grant but did not, because that grant was not about rural services. When the previous Prime Minister stood up in Tunbridge Wells and said that the Government had taken money from deprived communities and moved it across, he did not mean that it was for all communities; it was for party politics. So where were Conservative Members then when it came to those rural communities that did not get the grant? I did not hear anybody standing up and asking for their rural community to get the money for those services that Conservative Members are now trying to champion. We will absolutely make sure that deprivation and need are part of the funding reforms that are coming, but we will also make sure that we genuinely take into account the cost of delivering services in rural areas. The sector needs a fair funding review, and we are determined to deliver one.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the additional funding to tackle homelessness and provide early help and support for families. I also welcome the

principle that resources should be directed according to need. However, as the Minister knows, the elephant in the room of local government finance is that the statutory override for deficits related to special educational needs and disabilities is due to come to an end in March 2026. Councils will be setting their budgets in the new year through to the end of March 2026, and if there is no plan to address the SEND deficits, many councils will be issuing section 114 notices. Councils urgently need certainty at this point, so what discussions are taking place with local authorities about the statutory override, and when will they have the certainty they need?

Jim McMahon: I agree about the importance and significance of the statutory override—that is felt very acutely in the Department and in the sector. We are consulting now on a number of matters, including the statutory override, and we are in constant dialogue with the Treasury about how we deal with that in the long term. In the end, this is another example of the legacy we have inherited. We are taking very difficult decisions to reconcile, reform and repair the system—decisions that should have been taken earlier but were not. That issue is very much on our agenda.

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

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a member of West Berkshire council. Last Christmas, I was the leader of that council, and I can honestly say to the Minister that I would much rather receive in my inbox the settlement proposed by the Government than what I received from the Conservative Government.

In his statement, the Minister talked about fixing the foundations. I welcome the £3.7 billion for social care, but does he agree that, with councils spending up to two thirds on their budgets on adult and children's social care, social care needs full-scale reform if we are to fix the foundations? Will he support the Liberal Democrats' calls for a commission to undertake that piece of work?

Jim McMahon: To be honest, although I absolutely agree that we need reform, I believe the urgency is today. Think about the number of older people who would have been entitled to adult social care in 2010 who now do not even get support from the local authority, because eligibility has changed in so many areas. There is a crisis, and that crisis is not just being felt in the homes of all the people who have given to this country and deserve better; it is being felt in the acute sector and in the health service, where we are paying far more at the back end because community preventative services are not in place. We are working with the Cabinet Office and the Treasury to say, "Let's learn as we go" on some of this, in terms of innovation and pilots where we can invest to save—invest in those community preventative services up front, to try to better reduce demand. Of course, it is about money, but in the end it is about the service we provide. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments about the settlement in the round.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a councillor in Telford and Wrekin, as well as an honorary vice-president of the Local Government Association.

The Government's first step to restore funding for local government after a very difficult 14 years is welcome, but council areas such as mine have fast-growing populations, provide outstanding services and provide leadership to the sector. On all three of those counts, until this point, that has not been reflected in the settlement that Telford and Wrekin council has received. Will this Government change that? I also gently remind the House that when I was chair of the Local Government Association over the past couple of years, there was not a single Conservative councillor who thought the settlement or the last Government's approach to it was fair or proportionate.

Jim McMahon: I am pleased to say that this year, core spending power in my hon. Friend's area will increase by 8.1%, and again, that does not take into account the billions of pounds that will follow. That reflects the service demand pressures, but also the reality of the local tax bases in that area. Telford, like many areas, does a very good job of providing local public services, but the council itself recognises that the neighbourhood services that most people see and feel—those that make a difference to quality of life—have been retreated on because of the need to fund targeted services, and social care in particular. We are absolutely determined to rebuild adult and children's social care and sort out the housing crisis, but we also want people to live in good places that people are proud of, which requires those neighbourhood services to be rebuilt. It will take time to do that, but our commitment to Telford and the rest of the country is that we are absolutely determined to do so.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The core spending power tables that the Government have published today show that total Government funding for South Staffordshire is down by 7.5%. Just what do the Government have against council tax payers in South Staffordshire?

Jim McMahon: Given the hon. Gentleman's background, I am surprised that he is displaying such ignorance of council finance. The Government's role in local government finance is to be an equaliser. As he knows, everywhere has the ability to raise tax locally through council tax and business rates, but he also knows that some areas have the ability to raise far more than others because of their tax base. It is the job of the Government to equalise—to make sure that when it comes to demand for services, everywhere gets the service provision it needs. That requires the Government to provide more funding in some places to reconcile that lower tax base, so that everyone gets the services they are entitled to. The presentation that the hon. Gentleman has offered shows either ignorance or politics, but I think the country deserves better.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I very much welcome today's statement and the extra funding that has been announced. I commend the Minister for repeatedly reminding the Conservative party of 14 years of austerity, during which local government saw bigger cuts to its budgets than any other part of the public sector. Of course, the Lib Dems were a party to the coalition Government when the worst of those cuts were made.

[Mr Clive Betts]

May I ask my hon. Friend two questions? First, when he comes to consider more fundamental reforms—which we accept will not be in place for another year—will he look at the council tax system as a whole? It is an unfair and regressive system that takes a disproportionate amount of money from the poorest people in the poorest houses. Secondly, can he confirm that the local audit office will be a stand-alone body that looks at public sector audit, not an add-on to the audit, reporting and governance authority—a previous proposal—which was basically to be a private sector body that looked at local government as an afterthought?

Jim McMahon: I thank the former Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for that question. I can confirm that the core spending power of that element in this settlement for Sheffield will be 8.5%, which is before the additional funds that will follow. Sheffield gets a good settlement from this, but we recognise that it is in a context of growing demand, so we hope councils see that we are meeting them on the challenge they face.

On whether we will review council tax, I think every Government recognise that there are huge limitations with council tax, and also huge geographical variations. It is regressive, which is the nature of a tax based on property values rather than the income of the people in them. However, council tax is understood, its collection rates are high and it is really the foundation—although not the total, as my hon. Friend knows—of the funding of council services. The urgent issue we need to face is that previous Governments moved away from their role as the equaliser in the system. Whereas the revenue support grant used to be in place to support councils by reconciling lower tax bases, recent Governments have been missing in action. We are saying to councils of all political stripes, across every type of authority and every part of the country, that we will reconcile that and work with them to equalise the situation.

On the local audit office, we are absolutely determined that this will not be a return to the Audit Commission. We are trying to do a number of things. First, we want to rebuild the early warning system to make sure that we see any systemic problems developing in the system. However, we also recognise that the cost of audit has increased by 150%, which is a direct cost to taxpayers, and that there is fragmentation in the market, and we need to look at the fall-back position as opposed to auditor supply. There is quite a lot that we need to deal with, but this is very much about the provision of audit and making sure the early warning system is rebuilt; it is certainly not a blow to the inspection regime.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I know the Minister wants to give thorough responses, but I have absolute confidence that he can do that with fewer words.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the Government's statement and their attention to local government finances. Delivering services in large, dispersed rural areas such as mine in South Devon is challenging and costly. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that rural local authorities will be allocated additional funding to manage the extra cost of delivering services across areas such as mine?

Jim McMahon: That is exactly the point of moving to a fairer funding formula—and we will of course consult on the component parts making that up. We have to take this in the round—I genuinely want any part of the country and any type of local authority to be able to interrogate the system, and even if they disagree with the quantum—there will always be arguments that—to be able to say that the rationale and the evidence base hold. It is a matter of accepted fact that there is a premium on the cost of rural service delivery, just because of the travelling involved. For example, for a home care worker, there is the travel time between appointments and all the rest of it. However, it is probably also accepted that the evidence base is not as robust and strong as it needs to be, so we want to make sure through this process that we take into account the need for that strong and robust evidence base.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Fourteen years of Tory austerity and fiscal mismanagement have halved the central Government funding for Newcastle city council, sucked the blood vampire-like from our local economy, and left local businesses and families drowning in uncertainty, so I welcome this increased funding and the specific commitments on housing and social care. However, can the Minister reassure me that there is further light at the end of the tunnel, because this Government's work on reforming public services, local funding, business rates and innovation investment will mean that the people of Newcastle and the north-east will have the power and the resources to build the public services and the economy that we choose?

Jim McMahon: That is completely right. By the way, I give credit to council officials, frontline workers and councillors, because it is local government that has led on innovation and reform and that has bound together local communities in very difficult times—and, I would say, with other parts of the system too often working against the local interest, not with it. We need to find a way of sending that message not to local government, because I think it is understood there, but to the wider system. We need to say that when we make such public sector investment in Newcastle and other places, we expect the whole system to rally around a single plan for the place and its people. We expect local government to be respected as the local leader—the convenor of place—that can hold the ring to make sure there is not duplication or contradictions and that the money delivers the right outcomes for local people. We are absolutely committed to that.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Large rural counties such as Norfolk face higher costs in delivering their services, and the Government's jobs tax adds £14 million to the pressures that Norfolk county council is facing. Can the Minister clarify whether the NICs funding he referred to in his statement, which will go to Norfolk county council and other councils, will cover the cost of social care commissioned services?

Jim McMahon: First, I pay tribute to the leaders in both Norfolk and Suffolk for the conversations we are having, particularly on devolution. We look forward to, I hope, making progress on that in the near future, because that is where the real prize is. We can sort out the foundations of council funding and reorganise

public services to get efficiencies, but in the end we need to see devolution. We need to see power coming out of this place and being given to local communities. The best way to achieve that is through a mayoral strategic authority working hand in glove with local authorities.

On the question about NICs, we have provided over £500 million for the costs of employers' national insurance contributions and we are providing additional money through the social care grant, and it is for councils to decide how best to spend that money.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that this Government are starting to fix the damage done by more than a decade of disastrous settlements for local government. In my constituency, that means increases of more than 5% for each local authority in core spending power, but does the Minister agree that as important, if not more important, is the consultation on long-term proposals to fundamentally improve the way that local government is funded through a fairer system?

Jim McMahon: That is exactly right. We have approached this year as very much a recovery operation. We could see that councils were in the ditch and needed to be pulled out and taken home, and that is exactly what this one-year settlement will do. However, what they need and deserve is a multi-year settlement that gives long-term security and stability, and for that long-term settlement not to be the continuation of a broken system, but a system that has been rewired and put right. With the fair funding review, the multi-year settlement and the reform agenda, putting prevention at the heart of public services, we will begin to achieve the end to which my hon. Friend rightly points.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): We have heard a lot from colleagues about the delivery of rural services. Harrogate and Knaresborough was one of the areas that saw local government reorganisation, and we are now geographically the largest council in England. So what reassurances will there be on making sure that rural services can be provided? One of the biggest barriers the council faces is being able to deliver home to school transport, the cost of which has gone from £5 million just a few years ago to what is expected to be over £25 million this year.

Jim McMahon: I have covered the rural services element before, so I will home in on the home to school transport issue, which I know is a huge issue in many county council areas, where children are carried further away to get to schools. I will be honest and say that some of that is absolutely required, and has always been required, but quite a lot of it is the result of a broken system in which education is not being provided in local communities and parents have been forced to move further out. The plan we have to rebuild education and to invest in schools, some of it funded through impositions on private schools to get that money into the state sector, is about rebuilding local education provision so that parents have the choice and the confidence to go to the state school nearest to their home. That will have an impact on council budgets for home to school transport.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): After eight years of Conservative rule in Stoke-on-Trent, the council was taken to the brink of bankruptcy, and the Minister will be well aware of the extraordinary financial support that we have received and about which we are having additional conversations. How will the recovery fund interact with authorities in receipt of extraordinary financial support? May I also put on record the thanks of the city to Councillor Alastair Watson and Jon Rouse, the chief executive, for the work they have done to stabilise council finances in difficult times?

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I join him in paying tribute to the council officers and council leadership in Stoke-on-Trent. As a direct cash payment—the down payment I mentioned earlier—Stoke-on-Trent council will get £8.7 million, and its core spending power will increase by 8.6% just in this round, but that may well over 10% by the time the full allocations come through. That is part of the rebuilding process, and as I have said, it reflects the fact that we cannot punish councils because of their inherited historical tax base. We must make sure that the Government step up to their role to equalise the system so that everyone has fair access to public services.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement. I recognise and accept the importance of proper funding for areas of high deprivation, but it is important to acknowledge that councils with low deprivation face rising demand for their services. In my constituency of Wokingham, children with special educational needs and disabilities are suffering from this lack of investment. They are deprived, too, but in ways that are not being measured, so their council is not getting the crucial funding to look after SEND services properly. We want Wokingham borough council to get on with the job of delivering more for local residents, so how will the Minister ensure that Wokingham receives what it needs?

Jim McMahon: I thank the hon. Member for coming to one of our surgeries to make representations on behalf of his council. I know that he cares about these issues. We need to be careful not to think that those who have received the recovery grant are the only places that have deprivation, because that is not the case. The recovery grant is very targeted and has two components: one is whether the area has a weaker tax base; the other is whether the area has significantly higher deprivation than other comparable areas. We are clear that we need to root out deprivation and need wherever they exist. The fair funding review is intended to take into account many different component parts, including the cost of rural service delivery, general overheads, premises costs, deprivation and the rest, so that, whatever the issue and whatever the context, councils have confidence that the funding is correct.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the Minister and his team for listening to the voices of Portsmouth North and for the additional funding allocated to homelessness and rough sleeping, so that Portsmouth city council's projected deficit can be addressed. It would be remiss of me not to thank the council workers, alongside Bev and all the volunteers at Helping Hands

[Amanda Martin]

and other charities in the city. They have supported the growing number of people on our streets under the shameful Tory coalition's reign of recklessness. Can the Minister confirm that after five months in government, this is just the start of additional support for our councils? Can he also clarify that, should the Lib Dem-run Portsmouth city council need further advice, his door is always open?

Jim McMahon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her question to the Prime Minister earlier.

The council's overall core spending power will increase by 7.8%. Putting Portsmouth to one side, whatever measures we take in general terms, we can never cast the net so wide and so thinly that we catch every council at the extreme ends. If we did, the net would never get to the depth needed. The door is open to any council that needs a conversation about their particular circumstances. Regardless of party politics, councils can have absolute confidence that we will deal with them professionally, appropriately and with the respect they need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Members will know that if they are not here for the opening statements, they will not be called later in the statement.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a county councillor in Oxfordshire. In my constituency and in my surgeries and correspondence, the frustration, desperation and anger of parents and children with special educational needs is constant and shocking. Their needs are not being met, and as the Minister has acknowledged, the funding shortfall for the high needs block is significant and has led to a deficit, which the Local Government Association estimates will be £3.6 billion at the end of this financial year. I very much welcome the Minister's focus on this issue, as well as that of his colleagues in the Department for Education. Can he assure parents and children in my constituency that, under the multi-year settlement to which he has referred, the future needs of these children will be adequately met, and the needs of the council addressed, as we face those huge deficits?

Jim McMahon: Yes, I can confirm that we are providing, with the support of the Department for Education, new funding of £1 billion to support the high needs block in SEND for the reasons that the hon. Member says. We also know that money today is not the answer in the long term. We have to reform SEND provision in the mainstream, so that parents and pupils get the support that they need.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I welcome the money for homelessness in today's statement. Evidence increasingly suggests that prevention works in homelessness. Calderdale is one of three local authorities working with Crisis to pilot a system of early prevention. In six months, that has already led to a 20% reduction in people using temporary accommodation. Will the Minister look at that work and commit to championing what works?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Where councils such as Calderdale are doing well and excelling, they are working hand in glove with the local community and voluntary organisations to ensure they get the coverage to reach into communities. I applaud that work, and I hope that the 7.4% uplift in core spending power in this part of the settlement goes some way to supporting it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for a positive statement on the funding that is available. Government policy states that local government is the foundation of a good state, from bin collections to driving economic growth. It is paramount that that is done across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. What discussions has the Minister had, or will he have with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regarding the possibility of securing greater funding through the Barnett consequential so that Northern Ireland can have the funding it needs to stimulate local, community and economic growth?

Jim McMahon: I probably have to be a bit careful not to stray into that, given that this is a statement about councils in England, but the premise of the hon. Member's question about adequate funding for local public services is correct. Let us remember that councils deliver more than 800 different services to local communities in England. They employ more than a million people, many of whom will be local people of the community. Councils are a huge power and force for good, and I will certainly ensure that the representation he has made is passed on to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Massive cuts to local government services by the previous Conservative Government have seen rough sleeping more than double and families in temporary accommodation regularly forced to move from hotel to hotel with their belongings in black sacks. I welcome the record £14.7 million in homelessness funding that the Minister's Department has awarded to Ealing council. That is an increase of almost £4 million. Can the Minister outline how that will help those people sleeping out in West Ealing and in Southall town centre tonight? How will it end the use of hotels and bed and breakfasts for families in Ealing Southall?

Jim McMahon: That is precisely why we have provided an extra £233 million to meet the demand. We do not take any pleasure or pride in that, actually. It is a sign of a system that is not working that we must keep on providing more and more money for temporary accommodation, to the benefit of hotel owners and not to the benefit of the people who need a safe, secure and affordable home. This funding has to be part of a wider plan. That is why the 1.5 million new homes are so important. If we do not provide those safe, affordable homes for people, we will always be in this cycle of trying to play catch up, and that is not sustainable.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): May I, too, welcome the multi-year certainty given by the statement today? As a former deputy leader of Milton Keynes council, I can say that it is the kind of certainty we ask for, rather than getting a letter—on Christmas Eve, usually—setting out what the funding

might be, already halfway through our budget-setting process. I also welcome the fact that Milton Keynes is getting more than £7 million to prevent homelessness. I welcome the fact that there will be transparency, but can the Minister give reassurances to Milton Keynes that with the loss of the new homes bonus, additional funding will be given to Milton Keynes to make up for that difference?

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for the advocacy that she shows for Milton Keynes and for the local authority. Overall core spending power in Milton Keynes will increase by 6.1%, and that is only part of the settlement—the council can easily expect that to increase in its final settlement. It shows that the Government are working in partnership with the council to deal with the issues that she raises.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I welcome the extra funding going in to tackle homelessness, especially the £15 million allocated to Croydon council. After 14 years of Tory Members turning their backs on local councils, local councillors and the communities they serve, does the Minister agree that there is a cost to doing nothing when it comes to reforming local government funding? Can he outline what kind of support might be available to councils still carrying large amounts of debt?

Jim McMahon: There is a legitimate question to ask the previous Government about why on earth some councils were allowed to borrow disproportionately to their revenue. In the end, some councils have found themselves on the wrong side of that. When we were designing the recovery grant, that was about deprivation and low tax bases, and dealing with the quantum was about directing money to particular services, but I will be honest: there will always be councils—Croydon will be one of them—which, because of their unique situations, are just outside that general allocation. We are ready to have one-to-one support conversations where needed.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, let me wish you a lovely Christmas break. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Don’t put me off. I welcome the Minister’s statement. As someone who worked for a homeless charity in Harlow, I welcome the additional at least £1.2 million of funding to support homelessness and rough sleeping in Harlow as well as the additional £1.6 million of funding to neighbouring districts, which partly overlap between me and the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson). That is coupled with multi-year funding for councils, for which I achieved cross-party support in the Harlow district council chamber. Does the Minister agree that that shows a clear desire by the Government to support the most vulnerable people in my constituency, but that that must come with joined-up thinking on the planned 1.5 million new homes and investment in our NHS?

Jim McMahon: That was a cute way to get a long question in—merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to the work that he does to represent the people of Harlow as well as the local authority. We stand ready to work on those long-term funding settlement issues to ensure that we genuinely rebuild the foundations.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I commend the Minister for his work in bringing forward the settlement to secure a fair deal for the sector, but, as many hon. Members have alluded to, the elephant in the room is temporary housing. That is in large part due to decisions taken by the last Conservative Government to freeze the housing benefit subsidy at 2011 levels and cap the local housing allowance at a far lower level than local housing tends to cost, with the end result being that local government is subsidising central Government’s welfare bill to an astounding extent, with two thirds of the council tax in my local area going towards paying that bill. As an advocate for the sector, will the Minister meet with counterparts in the relevant Departments to try to lift that cap, so that people are housed at a rate that is cheaper both financially and socially?

Jim McMahon: We come back again to the broken housing market. The need to build 1.5 million new homes is there, but—let us be clear—they have to be the right homes in the right places for the need in the local area. That means not only more social homes but council provision. We continue to see a cycle—we have all seen today’s inflation figures, which are driven by private rent—in which the taxpayer pays more and more for accommodation that is often substandard and does not even meet the decent homes standard, with no benefit to the taxpayer. We have got to rebuild council housing and social housing and make it fit for purpose and affordable.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and merry Christmas—I won’t get any longer for saying that.

I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the announcements made today. In 2010, the last year of the previous Labour Government, St Helens borough council received £127 million in central Government funding. Under the Conservatives, that was cut to just £13 million a year. Services cannot be run on thin air and, despite the best efforts of council staff and Labour councillors, cuts have had consequences. Will the Minister assure me and my constituents that under this Government we will get the funding for the essential services that we need?

Jim McMahon: That is exactly the reason core spending power in St Helens will increase by 8.6% just through these measures. Given the type of council, we could easily expect that to top 10%. That is our down payment to say, “We need time to prepare the multi-year settlement and we need to do the fair funding review, but we know that councils cannot wait for that, given the last decade,” as my hon. Friend described.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The last question goes to the ever-patient Mark Ferguson.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Thank you for squeezing me in, Madam Deputy Speaker. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I was glad to hear my hon. Friend refer to the unfair funding formula championed by the previous Prime Minister, laser targeted as it was at reducing support to communities like mine. There are parts of Gateshead where the average life expectancy for a man is 73 years, yet the last Government focused

[Mark Ferguson]

wholeheartedly on reducing support to areas of deprivation like that. I welcome the almost £2 million that Gateshead council is receiving to tackle homelessness this year on top of its previous allocation, but given that one of the shameful legacies of the last Government is crumbling infrastructure in communities like mine, what efforts will be made to support councils like mine with the infrastructure they need?

Jim McMahon: In the end, some of it is about the quantum of funding, and some of it is about freedom of funding. Taking away the ringfencing and reporting is absolutely critical to that. Gateshead, and every other council, has our absolute commitment.

Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I say thank you to the millions of public sector workers, council officials and, importantly, councillors for the work that they do in providing good public services every year, day in, day out? May I wish everyone a merry Christmas and a happy settlement day?

Winter Preparedness

2.15 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on winter preparedness. Before I begin, I want to say a very special thank you to all the staff who will be keeping our NHS going over the Christmas holidays and into the new year. When I was a manager in the NHS, I worked on winter planning, so, if I may, I will say an additional thank you to all the people who are often unseen: the managers and admin staff who also keep the system going. I know how hard it is for people to work in the system with the challenges that winter can bring through increased demand and higher rates of infection.

There are things that we cannot predict. Storms Bert and Darragh have added pressure, and we might have a cold snap. I know that many people like a winter cold snap of snow and ice, but it is not something that the NHS ever wants to see. The NHS has excellent people who have done this before and, unlike last year, thanks to the new Government, many of them will not be on strike. While we cannot control the weather, we can plan, prepare and pull together, so today I want to update colleagues with the current picture before moving on to the things that we are doing.

NHS England and the UK Health Security Agency will publish the latest statistics tomorrow morning as usual, but we do know that levels of seasonal illness are high. The most recent figures show that last week there was a 350% increase in flu cases compared with the same week last year, but that is comparable to levels we saw two years ago. Norovirus cases are high, but covid rates are low, and although rates of RSV—respiratory syncytial virus—have been high, we expect them to start coming down over the next few weeks.

I want to make it clear that the current rates for both bed occupancy and ambulance delays are unacceptably high. I will shortly come to measures about how we are dealing with that capacity.

I will not rehearse the Darzi investigation and his findings, except on one thing. I remind the House that he found “a perpetual bed crisis”, particularly during peak periods like winter cold snaps. That means that every winter our staff have been wasting precious time solving process problems, ringing round wards to find beds and desperately trying to hold the system together. We can see that in the figures.

On an average evening in 2009, a patient would have been 39th in the queue when they arrived at a typical accident and emergency department. In 2024, they are 100th. The four-hour A&E standard has not been met for nearly a decade and ambulance response times have not been consistently achieved since their introduction in 2017. In November, the average ambulance response time stood at 42 minutes, which is more than double the NHS constitutional standard. A third of the 2.3 million people who attended A&E last month waited more than four hours, and one in 10 of those people—more than 150,000—waited for more than 12 hours.

Those life and death delays are the result of deep structural issues in the NHS that cannot be fixed overnight. But this winter, NHS staff will be on the frontline, not the picket line, because we took a different approach on how to work with staff and the unions. To resolve the

resident doctors' dispute, we spoke to them on day one, we met them in week one, and by week four we had negotiated a deal to end their strikes. That is why, for the first time in three years, the Government are fully focused on winter and not on planning for strikes.

This is what we are doing. First, the NHS is managing extra demand by strengthening same-day emergency care and offering more falls services for older people, with upgraded 24-hour live data centres. Secondly, we are continuing to support systems that are struggling with direct intervention through the NHS urgent and emergency care tiering programme.

Thirdly, the Secretary of State is chairing weekly meetings with me and senior leaders to ensure that we are managing pressures across the entire system. Last week, he specially convened with trusts and told them to prioritise patient safety by focusing on key metrics, including improving emergency ambulance response times, addressing handover delays and tackling the longest waits in A&E. We have made it crystal clear that we do not want trusts to prioritise patients who can be seen and discharged more quickly over those with the greatest clinical need, because this Government will always prioritise people, not performance. This morning, the NHS published a letter outlining how it is prioritising patient safety.

Fourthly, I am taking steps to ensure that we get a clear picture of what is happening on the ground. I recently visited Newham hospital's A&E, Bristol Southmead hospital and the head offices of NHS England to see the aforementioned operational control centre, where it receives data in real time and responds to problems as they emerge. Fifthly, we launched a national communication campaign in the autumn to encourage people across the country to take their winter vaccines, with a particular focus on people who are less likely to come forward.

That last point is essential, because the best and easiest way to keep people out of hospital this Christmas is to encourage them to come forward and get vaccinated. Last year, people who received a covid vaccine were half as likely to be admitted to hospital than those who did not. So far, we have delivered over 17 million flu jabs and 9.5 million covid jabs, and we have introduced the first ever public vaccination campaign for RSV, with over a million and counting vaccinations delivered to protect young babies and the elderly. In total, we have delivered nearly 28 million vaccinations for this winter, and I thank every person who has come forward to protect themselves and the vulnerable.

Now, I would like to speak directly to anyone who has not yet been vaccinated. No one wants to be separated from their family and stuck in hospital this Christmas, and there is a real risk that people may inadvertently take flu home to loved ones this year. Please protect yourself, your family and the NHS, and book that appointment today, because tomorrow is the last day you can book a vaccine through the NHS app or website, although after tomorrow there will be local solutions.

While we tackle winter pressures in the short term, we are fixing the foundations of our NHS with long-term reform. Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister spoke to the nation about our plan for change, and set out our ambitions for the health service over this Parliament. We will get a grip on waiting lists and return to 92% of patients waiting no longer than 18 weeks from referral to treatment by the end of this Parliament. We are also taking action on social care, introducing the largest

increase in the carer's allowance weekly earnings limit since 1976. We will ensure that carer's allowance meets its objectives, while reviewing unpaid carer's leave and looking at the benefits of introducing paid carer's leave.

We will publish an improved better care fund framework, using £9 billion of funding to provide better, more integrated health and social care for patients and people who draw on care. We are helping disabled people on low incomes adapt their homes through the disabled facilities grant. The Employment Rights Bill is already in Committee, laying the foundations for the first ever pay agreement for care workers as a first step towards building consensus on the long-term reform needed to create a national care service. By the end of our first year in government, we will deliver an extra 2 million operations, scans and appointments through innovation, investment in additional capacity and productivity gains.

We are sharing the best of the NHS with the rest of the NHS, with our Further Faster teams. These are teams of experts that are supporting 20 trusts with long waits to tackle waiting lists and increase productivity. They have been deployed to five trusts so far, and we are already seeing improvements—for example, in theatres. For this financial year, the Government have committed £12 billion more in everyday spending on health and social care than was planned by the last Government in the spring Budget.

We are giving our capital-starved NHS the funding it so badly lacked over the past decade, setting aside at least £1.5 billion next year, which will create additional capacity, including new surgical hubs and diagnostic scanners, and new beds across the estate. That will enable 30,000 additional procedures and over a million diagnostic tests as they come online. That is the difference that a Government of service make. We have also been clear that investment must come with reform. Lord Darzi has given us the diagnosis, and the cure can be found in shifting the NHS from treatment to prevention, hospital to home, and analogue to digital.

Harold Wilson once called himself an optimist who carries a raincoat. As someone who has worked in our NHS at this critical time, I am fully aware of the challenges we face and the effort required. I am making sure that we have a firm hold on problems in the short term, while we do the work of fixing the foundations of our NHS with long-term reform. Over the past 14 years, we have limped from one crisis to the next, improvising and making do with sticking plasters. It cannot go on. It is bad for patient care and it is totally demoralising for staff.

We are building a health service that is fit for the future, ready to face every winter with confidence, and we will publish our 10-year plan for health in the spring. Anyone who thinks that we cannot do it should remember: we have fixed the NHS before, and we will fix it again. The public rightly expect us to put an end to the annual winter crisis, and that is what we will deliver. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.24 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for early sight of her statement—as I have said before, it is typically courteous of her. I echo the gratitude that she expressed to those in our NHS,

[Edward Argar]

and also those in the social care workforce who will be working hard throughout the festive period. As she alluded to, the NHS is already feeling the pressure this winter. We know that winter is always tough for the NHS, irrespective of who is in government, but services are feeling the strain even earlier than in previous years. A tidal wave of flu infections has led to a 70% increase in hospital cases in just seven days, and the national medical director of the NHS has warned of a “quad-demic” of health emergencies as cases of covid, norovirus, RSV and winter flu are all on the rise.

Meanwhile, in October, the longest A&E waits of over 12 hours increased by over a quarter in just one month, reaching the third highest monthly figure since comparable records began in 2010. Of course, all that has come before the cold weather really hits and before more vulnerable pensioners are left in freezing homes, unable to put the heating on after the winter fuel payment was scrapped for a large number. What assessment has the Minister and the Department made of the potential impact of that on hospital admissions this winter?

In government, we recognised that the NHS faces unique challenges in winter. We also recognised, as I know the Minister does from our previous discussions, the importance of flow in the NHS, with all parts of the system working together. That is why last year we provided £200 million to boost NHS resilience specifically during the peak winter months, which was accompanied by £40 million to bolster social care capacity and improve discharges from hospital. That followed the £1 billion announced earlier that year to boost capacity by delivering 5,000 additional beds, 800 new ambulances and 10,000 virtual ward places.

The Secretary of State himself has admitted that there will almost certainly be a winter crisis. There have been warnings from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, the Royal College of Nursing and directors at NHS England. Yet in today’s statement, in contrast to the steps we took, we heard a lot about data, meetings and co-ordination, but very little in concrete terms to increase capacity specifically over the winter period. That will give scant reassurance to those working in the system or patients needing the system. In fact, earlier this year, the Secretary of State suggested that there would not be any specific new funding for the NHS to cope with winter pressures.

The Minister will know that I have tabled a number of written questions in recent days, met in many cases by what seems to be the standard DHSC response for named day questions of a holding answer. As the pressure continues to grow, I have a number of specific questions for the Minister while she is at the Dispatch Box. Will the NHS receive more resources specifically to increase bed and A&E capacity this winter? Are there enough hospital beds and ambulances for this winter, or is she taking steps to increase them? As of the 1st of the month, how many people who were medically fit to be discharged had not been, for a variety of other reasons?

I am grateful for the update that the Minister provided on winter vaccinations. What assessment has she made of the supply of the flu vaccine? There are some suggestions that pharmacies and others have run out and are waiting

for more deliveries. How many additional 111 and 999 call handlers have been recruited specifically for this winter?

We talked briefly about the need for the system to work as a whole. In that context, what is the impact of national insurance contributions on hospices, social care and GPs? The Secretary of State told the Health and Social Care Committee this morning that hospices would get an update from him before Christmas, but at Prime Minister’s questions in response to the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister appeared to say that it will be after Christmas. Can the Minister clarify that for the House, because it is an important point?

Finally, what meetings has the Secretary of State personally had with Julian Redhead and Sarah-Jane Marsh, the NHS winter leads, and when was the first of those meetings specifically on this subject? I am very happy for him to write to me if that is easier, given the complexity.

As seasonal flu piles yet more pressure on NHS systems, it is more important than ever that it gets the resources and support that it needs. There are many promises of reform, but the NHS needs an immediate capacity boost in beds over winter. So far, the Government have kicked reform into the long grass in favour of yet more consultation, and their preparations for winter have lacked the urgency and focus that patients and NHS staff demand. In government, the Conservatives always put extra support in place to keep the NHS going through the tough winter period, boosting capacity and increasing support. This Government need to get a grip and do the same.

Karin Smyth: I will do my best to address that range of questions. First, as even a stopped clock is right once—[*Interruption.*] Yes, twice. On that basis, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. On correspondence and answers to parliamentary questions, again, the situation we inherited is not satisfactory. I apologise to all Members who are waiting for correspondence—it is something we are taking a grip of. We want to respond positively to questions. The Conservatives did not; we will make sure that starts to happen.

On capacity in the system, again, I remind Members that we came into office in July, which is one quarter of the way through the planning and financial year. We very rapidly looked at the plans that were baked in by the previous Government—I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman was in the Ministry of Justice at the time, not the Health and Social Care Department—to see whether they were fit for purpose. We wanted to make sure we brought stability to the system. There are, in fact, more beds currently available in the system than last year. If there is a need to increase capacity due to a likely cold snap, the system is absolutely ready to respond in its usual way. That is why we are meeting weekly.

On meetings with clinical and managerial colleagues at NHS England—who, frankly, I see more often than many members of my own family—I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we started those meetings immediately. I would have to check the exact date, but it was certainly in the summer. I have had fortnightly meetings since September, which, as I said, we can move to monthly meetings, chaired by the Secretary of State. We began getting a grip from day one, knowing that winter was coming, which is why I am monitoring the situation

weekly. It is also why we visited the operational centre, to understand in real time what is happening across every single system and every single trust—be that ambulance issues or problems at the front end and in A&E. The one question I do not directly have the answer to is what the daily figures are; I will try to get those figures to the right hon. Gentleman later.

We all know that waiting for discharge to assess is a massive problem. That is why, as I said in my statement, we want to take a grip of the better care fund, to ensure it works better and to stabilise the social care system. I am not particularly versed in issues on supply, so I apologise if that is wrong. We will certainly get back to the right hon. Gentleman on that matter, because we want people to be taking the vaccinations where necessary.

I can confirm that we want an announcement on hospices before Christmas. On winter fuel and its impact, as Opposition Members know, we will continue to monitor the impact of all situations on individuals to ensure they are supported in the community. We urge people to make sure they access pension credit. *[Interruption.]* I have just addressed that, but if I have missed anything, I will come back to it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite York's new emergency department, a consultant has described to me the situation in emergency medicine, where patients are waiting for days to be discharged and 50 patients are waiting to be placed on wards. We know we have inherited a broken NHS. Will the Minister say what she is doing first to enable primary care to pull more patients out of emergency medicine, in order to see people in the community, and secondly to invest in social care, which will clearly address some of the backlog and the logjam in patient flows?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend's comments reinforce how much pressure, we understand, is front facing. A&E is demonstrative of the overall pressure in the system, not just at discharge but, as she rightly says, in primary care. We took action in the summer to improve primary care, increasing the number of GPs available in the system. It is absolutely critical that primary care community services are integral to winter planning at a local level. That is what we expect from every single system. We will continue to monitor that over the winter period and into the spring. If those services are not involved in planning for any particular systems, enabling them to monitor the surge and flow of people, we very much want to understand how that is working.

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

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I express my thanks and those of my Lib Dem colleagues to everyone working over the Christmas period to keep people healthy and safe. Preparedness for winter is absolutely critical for our health and care system, and a quick look at what happened last year shows us why. Ambulances across England collectively spent a total of 112 years waiting outside hospitals to hand patients over, and a quarter of a million people waited more than 12 hours to be seen. Every winter we are warned of a winter crisis. Under the Conservatives, crisis became the norm not just in winter but all year round.

This year is very concerning so far. A&Es have overflowed through spring, summer and autumn. At my local hospital trust, Shrewsbury and Telford, one in three ambulances have had to wait more than an hour to hand over patients, while patients with devastating cancer diagnoses have had to wait months for crucial scan results. Across England, more than 7 million people are on waiting lists. Meanwhile, I am afraid, we have not heard enough from the Government on fixing one of the root causes of this crisis, which is our broken social care system.

The scale of the crisis is demonstrated by the challenges facing ambulance services across the country at the moment. October—before the winter—was the third worst month ever for handover delays at West Midlands ambulance service, which covers my constituency. The equivalent of 130 ambulance crews are out of action, waiting every single day. Now these overstretched ambulance services are formally changing their advice to reflect the pressure they are under. At times of peak demand, even category 2 patients—those suffering a heart attack or a stroke—will be asked to make their own way to a hospital. People in North Shropshire have long had to put up with some of the worst ambulance waits in the country, and they have come to harm as a result. It may no longer be the case that they can rely on an ambulance arriving.

Action is urgently needed to prevent more preventable deaths this winter. I am sure the Minister shares my alarm that ambulances may not be reaching people facing life-threatening situations. If she does, will she commit today to the Government tackling the handover delays paralysing the ambulance service by accepting Liberal Democrat proposals to make a £1.5 billion fund to provide more staffed beds, and by agreeing to urgent cross-party talks to fix the crisis in social care?

Karin Smyth: I think I have addressed the Government's plans on social care. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point on ambulance delays, which we know to be a problem, and particularly so in the west midlands. That is one of the things I have asked the system to look at particularly, so that the Government and hon. Members can better understand the particular problems in their particular systems. We know that ambulance and handover delays are a particular problem in some systems. We are making sure that clinical and managerial leads from NHS England are visiting those systems and that they are understanding in depth the process issues in some places, where they may not be adopting the best practice that can be learned from others.

We need to roll out best practice across the country. When the Secretary of State and I visited the operational centre of the London ambulance service, we sat in on some hear-and-treat calls; in dealing with people in mental health crises, in particular, some places are doing that better than others. Those are the sorts of examples we want to learn from. I absolutely hear what the hon. Lady says about the unacceptable delays in particular parts of the country. That is very much on our priority list.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call a member of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Last week, I visited Basildon hospital, which is relied on by my constituents and people across Essex. Staff in the emergency department

[Jen Craft]

told me that they were operating under intense pressure all year round, and that it is indeed winter all year for them. That is due to a lack of beds, the terrible condition of parts of the estate and inadequate primary care services, meaning that people turn up at the ED when they should be somewhere more appropriate. What steps is the Minister taking to turn the page on 14 years of decline, and to ensure that Basildon and hospitals across the country have the resources and structures they need to better manage seasonal and year-round pressure?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend has already been a fantastic advocate for her local NHS services. Like the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), my hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the acute pressures all year round. We did not always have winter crises under the last Labour Government. It was tough; I worked during some of that time, and it did happen, but getting used to such levels of bed occupancy and pressure in the system all year round is a direct legacy of the Conservatives and what they did to the NHS, particularly with the Lansley reforms, and their refusal to take a grip of it. This matter of a summer crisis going into a winter crisis is a real problem. That is why we are committed to these short-term measures to stabilise and support the system over the winter. However, as I said in my statement, we will also look at medium and longer-term reform so that we do not have to revisit this scenario year on year.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Last Friday, I visited Sherwood Pharmacy in Abingdon. Ben, who owns it, told me that local pharmacies stand ready to help. In fact, they are more than keen to help, but there are two things that he needs from the Government. First, there needs to be a real push for GPs to refer people to pharmacies, in particular for vaccinations, so that we are not collecting patients in one already overstretched part of the system and they can do what they do best. Secondly, there needs to be a general plea to the public that they can go to their pharmacies for those things. I note that in her statement the Minister did not mention pharmacies once. Let us be honest, this question is not going to do it either. How do we ensure that the message—"Go to your pharmacy and get vaccinated, you can do it faster there"—gets out there this winter?

Karin Smyth: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her point. She is right that I did not mention pharmacies, which was an omission on my part. We are running an advertising campaign, "Think Pharmacy First", to ensure people use pharmacies. She is absolutely right that they stand ready. I will visit mine over the next few days to make sure I am vaccinated. Their support, working with primary care, is critical. Again, in some places relationships are working well and pharmacies support people in the community—that is apparent in the statistics. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that that works better, as part of our long-term reforms.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call a member of the Select Committee.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Last week, Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS foundation trust's bed occupancy was at 99.6%. Some 20.1% of those beds, because of the failure of social healthcare and community care, were taken up by people who could be treated elsewhere. All I want for Christmas is a reassurance that, next Christmas and next winter, social care will be on a more secure footing.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight those shocking levels of bed occupancy. As I said earlier, running consistently at that high level of occupancy is something we should never have got used to. That discharge rate is demoralising for staff, very bad for patients and a sign of the pressure in the system. We absolutely must ensure the system is incentivised and works properly to make our hospital-to-community commitment, one of our three shifts, operate in practice. People do not want to be in hospital when they do not need to be and it is not the best place for them to be. We will be saying more about that in the new year.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): We hear today about a massive backlog at the Department for Work and Pensions in processing pension credit and winter fuel payment claims. Bearing in mind that cold homes increase winter deaths and hospital admissions, and that we are debating winter preparedness today, what discussions has the Minister had with the DWP to ensure that those in my constituency who are waiting for their winter fuel payments will receive them before the Christmas break? Will she commit to publishing a full impact assessment of that decision on the NHS?

Karin Smyth: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. We have discussed this issue a number of times in this place. We absolutely understand the impact of cold and heat on the system and on people. It is something we need to address more generally. She will be aware that discussions on this issue are continuing with the DWP. If there are specific examples she wants to raise with me or the Department, I am very happy to look at them.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome today's statement and take a moment to thank emergency services in Harlow and across the country who are giving up spending time with their families at Christmas to keep us all safe. East of England ambulance service has set up a new process to support paramedics and Princess Alexandra hospital, which will give them a direct line to a GP who can triage patients and send them to the right department straight away. What is the Department of Health and Social Care doing to work with ambulance services across the country to learn from that and share good practice?

Karin Smyth: Again, my hon. Friend is already representing the people of his constituency so well by getting to the heart of what is happening on the ground, learning it for himself and bringing such examples to the House. He is absolutely right that there are such examples across the country, working differently in different systems, which are challenging other systems to look at that practice. That is why we say we want to bring the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS. That is exactly what we mean. I am confident in the work happening centrally at NHS England. It is learning

from such examples and wants to go around the country to ensure that we spread those sorts of ideas to other places. We are looking at them all very closely.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Andrew George, a member of the Select Committee.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): In the far west of Cornwall, in a medical emergency we cannot look for additional support from the north, west or south, because it is sea. The urgent treatment centre at Penzance hospital was closed two and a half years ago, under the Conservatives, adding pressure to the only emergency department for the next 100 miles, which is in Truro, and the out-of-hours doctor service has no doctors. The Minister mentioned in her statement that the NHS urgent and emergency care tiering programme is able to help. Will she use her influence to reopen the urgent treatment centre so that we can have a 24/7 emergency service in the far west of Cornwall?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to make commitments from the Dispatch Box, which I am not going to do. He makes a very serious point. The sea is an issue for many hon. Members—beautiful though it is, it has an impact on the ability of the system to manage different areas. Looking at different solutions for populations such as those he represents—be that 111, hear and treat systems, more use of technology, and pharmacies and community out-of-hospital care—is exactly what we think is the right way to go in the next few years, as part of the long-term plan. That may or may not be a building with services. We need to look at that in the round and learn from what works well in different sorts of systems.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The questions seem to be getting longer and longer, as do the responses. Let us try to keep the questions on point, and no doubt the answers will be the same.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): When I started working in public health, winter pressures were just that: seasonal flu and extra hip fractures. Under the Conservatives, winters started getting longer and longer. How will our 10-year plan ensure that seasonal pressures actually become seasonal and manageable again?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We need to get back to normal and we need to recognise that there are different things happening to the system at different times of the year, much of which is predictable. We need to ensure that the system is strong enough to be able to cope with those differences.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): As we come into the height of winter, will the Minister join me in thanking all the amazing people on the frontline who are diagnosing, treating and caring for people right across the country? With multiple infectious disease challenges, the impact of cold and extreme weather, and the risk of falls and accidents, will the Government please now rethink their policies on winter fuel cuts and national insurance rises, which will exacerbate the situation and compromise the delivery of primary healthcare, social care and hospice care?

Karin Smyth: I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking everyone who works in the system. As I said, the NHS is getting £12 billion more this year from this Government than it had from the previous Government in the spring Budget. We are now focused on ensuring that money is used properly.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Let me take this opportunity to thank healthcare workers in Bracknell Forest, who will be working so hard across the Christmas period to keep patients safe this winter. Does the Minister agree that we must ensure that we have not only the right investment in our health services but the right reforms, so that we can fix the broken NHS and get it back on its feet?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to make sure that taxpayers' money is used efficiently and effectively in the right places for the right treatment at the right time. That is why we are looking at our long-term plan. That is why we want to stabilise the system, so we do not have to keep coming back here year after year with a so-called winter crisis.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I note that the Minister thinks that the absence of the word "pharmacy" from her statement was an omission. I wonder whether she also thinks that the absence of the words "general practice" was an omission. I have been visiting some of my local GP surgeries, and one told me that, as a result of the NIC rises, it is facing charges of £40,000. That equates to a staff member, so it will have to consider laying off a member of staff. Will the Minister please explain how GPs laying off staff will help them to cope with the winter crisis?

Karin Smyth: As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, I cannot talk about individual cases from the Dispatch Box, but we will be making announcements on that subject very shortly.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, and also thank my recent former NHS colleagues, especially those in Sunderland, for what they will be doing over the winter. The Minister has rightly highlighted unacceptable levels of bed occupancy as we go into winter; we know that as bed occupancy increases to unacceptable levels, there is a rise in patient safety risks. What assessment has she made of the patient safety monitoring regime over the winter, linked to those risks?

Karin Smyth: We have made it absolutely clear, as did the NHS in its letter today, that patient safety is the watchword this winter. We have targets in relation to monitoring the performance of the system, but we absolutely want to ensure that patients are kept safe as we go through the next few months.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Yesterday I spoke to an elderly gentleman who was taking himself off to his local pharmacy to receive the RSV jab, but because he was over 80 he was going to pay more than £200 for it. Will the Minister please tell us how much the RSV jab costs the Department when it is free for 75 to 80-year-olds, and how much guidance or limitation it places on the profit that can be taken by chemists who give it to people who are over 80?

Karin Smyth: I think the hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot do that from the Dispatch Box, but my officials will have heard his request and what he has said about that specific case, and I will ensure that he receives an answer.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the hard-working NHS staff in Norwich and in Norfolk as a whole. Norfolk County Council has used artificial intelligence to identify more than 1,000 people who are risk of being admitted to hospital because of falls this Christmas. Does the Minister welcome that use of AI, and will she expand on how we are using technology, now and in the future, to help alleviate winter pressures?

Karin Smyth: I do not wish to test your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, but good falls practice has not been prioritised over the past decade, and the failure to prioritise it and continue the work that I know was being done many years ago is yet another testament to the failure of the Conservative party. My hon. Friend is right to refer to the way we can use AI to help the system to improve, so that this hugely preventable problem, which is so damaging to the elderly in particular, no longer occurs.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Winter pressures come around every year for all sorts of reasons. The difference this year was the political choice to take the winter fuel payment away from millions of pensioners. Worse still, the 44,000 pensioners living with a terminal illness will lose that payment. I cannot believe that a Minister as diligent as the hon. Lady has not carried out an impact assessment of the cost to the NHS of people being left in cold homes. My right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar)—the shadow Secretary of State—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) asked for such an assessment. May I give the Minister another chance to commit to publishing it?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman is wholly wrong to say that winter crises happen under every Government in every year. They happened, and became a fact of the NHS, under his party's Government. The key difference this year, which the Conservatives will still not address, is the fact that doctors are not on strike. Doctors are working in the system, caring for patients and doing their job, because this Government, on day one and week one and week four, delivered the negotiated settlement with the doctors. We cannot run the NHS and we cannot manage a winter crisis without doctors in the frontline, and that is where they are. That is what the difference is.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is great to be going into the winter for the first time in four years without doctors being on strike. Last week I visited the new emergency medical receiving unit at Stoke Mandeville hospital, a 21-bed facility to provide quicker care for patients who come in from ambulances and as a result of GP referrals but require only short admissions. The early results look very promising. Does the Minister agree that we must take these pockets of good practice from across the NHS and ensure that other parts of the NHS learn from and adopt them to help us get through this winter and future winters?

Karin Smyth: I commend my hon. Friend for, as a new MP, getting to grips in detail with what is happening in her local system and challenging that system, while also giving us those examples of good practice so that we can all learn from them. As she says, many parts of the NHS across the country want to learn from them, and we want to ensure that they are mainstreamed where possible. There are different solutions for different systems, but she is absolutely right to highlight that one.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a member of the University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

The upcoming rise in national insurance contributions could cost our GP surgeries the equivalent of more than 2 million appointments a year. General practice is the cornerstone of the NHS; it is our front door. Many GPs in my constituency have written to me to express their serious concerns. Does the Minister recognise that hiking costs for family doctors will only worsen pressures on our hospitals, pushing more people towards A&E and preventing many from receiving the care they need?

Karin Smyth: We recognise all the costs to GPs, as contractors, and to many other parts of the system, as we have said many times in the House. We also recognise the improvements that we have made to the system by improving the number of GPs and funding the NHS by more than the last Government did. We will continue to look at that in the round to ensure that we have a sustainable system.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): One of the main reasons I became a politician was the fact that my wife is a midwife. She would come home night after night complaining bitterly about staff shortages on the wards. Can the Minister reassure me that maternity services will receive all the funds they need over the winter, and will she join me in thanking all those maternity staff who work so hard over Christmas, over the new year, and all year round?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many tragedies happen over the Christmas period—my own father died on 23 December. Those staff members go above and beyond to help people at difficult times, but also at times of great joy—babies do not wait for Father Christmas, do they?—and my hon. Friend is right to commend midwives and everyone else who is working at this time. We know that maternity services are particularly stretched across most of the country. Those midwives are doing a tremendous job in keeping the system working, and doing the critically important job of supporting women at a mostly joyous but sometimes very difficult time.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): At the start of this week, 300 patients were ready to go home from my local NHS hospital trust in Sussex. That bears out the statistic in Lord Darzi's report that 13% of patients are medically fit for discharge. I am really concerned that we have now reached a point with winter pressures where corridor waits are normalised, not only in A&E departments but in the case of initiatives such as continuous flow models, with corridor trolley waits being pushed into regular wards. It is unacceptable that this has become normalised.

Will the Minister expand on her comments about the national care service? When will the plans be published? Will the Government work with us on a cross-party basis, and why did this work not begin sooner?

Karin Smyth: As I said in my statement, we have begun plans to stabilise the workforce and the employment Bill is going through the House, so I do not agree with the hon. Lady on that point. We know that it will take a long time, and we will of course be working with colleagues to ensure that we do develop that national care service.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Let me begin by echoing the Minister's words and thanking the fantastic NHS workers and those in the wraparound service who provide a vital service in Portsmouth all year round, but particularly in winter. Let me also thank all the Members who turned up for the joint NHS consultation with me and with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan).

Unfortunately, owing to the scale of the damage done to the NHS by the last Government, our NHS providers have to make very difficult decisions at this time. Can the Minister reassure me and my constituents, that patient safety, and emergency services in particular, will be this Government's first priority during the winter?

Karin Smyth: I am very pleased to reiterate that safety is the watchword for winter, as it is all year round, and to stress that that is why NHS England wrote about it today. I commend my hon. Friend for meeting her constituents locally, and I urge all Members to do the same. We are getting some fantastic ideas from staff and from patients about how to reform and change the system for the long term.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): One in four people trying to contact their GPs last month were unable to get a same-day appointment, and one in 20 could not get through to their GPs at all. We know that these people end up in A&Es up and down the country, and that hospitals are already buckling under the strain. What is the Minister doing to improve support for GPs and frontline services during this winter crisis, especially while they navigate the challenges of the employer NICs rises?

Karin Smyth: I refer back to what I said in my statement about how we are supporting the system. We absolutely understand the importance of primary care, and of using 111 to make sure that people are directed towards getting the right care in the right place. We know that the system is under pressure, and we will continue to do all we can to support it in the longer term, as well as in the short term.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I recently visited Northumbria specialist emergency care hospital in Cramlington in my constituency. I met the staff there, who shared their concerns about winter pressures. Every year, they closely track the flu seasons in Australia, given that the patterns that emerge there are often what follows here. They are extremely concerned about what we are going into this winter. What steps has the Department taken to ensure that as many people as possible are vaccinated this winter?

Karin Smyth: I am working very closely with the UK Health Security Agency to make sure that, week on week, we are aware of the movement of different diseases and viruses through the system, and we will continue to publicise the campaign to get people vaccinated. Anything that hon. Members can do to support that campaign, and to make sure that people support themselves and their loved ones, will be gratefully received by the entire system. The campaign is something that everyone can get behind.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): While we all pay tribute to the NHS staff who work over Christmas, we should remember that they are not only missing Christmas with their families, but putting their own health at risk in caring for us.

On Monday, Winchester hospital declared a critical incident, saying that it could admit no more patients and asking people to seek treatment elsewhere. For years, the chief executive officer of the hospital has been requesting 160 extra social care packages, because the lack of social care is stopping the flow of patients through the hospital. She said that providing such packages is the single biggest thing that would help deal with the winter crisis. In September, Winchester hospital applied for winter crisis funding to put an urgent treatment centre on the front of its A&E department to help deal with the anticipated extra caseload. It is now December, and the hospital has still not heard whether it will get the funding. Given the number of critical incidents being declared, will the Minister meet me and the CEO to discuss how we can support the hospital through this situation, and how we can avoid having a planned crisis next winter?

Karin Smyth: As I said earlier, different systems have different issues. Funding has been allocated in advance to the NHS so that it understands which systems require funding, and that has now been baked in for this year. I cannot address the hon. Gentleman's points directly from the Dispatch Box, but I am very happy for officials to take note of them and to check with the system on what is happening in his particular community. Obviously, it is important that Winchester hospital works closely with its local authority with regard to discharge. We want to improve the better care fund, and I am sure that he will work with the local authority and his hospital to make sure that it works better.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I declare an interest: I am a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital, and I have a family member who has shares in a medical company.

The Royal Berkshire hospital has experienced its highest increase in emergency department attendances as we head into the winter period, yet the estate of the Royal Berks is crumbling, out of date and not fit for purpose. People with infectious diseases, such as flu, covid and norovirus, cannot easily be isolated due to poor air circulation, which only makes the situation worse. When will the Royal Berkshire hospital be rebuilt, and will the Minister visit it to see the full extent of our challenges?

Finally, may I wish the Secretary of State and the Minister a merry Christmas? They should take a short break but come back quickly to continue to clear up the Conservatives' massive failures on the NHS.

Karin Smyth: Hopefully, we will make announcements on the Royal Berkshire hospital and others as soon as possible in the new year, as I know that this issue is of great concern to all hon. Members. We know that the system will be under pressure, and we thank everyone working in it. We want to make sure that everyone keeps well, and I will take this opportunity to thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I am looking forward to returning here in January, hopefully to answer more questions. I thank hon. Members for their questions this afternoon.

Copyright and Artificial Intelligence

3.4 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): And now for something completely different! With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement regarding our launch of a public consultation on copyright and artificial intelligence.

The United Kingdom has a proud tradition of creativity and technical innovation. From our film and television sectors to video games, publishing, music, design and fashion, our creative industries are a cornerstone of our economy and our creative identity. They bring £125 billion to the economy and employ over 2.3 million people. James Bond, the Beatles, Vivienne Westwood, Adele, “Vera”, Bridget Riley, “Tomb Raider”, the Sugababes, “Football Manager”, Paddington and Paul Smith are all part of an immensely valuable British industry.

The creative industries are central to our economic future, and we are determined to help them flourish. The same is true of artificial intelligence—both as an enabler of other industries, including the creative industries, and as a sector in its own right. The Government are determined to capitalise on the UK’s position of strength in the global AI sector and will soon publish the AI opportunities action plan, which will set out an ambitious road map to unlock AI’s transformative potential across our economy and public services.

Both the creative industries and AI sectors are at the heart of our industrial strategy, and they are also increasingly interlinked. AI is already being used across the creative industries, from music and film production to publishing, architecture and design; it has transformed post-production, for instance. As of September 2024, more than 38% of creative industries businesses said that they have used AI technologies, with nearly 50% using AI to improve their business operations.

Strong copyright laws have been the bedrock of the creative industries, but as things stand, the application of UK copyright law to the training of AI models is fiercely disputed. Rights holders, including musicians, record labels, artists and news publishers, are finding it difficult to control the use of their works to train AI models, and they want and need a greater ability to manage such activity and to be paid for it. Likewise, AI developers, including UK-based start-ups, are finding it difficult to navigate copyright law and complain that the legal uncertainty means that they are unable to train leading models in the UK.

The status quo cannot continue. It risks limiting investment, innovation and growth in the creative industries, the AI sector and the wider economy. Neither side can afford to wait for expensive litigation—either here or in the US—to clarify the law, not least because courts in different jurisdictions may come to different conclusions and individual cases may not provide clarity across the sector. Nor can we simply rely on voluntary co-operation. That is why we think the Government must take proactive and thoughtful action that works for all parties.

The consultation published yesterday sets out clearly that the Government’s objectives on this issue are threefold: to enhance rights holders’ control of their material and their ability to be paid for its use, to support wide access to high-quality material to drive the development of leading AI models in the UK, and to secure greater transparency from AI developers in order to build trust

with creators, creative industries and consumers. In short, we want to provide legal certainty for all and to secure enhanced licensing of content.

There are three key aspects to our consultation. The first is increased transparency from AI developers. That includes the content that they have used in training their large language models, how they acquire it, and any content generated by their models. In other words, consumers should know whether a book or song has been generated by a person or by artificial intelligence, and whose content helped generate it in the first place. The second aspect is a new system of rights reservation, whereby rights holders can withhold their content from being used unless and until it has been licensed. The third is an exception to copyright law for text and data mining where rights holders have licensed their content or otherwise chosen not to reserve their rights. That would improve access to content by AI developers, while allowing rights holders to control how their content is used for AI training.

Those measures are contingent upon each other. Progressed together, we believe this package of measures could enhance the ability of rights holders to protect their material and seek payment for its use through increased licensing, while also enabling AI developers to train leading models in the UK in full compliance with UK law. It will, however, only work if there is a proper system of rights reservation in place. I urge everyone to read and respond to the consultation document and to examine the safeguards we are proposing for rights holders. I would especially urge both AI developers and rights holders to work with us to identify a simple, practical, proportionate and effective technical system of rights reservation, without which the whole package will not work.

We are conscious that the UK does not operate in a hermetically sealed bubble, and this provides its own challenges. If we were to adopt a too tight regime based on proactive explicit permission, the danger is that international developers would continue to train their models using UK content accessed overseas but may not be able to deploy them in the UK. As AI becomes increasingly powerful and widely adopted globally, this could significantly disadvantage sectors across our economy, including the creative industries, and sweep the rug from underneath British AI developers. That is why, as well taking this approach in the UK, we are committed to international engagement and recognise the importance of international alignment.

This consultation is a joint effort between the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Intellectual Property Office, and between the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), who has responsibility for AI, and me, with responsibility for the creative industries.

This is not an academic exercise. The consultation is absolutely clear that we will not implement these changes unless and until we are confident that we have a practical, practicable and effective plan that meets our objectives of enhancing rights holder control, providing legal certainty around AI firms' access to content, and providing transparency for rights holders and AI developers of all sizes. My fellow Minister and I will be engaging directly with a wide range of people in an attempt to find practical and technical solutions to this question.

Many people have called this an existential question for our creative industries. They are right. We therefore see this consultation as a pivotal opportunity to ensure that sustained growth and innovation for the UK's AI sector continues to benefit creators, businesses and consumers alike while preserving the values and principles that make our creative industries so unique. We believe that there is a potential win-win solution, and that the UK, with its strong traditions of copyright and technological innovation, is in a unique place to deliver it. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister, Dr Ben Spencer.

3.12 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement.

Britain is a world leader in the creative industries, from music to art to literature to our free and independent media. I say as a shadow Science, Innovation and Technology Minister that, while we need science to live, the arts make life worth living. The UK also has a world leading tech sector. The invention of generative artificial intelligence provides many opportunities, but particularly for the creative industries the data mining behind AI models can breach copyright. That presents challenges around authenticity when they are used to mimic artists and creative works, and there is a lack of legal clarity around the status of computer-generated work. We must tackle and respond to those issues.

Britain's creative industries employ nearly 2.4 million people and contribute £125 billion to our economy, but we must also recognise that we are part of a global technological ecosystem and if we fall behind in supporting our artificial intelligence industry it will move elsewhere. Let us be clear: the genie is out of the bottle and the world is scrabbling to respond to it. As always there is a balance to be struck to ensure we take the opportunity on offer to revolutionise working practices and to deliver productivity through technological innovation, so we welcome work and investigation in this area on both the role of regulation and the options available.

Given the delays in the Minister bringing this work forward, he must recognise that this is a complex area to regulate, especially given the international and domestic interconnectivities. Sadly, rather than taking an open position as an honest broker, it is clear today that the Government have already picked one side in this debate. The Minister's preference for a data mining opt-out for the creative industries will place extra burdens on creators to protect their intellectual property. Given the magnitude of the impact of his proposals, why has he released this consultation now, just before the Christmas break, and why is it limited to only 10 weeks? So when I am benefiting from UK creative talent over the Christmas period, whether listening to the Sugababes or watching Daniel Craig as James Bond—Bond was blond—the creative sector will be responding to a consultation that the livelihoods of those who work in the sector depend on. Will the Minister extend the consultation? Can the Minister explain how the opt-out will ensure protection to creators? And in forming this position, how many times has he already met representatives from the technology and creative sectors both domestically and internationally?

[Dr Ben Spencer]

The Minister should be well aware, following five months of falling business confidence, that one thing that businesses dislike is uncertainty, but this announcement of an opt-out represents nothing but uncertainty for the creative industries. Rather than prioritising their need to be seen to be doing something, the Government need to start learning to do things right.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call our very own James Bond, Minister Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Fortunately, I asked ChatGPT what the shadow Minister would ask me and it was pretty much right—although some of the questions from ChatGPT were rather more to the point. I will deal with the serious points he made.

First, the shadow Minister raised the point about mimicking artists. That is one of the things we are consulting on. There is a legitimate question about whether we should take further action in this country. Tennessee has acted: it has got its ELVIS Act—the Ensuring Likeness Voice and Image Security Act. California and a couple of other states in the United States of America have acted on this already, and whether we should move in that direction is a perfectly legitimate question.

Likewise, the shadow Minister referred to computer-generated works. He will probably know that under section 9(3) of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 there is provision that seems to guarantee the right for computer-generated art to be copyright-protected. That is not the case in most other countries, and it could be argued that developments in recent copyright law on the nature of originality would suggest that, unless a human being is directly involved in the creation of the work, there should not be copyright protection. We have suggested a direction of travel to get rid of section 9(3) of the Act.

The shadow Minister said that we have delayed bringing this forward, but I merely point out that for quite a long time the previous Government said that they would bring forward a voluntary system, bringing the two sides together. Nothing whatsoever came from that, so I am afraid that feels a bit of a cheat.

What I want to contest is the idea that we have sided with one or the other. There is a legitimate problem, which is that AI companies and the creative industries are at loggerheads in the courts in several different jurisdictions on several different points which are moot at the moment. We do not think that simply standing by the present situation will suffice because the danger is that in two or three years' time all UK content will have been scraped by one or other AI developing company somewhere else in the world if there is no legal clarity in the UK. I would like to be able to bring all that home so that AI operators can work in this country with security under the law, using UK copyright that has been licensed and paid for, because that is another potential revenue stream for creators in this country.

The shadow Minister asks about extending the consultation. I am not going to extend the consultation. We want to crack on with this piece of work. Only two minutes earlier in his speech he said that we were

delaying bringing it forward and then he said we should delay further. It is time that we seize hold of this. I certainly will meet with a large number of people. My fellow Minister my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North and I have met many different organisations and we will be providing a list because it will be in our transparency returns published soon, and the number must run to dozens if not hundreds. Of course, there are differing views, but I make it absolutely clear that the three measures we are talking about—the transparency on inputs and outputs that AI developers will have to provide, the provisions for creators to reserve their rights, and the exemption for data mining for commercial purposes—are contingent upon each other. We will not move forward with such a package unless there is a technical solution to the question of how people can reserve their rights.

At the weekend, I looked online to see what it would be like to try to reserve rights, by pretending to be various musicians and artists. At present, it is phenomenally difficult and complicated—other Members may have questions about this—and that must change. There must be a proper rights reservation system that is easy to use, practicable and enables creators, either individually or collectively, to assert and maintain control of their rights.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The UK is in a unique position—second in the world in the creative industries, and in the top three for AI innovation—so getting the right solution to protect and support our intellectual property, while supporting and incentivising AI innovation, is uniquely important to our cultural and economic life.

I am a former regulator and chartered engineer, so I welcome the Minister's decision to go with regulatory technology as the solution, and to challenge the tech sector to come up with technology to ensure we can have both the reservation of rights and the transparency of inputs to large language models, both of which are critical.

The tech sector too often spends less time protecting people and property than maximising profit, but the language of the consultation is a bit vague. The Minister talked about arriving at a plan rather than a solution, so will he make it absolutely clear that any text and data mining exemption is contingent on the technology being deliverable, implementable and workable, and that if the technology fails, the exemption fails?

Chris Bryant: I welcome the Chair of the Select Committee to her place. She is 100% right that we cannot have the text and data mining exemption for commercial purposes unless there is a proper rights reservation system in place. I do not know whether she has looked at rights reservation, but it is terribly complicated. People can use the robots exclusion protocol, but it is rather out of date and is avoided by many players in the market. It is very complicated and applies only to a person's own website, whereas their creative input might not be on their personal website—it might be on somebody else's.

I tried to create a Bridget Riley using an AI bot over the weekend. The bot had obviously trained itself on some Bridget Riley works, but it was a shockingly bad Bridget Riley—it was nowhere near. I wanted to ask whether it had used Bridget Riley's work to learn how to make a Bridget Riley-like picture and, if so, whether Bridget Riley received any compensation. Bridget Riley could use another website, haveibeentrained.com, if she wanted, but it is phenomenally complicated. That is precisely what must change. The AI companies must come up with a technical solution, whether they produce music, text or whatever. Without that, we will not be able to progress.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is always easier if the Minister looks at the Chair, so we can ensure that we are sticking to time limits.

I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpden and Berkhamsted) (LD): The UK can and should be a global leader in AI innovation, and I welcome this consultation. Investment and support for technological innovation will be a crucial pillar of growing our economy and solving the problems of today and tomorrow. Likewise, our world-leading creative industries must remain a growth priority.

In my constituency, I see the invaluable contribution that the film industry makes to the local and national economy, driving growth while producing top-quality content. We might not have James Bond, but we have had “Robin Hood” and “Deadpool”, and “Wicked” was recently filmed just over the border.

The creative industries have been clear that failure to apply existing copyright laws to AI model training presents an existential threat. They are being asked to allow their output to be used to train models that could be in direct competition with them. We must get this balance right.

There is no uncertainty in existing law. UK law is totally clear that commercial organisations must license the data they use to train their large language models. The announcement that the Government favour a text and data mining exemption will be deeply concerning to the creative industries. The issue was thought to be settled under the previous Government, so what assessment have the Government made of the likely impact of their favoured option on the creative industries? The expectation seems to be that small businesses in the creative industry should welcome an opt-out system in exchange for vague commitments to transparency, so will the Minister lay out what successful, workable examples of an opt-out system he has looked at? Can he give us examples of where this approach has successfully protected creatives? Why has the option of an opt-in not been included in the consultation?

As has been said previously, the creative industry adds £125 billion a year in gross value to the economy and goes hand in hand with our digital economy. It is essential that the Government support AI innovation, but that cannot come at the cost of our world-leading creative industry.

Chris Bryant: Madam Deputy Speaker, I will look at you to make sure that I do not go over time, but I would point out that “Wicked” is far too long a movie.

I make it clear that I do not think there is a complete separation between AI and the creative industries. AI is a creative industry in many regards. There is an important collaboration between the two, and even Sir Paul McCartney has said that he has used AI to help him write some of his most recent work.

The hon. Lady says this was all settled under the previous Government, but nothing in this territory was settled under the previous Government. It was simply left hanging in the air, which is why we are trying to take action. She asks whether there are any successful examples of opt-outs. No, there are not. Precisely the point I am trying to make is that, at the moment, it is remarkably difficult for individuals and organisations—whether a record label, an individual artist or photographer, or whoever—to protect their rights. That is what needs to change.

There has been some licensing. Some newspapers have licensed content with OpenAI. Sony Music has written to all the different AI operators to say that all the work that it protects is copyrighted and not to be used. But I am not sure that such piecemeal processes are enough to build the control we want for rights holders, while enabling AI to develop fruitfully in the UK.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I welcome this consultation and my hon. Friend's recognition that neither we nor this stuff exists in a bubble. What does he make of the NO FAKES—Nurture Originals, Foster Art, and Keep Entertainment Safe—Bill, currently in the US House of Representatives, which protects personality and likeness of human writers and artists against misappropriation?

The Minister says he is in meetings mode. Does he know what is happening with the consultation on live event ticketing? It would be great to meet him to discuss my private Member's Bill—the anti-Oasis-style scam, rip-off ticketing Bill—which is being squashed by Friday filibustering.

Chris Bryant: I think my hon. Friend, who is on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, took advantage of the change in the Chair to get away with asking a question that has absolutely nothing to do with this consultation. On live ticketing, I am absolutely certain that the Government will have something to say soon—the word “soon” means precisely what I choose it to mean.

On publicity rights, my hon. Friend is quite right that that is a significant question that we will ask during the consultation. There is an argument for bringing in legislation in the UK. California, as I said, has a digital replicas law and Tennessee has the ELVIS Act, which stands for eliminating limits on the voice's intrinsic sovereignty. I think that was an attempt to cram that into the word “Elvis”. She is right that the US Copyright Office is arguing for a federal digital replica law, and we might want to go down that route as well. I urge my hon. Friend and, perhaps, the Select Committee to consider that matter. They might like to provide some advice in response to the consultation as well.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am tempted to invite the Minister to consult the magnificent Taylor Swift who, apart from all her many other talents, has shown herself pretty shrewd when it comes to preserving the copyright of her material. He puts his

[Sir Julian Lewis]

finger on the key weakness in all this: no matter what sort of regime we set up, and no matter how many countries we try to get involved in this, surely it will only take one rogue jurisdiction to allow a machine to scrape from everybody else's material? Then, the internet's ability for everyone to access it will undermine the regime and, in that way, we face the danger that "Shake It Off" becomes "Rip It Off".

Chris Bryant: I disagree. I saw the right hon. Gentleman nodding earlier when I was talking about not wanting to pull the rug from under the feet of UK AI adopters. The UK is in a very specific position. We have probably the best copyright laws of any country because of the specific way in which they developed. It is partly thanks to Hogarth, Dickens and many others over the years that we have ended up with strong copyright legislation. We also have a strong body of intellectual property in this country, which is enormously valuable, potentially, to AI operators. We stand in a very specific position. There is an argument that AI can be trained elsewhere, in another jurisdiction, but the moment it is brought into the UK, it still falls under UK legislation.

The right hon. Gentleman is also right about this. I did not consult Taylor Swift, but I did ask an AI company to come up with a song in the manner of Adele.

"Oh, I still feel you deep in my soul,
Even though you left me out here on my own.
The love we had it's slipping through my hands,
But I can't forget, I still don't understand.
You're gone, but your memory's all I see,
And in the silence, it's you haunting me"—

Madam Deputy Speaker. [*Laughter.*] It is sort of Adele, but it is not Adele. Does Adele know that her material has been used? Does her record label know that her lyrics have been used to create that? It is sort of in the territory, but it is not right. I think we can get this right in the UK and provide leadership to the world. That is what we should strive for.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I will just make the point that I can see that this is very technical and complicated. It might require long answers, but I am not sure it required that level of input from not-Adele.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Can the Minister clarify the difference between his term "rights reservation" and previous reports of the Government's preference for an opt-out system? Those systems have already been called out and considered unjust by our creators. There are AI leaders who recognise the need for fair licensing. What assurances can the Government provide to support both human and AI innovation? Does the Minister, with his creative industries hat on, agree that respecting copyright would see the introduction of an opt-in system as essential?

Chris Bryant: Again, this is another false dichotomy being presented to us between opt in and opt out. That is why we have landed on the term "rights reservation". A lot of the material out there is not copyright. That is either because it is long out of copyright—the law for

most works lasts for 70 years after the death of the author or the first publication of the work—or because some artists have categorically decided not to retain their copyright. Tom Lehrer, the author of many satirical songs from the 1980s and 1990s, such as "The Vatican Rag" and "The Masochism Tango", has deliberately surrendered his copyright.

This is a world where we want to make sure that the vast majority of rights holders, whether they be the record label, the individual photographer, the artist or whatever, have the right of control over their copyright—over whether it is used and how it is used—and if it is going to be used, they should be remunerated. I urge my hon. Friend, who I know has a great interest in this subject in his role on the Select Committee, to make sure that that false dichotomy between opt in and opt out is abandoned. We talk about rights reservation, because then, opt out might look remarkably like opt in.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): In July of this year, it was revealed that 173,000 YouTube videos, including material created by globally recognised British musicians, news channels and artists, had been scraped into a dataset used to train AI models. Content from over 40,000 creatives has been found in this dataset, yet I do not believe that consent was sought from a single impacted creator to use their copyrighted works. It is clear that AI offers a fantastic opportunity for our economy, but it must supplement and grow industries rather than replace them wholesale. Creatives deserve to be compensated for their work. AI companies will happily pay the electricity bill for their data centres and wages for their staff, so why should they not also pay to access the creative content on which their models depend?

Chris Bryant: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. Of course those companies should pay for the content that they are using. I think she is referring to LAION-5B, which is the dataset that was produced in Germany. Interestingly, a court in Hamburg has decided that this is already covered by the exemption for data and text mining for non-commercial purposes for research. Subsequently, though, this has been used not just for research, but for other purposes, which is precisely the kind of area where there is a legal dispute. That is why we are trying to provide legal certainty in the UK as to what can and cannot be used, when it can be used, and how we can make sure that people's creative rights are protected.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): This is an important issue everywhere in the world, but it is particularly important here in the UK because our economy has, as the Minister has said, incredible strengths both in the creative industries and, more recently, in AI development. It is important to note that a lot of the technology that powers these models was pioneered by DeepMind here in London. Does the Minister agree that getting the balance right on this is critical to the Government's mission of delivering economic growth?

Chris Bryant: Both sectors are part of our industrial strategy, and we must make sure that both are able to flourish. I fully understand that there will be people in the creative industries who will be worried about what we are saying, but I want them to understand that this package comes as a whole. Ed Newton-Rex, who was

formerly of Stability AI, wrote in his Substack today that he was concerned that this Government would proceed without actually checking whether a system of rights reservation worked. We will not. We will proceed only if there is a proper system of rights reservation. But there are an awful lot of very clever people who work in AI in this country. I would like somebody to set a bunch of them on working out a simple, practicable, technical solution to the question of rights reservation. Then, I think, everybody has a chance of prospering in the UK.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): As a former journalist, I am intimately familiar with the gold standard copyright laws that we have in this country. Does the Minister agree with the News Media Association, which is very concerned about the current situation faced by its members, where things are already being scraped and taken into these AI machines? To quote the fabulous Sugababes, those members would like the Minister to “Push the Button” on the existing laws and protect their copyright now. Can we have action now, rather than this rather vague and woolly consultation?

Chris Bryant: Well, no. This is a genuinely thorny question that needs a technical solution. The Government are not going to write the technical solution. That has to come from the two sides working out together how we can get to a situation that benefits everybody. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the newspapers. Some newspapers have already licensed material, including Associated Newspapers, *The Washington Post* and several others. It would be interesting to see whether the income that those companies are receiving is flowing through to the journalists who produce the copyright material in the first place, but perhaps that is part of the rights reservation system that we need to look at as well.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): The commitment of the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media and Sport and for Science, Innovation and Technology to ensuring that creators can control how their content is used and be paid for it is very welcome, but some creators are concerned that the rights reservation framework proposed by the Government will not allow them to assert control. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that a new framework takes account of those concerns?

Chris Bryant: I have been trying—perhaps I have not yet succeeded—to make it absolutely clear that I, the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media and Sport and for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), who is sitting next to me, would not bring forward for legislation something that undermined the copyright rights of rights holders in the creative industries. We simply would not do so.

What we are trying to do is push both sides to a place where we can create a new system—it will probably be new to the United Kingdom, and might be one of our gifts to the world—of rights reservation that is simple, practical and practicable. This is not a Second Reading debate; it is simply a statement on a consultation. I urge all who have concerns to voice them in that consultation.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): This is a timely statement, because I have been conversing with Anne, one of my constituents. Anne is a visual artist and dress designer, and she has exactly the concerns that you set out.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It is the Minister who is setting out concerns, not me.

Mike Martin: I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I will recommend to Anne that she contributes to the consultation. However, the Minister hits on the nub of the problem, which is the international element. For me, the key example is China, a country that has a history of stealing IP and is a key player in the international AI competition. I wish the Minister well in this work, but how can we thread the needle so that, if the consultation leads to a Bill that gets implemented, we avoid not only the copyright of our creatives being stolen by Chinese AI firms but handing the AI advantage to China?

Chris Bryant: I think that China is the problem in lots of different cases; I am not sure that it is in this case. It is more difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for me to get a practicable solution, but that is what we are determined to achieve. When the hon. Gentleman referred to Anne, I thought for one moment that she was his AI assistant. The truth is that we will all have AI assistants very soon. Most of the time, when we google anything these days, the first result comes up because of AI. It is part of our lives, and we cannot pretend that away. What I would like is for UK companies and start-ups to develop AI in a way that accepts that the content that many of them are desperate to use needs to be paid for.

Kanishka Narayan (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): May I convey to the Minister my disappointment that his ChatGPT prompt yielded the Sugababes and “Football Manager” but not the enduring institution of “Gavin and Stacey” from the Vale of Glamorgan? I know that that is an omission that ChatGPT will correct. This is a critical debate, because the path to prosperity for nations has to be a path through technology. In that context, the primary question on my mind is whether the Minister can set out plans for how data accuracy and completeness in the creative sector can underpin the Government’s wider AI action plan, and ultimately drive national growth.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about “Gavin and Stacey”, and I look forward to the Christmas special. I would merely point out that, since H from Steps is from the Rhondda, Steps has a lot more to offer.

Kanishka Narayan: He lives in the Vale of Glamorgan.

Chris Bryant: Well, some people have greatness thrust upon them.

My hon. Friend makes an important point about data, which will become an increasing part of our economic resilience and strength in this country. That is another part of my responsibility, if I have my DSIT hat on. I very much look forward to the Data (Use and Access) Bill coming to the Commons in the new year, once it has finished in the other place, because it is an

[Chris Bryant]

opportunity for us to create smart data, which will release a great deal more economic potential and productivity in the UK.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): UK Music describes copyright as the foundation of the music industry, providing a means for creators to monetise their work, an incentive for investment in talent, and an opportunity for us, the public, to enjoy the fruits of creativity. It is important that we get this right, so will the Minister set out how the Government will work with both developers and rights holders to make the most of this groundbreaking technology while still protecting artists' work?

Chris Bryant: No. 1: I will have endless meetings with an awful lot of people from the creative industries to ensure that all their concerns are recognised. I pay tribute to UK Music, which has already been in touch several times in the past 24 hours to express its views on the subject. Quite interestingly, copyright works differently in different media—in music, publishing, newspapers and so on—and that is one of the things we need to take clear hold of when we take anything further forward.

I also had a successful meeting this afternoon with people talking about introducing a voluntary levy on tickets and arena gigs to ensure that we have money to support grassroots music in this country, and I very much hope that we will be able to make a significant announcement on that in the new year.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the statement. The Minister refers to Ed Newton-Rex, who recently gave evidence to our Select Committee on this

very subject. It is clear that creatives are deeply worried about any suggestion of an opt-out when it comes to the solution. That is why I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment at the Dispatch Box to make any progress contingent on a technological solution on rights reservation because, ultimately, is that not the way to square the circle that this Government are always trying to square, which is of economic growth and innovation, while protecting workers' rights?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is 100% right. Squaring the circle is what we are in the business of doing, and sometimes that is not an easy thing for Government, because not all the levers lie with Government and with legislation. To be absolutely clear, though, we know we need to provide legal certainty in this space. That almost certainly means that we will want to introduce legislation. We will not introduce legislation until such time as all the different aspects that I have already referred to—namely, transparency on inputs and outputs, control of rights reservation for rights holders, and the text and data mining exemption for commercial work—in that sphere hang together, as all of them are contingent on one another.

I think that was the last question, Madam Deputy Speaker, so have yourself a very merry Christmas.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): You are supposed to sing it!

Chris Bryant: I don't think I am allowed to sing at the Dispatch Box.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The Minister would be well advised not to sing at the Dispatch Box, but I thank him for his comprehensive responses this afternoon.

Post Office Redress and Funding

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to provide an update to the House about the Government's Post Office redress schemes and funding.

No one in this House—no one in this country—will have failed to be moved by the plight of postmasters caught up in the Horizon scandal. The fact that they suffered so much over so many years is both unconscionable and inexcusable. The Government are determined to do right by them and to learn from the mistakes of the past. That is why, before the election in July, we promised to ensure swift and fair redress for postmasters affected by the Horizon scandal and, in the past five months, we have made significant progress.

To date, compensation has more than doubled since the Government took office, with £499 million paid to 3,300 victims. Of that amount, £79 million has been paid to 232 people from the Horizon convictions redress scheme, which we set up in July. As of 29 November, the Ministry of Justice had notified more than 520 people in England and Wales that their convictions have been quashed by the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Act 2024. The relevant justice authorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland are also continuing to notify individuals within their jurisdictions.

While the progress we have made is positive, we know there are still complex cases to resolve, and we need to speed up other parts of the redress process. Many postmasters are still yet to be compensated or have their cases reconsidered. I am conscious that for the victims of the Horizon scandal, justice delayed is justice denied, and that our responsibility in Government is to work to make the compensation process as effective as possible. That is why we have asked the Post Office to write to over 16,000 former postmasters, encouraging them to come forward if they believe they have a genuine claim. I can confirm those letters have been sent. We want to ensure that every postmaster who is eligible for redress under the Horizon shortfall scheme has the opportunity to apply for it.

On more complex cases, notably in the group litigation order and the Horizon convictions redress scheme, for which my department is, and should be seen to be, directly responsible, we have agreed a new target for 90% of challenge cases in the GLO and HCRS to receive a substantive response within 40 days. We have moved in additional staff, and Sir Gary Hickinbottom, who is already assisting us with the overturned conviction cases, has been appointed chair of the independent panel for the HCRS.

We are looking again at the arguments for providing additional redress to postmaster family members who were affected by the scandal, and to the employees of postmasters. I will report back to the House on that in due course. The Horizon compensation advisory board recommended the establishment of an appeals process for the Horizon shortfall scheme that is independent of the Post Office and Government, and we accepted that recommendation in September. We are in the process of assembling a team of independent external lawyers to help deliver the appeals process. We expect that contract

to be awarded in January. I will be able to provide a further update on the appeals process early in the new year.

There are still concerns about the responsibility of the Post Office to deliver the Horizon shortfall scheme and the overturned convictions scheme. The Government are considering the merits of my Department taking over that responsibility, but the benefits of such a move must clearly outweigh the potential disruption. We are carefully considering what intervention we may take.

Thanks to a small group of postmasters and their families coming forward this year, as well as to parliamentarians including Lord Beamish, we now know that issues at the Post Office went beyond Horizon, and that some postmasters may have been affected by earlier systems such as Capture. The Government have responded with swift, significant action. The Kroll investigation published its report into Capture on 30 September, with a further addendum made on 18 October. From that report we have concluded that there are postmasters who may have fallen victim to flaws in Capture software.

Most of us will not be able to comprehend fully what it was like to be accused of mistakes never made, ill intent never harboured and crimes never committed. Some postmasters have told us that, like victims of the Horizon scandal, they were shunned by their local communities—by their customers, friends and neighbours. I speak on behalf of the whole Government in expressing how sorry I am for what those postmasters and their families have gone through. For that and all they were forced to endure, they deserve not just redress but the restoration of their good names.

Uncovering exactly what happened in each case will be a challenging exercise given the passage of time and the lack of records and evidence. However, we are keen to apply the lessons that we have learned from previous redress schemes, and to take account of the needs of this group of victims. The Government will develop our proposals through engagement with postmasters and other key stakeholders, such as the Horizon compensation advisory board and legal experts. Over the coming months, we want to determine the scope of the financial redress and the eligibility criteria, so that we can bring both redress and closure to the impacted postmasters and their families. I expect to provide a further update to the House on that matter in the spring.

Next year, we also expect to receive Sir Wyn Williams's report. The Post Office Horizon IT inquiry has reviewed the oral evidence that was submitted to it over the course of the last two years. I am thankful to Sir Wyn Williams for his excellent chairing of the inquiry, which closed yesterday. I am also thankful to the Horizon compensation advisory board for the report that it published earlier this year. In case Members are not aware, the board is recommending that a new independent body be set up to deliver any future redress schemes on behalf of the Government, as well as to act in a role similar to that of an ombudsman. The goal is, of course, to reduce the chances of future scandals—or at least to expose them more quickly.

The Government welcome those recommendations. Any recommendation that might prevent harm, or at least help the Government be more responsive to it, is worthy of serious consideration. The potential impact of such a body would be wide ranging, with potential implications for existing redress schemes in the NHS,

[Gareth Thomas]

which need to be considered alongside other issues. We will therefore take time to consult and consider in particular the view of the Williams inquiry before reaching a conclusion. We intend to give a full response within six months of the publication of the Williams inquiry report.

For too long, decisions about the future of the Post Office have been put off. That neglect has allowed significant issues at the heart of the company to grow and take root. As previously set out, we will publish a Green Paper in the first half of next year to seek the public's views, insights and experiences to help shape the future of the Post Office. In the meantime, we are taking steps to continue to support the post office network and the important services it provides. I can announce that we are providing a further £37.5 million to subsidise the post office network this year. The interim chair of the Post Office, Nigel Railton, is rightly shifting the focus of the business from headquarters to postmasters; the Post Office is also reviewing its costs, as its financial position continues to be challenging. He has announced ambitions for a new deal for postmasters, and I am pleased that the Post Office is going to make an immediate one-off payment to postmasters to increase their remuneration, in recognition of the pressures that postmasters face. That payment is expected to be delivered this month.

We are working with the senior leadership of the Post Office on future opportunities, beginning with banking, so that the company can increase its product offers and commercial revenue and reduce its costs in communities across the UK. Together, we hope these steps will enable the Post Office to move forward, working better with its postmasters and better serving the needs of its customers. This Government are attempting to fix the foundations, deal with the injustices of the past, and invest in a different future for the Post Office so that it can sit at the heart of our communities as a trusted institution once more. I commend this statement to the House.

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

3.56 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

As shadow Secretary of State, I can say on behalf of every Conservative Member that we are committed to working collaboratively with the Government to deliver the appropriate redress to all those affected by the Horizon scandal and any issues relating to the Capture software. Many of the actions on which the Minister has updated the House were initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). As my hon. Friend has said, Ministers will have our full support in the swift delivery of redress and the overturning of the convictions of those affected by this wide-ranging scandal. The Conservative party welcomes the redress schemes that have been implemented to remedy the gross miscarriages of justice that have affected hundreds of families across the country. Our only focus now must be on processing claims to get those schemes completed as quickly as possible.

There remain a number of questions following the Minister's statement that I would be grateful if he would clarify. I understand that the Kroll report did not publish any conclusions about the safety of criminal convictions. The Horizon advisory group had already recommended that the Government introduce legislation to overturn the convictions of postmasters who fell victim to the Capture scheme. I read that the Government have deferred to the Criminal Cases Review Commission on that matter. Could the Minister update us on what conversations he has had with the CCRC in relation to the process of overturning convictions?

The redress that the Minister has announced is welcome news, but there remains a lack of specific detail on how the affected parties can expect progress. Will he set out a timeline for the redress of postmasters affected by Capture? He said that he has instructed the Post Office to write to 16,000 potentially affected former postmasters, urging them to come forward if they believe they have a claim to make, and that those letters have been sent. Can he confirm when they were sent?

Is the Minister able to provide an update on his conversations with Fujitsu? How much has Fujitsu contributed to date? What meetings has he had, and where are we on that important aspect of this process? It was concerning to learn back in September that only a small handful of claims had been offered redress through the Horizon convictions redress scheme and, at that point, no full and final settlements had been made through that scheme. Could the Minister reassure the House that the Government are not just opening the door to those claims, but managing the process of getting them heard, resolved, and ultimately redressed? I was pleased to hear that additional staff have been seconded to facilitate the compensation scheme—I welcome that and thank the Minister—but can he confirm how many have been seconded and from where, and can he give the House an assurance that they will remain seconded for as long as is necessary?

Finally, we welcome the Government's announcement of £37.5 million of network subsidy. It was announced in yesterday's written ministerial statement, and it is indeed welcome news. The Minister said that it is for this year, so would he clarify whether that relates to the period up until the end of March 2025? What certainty is there of funding beyond that period so that we can all proceed on a sustainable footing? Is it only for this year, or does it also cover the fiscal year 2025-26?

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for his willingness to work with us collaboratively on providing redress not only to the victims of the Horizon scandal, but to the victims of the Capture software issues.

The shadow Secretary of State referenced the Kroll report. As he and, I suspect, other Members of the House who have followed this issue closely will be aware, Kroll did not take a specific view on convictions. We are aware that a small number of sub-postmasters—those who believed they were victims of using the Capture software, given the shortfalls it generated and the way they were treated by the Post Office as a result—have referred their claims to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. We have instructed the Post Office to work at speed to review what evidence it can provide to the CCRC to help it make decisions on the safety of

those convictions. Similarly, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission is looking at a number of cases, and we have similarly instructed the Post Office to co-operate with it as quickly as it can.

On Capture redress, yesterday we met sub-postmasters who have campaigned on Capture, and indeed Lord Beamish, to update them on the steps we will take. We will work at pace. As I said in my statement, we face a significant challenge with the amount of evidence available. For example, no central record has as yet been found of the number of Capture users or of who they were. We are nevertheless going to be working to design a redress scheme. We will consult sub-postmasters and the Horizon compensation advisory board. As I have said, I will bring forward an update on where we have got to by next spring.

On the 16,000 letters that the Post Office has sent out, I can confirm that they have gone out very recently—the shadow Secretary of State will forgive me if I do not have the exact dates. He rightly aired again the concern about the responsibility of Fujitsu, which is felt across the House. I am sure that he will recognise that we need to wait for Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry to report, to give us a better understanding of the scale of Fujitsu's responsibilities and, therefore, its potential liabilities. We have said that we will respond to the inquiry's recommendations at pace, and certainly within six months. I am sure that he will opine on Fujitsu, and we will respond accordingly.

On the Horizon convictions redress scheme, the then Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander), and I had the pleasure of appearing before the Business and Trade Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), to update it on progress in overturning the convictions following the legislation last summer. She committed the Ministry to completing its work of assessing the cases by the end of January, and I understand that it still intends to do so. We have already paid out some £79 million as part of our responsibilities to provide redress to those whose convictions were overturned.

Lastly, on the network subsidy uplift, the shadow Secretary of State will understand that the money is just for this year. Spending review discussions are taking place across Government, and the Post Office is an active part of those discussions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I welcome much of the Minister's statement today. Redress is being paid out faster, but the truth is that 70% of the budget for redress has still not been paid. The Select Committee will be supplying its advice on how we make that faster in a report that we will release on new year's day. The Minister has set out details for the House about the Capture victims who have been identified. Does he believe that many of those victims were convicted? If they were, would it not be right to have those convictions automatically overturned, in the way that we have done for other victims of this appalling scandal?

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend that the first report of his Committee has looked at the Post Office redress schemes. He will know that progress has been made, but as I alluded to in my opening statement, we recognise that there is still significantly more to do, particularly with the complex cases. Specifically on convictions and Capture, I have to tell the House that at this stage we do not know how many people were convicted as a result of the Capture software. We are aware of a small number of cases. As I have said, a number of cases are with the Criminal Cases Review Commission and the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission. We have instructed the Post Office to review all its records—we know it has some records available for the 1991 to 1999 period—and to get what information it does have to those two bodies, so that they can opine as quickly as is feasible on the safety of those convictions. It is right that that is the first step we take. We will wait to see the judgment. In the meantime, we will get on with designing a redress scheme for all those who were not convicted but who suffered as a result of the Capture software.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I thank the Minister for sharing his statement in advance.

Honest, hard-working people had their lives totally wrecked by this scandal, and it is a great shame that it happened over a number of years, and that there was dither and delay over it for far too many years. I welcome the steps that he has outlined this afternoon. I welcome the suggestions made to him about an independent body for compensation. However, this scandal must never happen again. One way this Chamber could ensure that is the case is by having a duty of candour on officials, as the Liberal Democrats have called for. I hope he will give that serious consideration, to stop such a scandal ever happening again. Finally, there is a real opportunity, should the Government choose to take it, to set up an office for whistleblowers through the Employment Rights Bill, which is currently making its way through the House.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks. In particular, I share his anger, and that of the whole House, at how sub-postmasters were treated, whether as victims of the Horizon scandal or of the Capture software issues, which was clearly appalling. We must do everything we can to ensure that can never be repeated. He will understand that yesterday was the last day of hearings in Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry. Sir Wyn Williams has said that he will publish his conclusions and recommendations within months. The Government will then work at pace to consider his recommendations and to publish our response within six months of that date. The specific ideas that the hon. Gentleman has referenced in that context will, I am sure, be part of the Government's deliberations. He will forgive me if I wait at this stage for Sir Wyn Williams's recommendations. We will then look at those recommendations and come to the House with the future steps we intend to take.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's announcement on the Green Paper on the future of the Post Office. It is also welcome that the Government are taking additional

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

steps towards financial redress for the postmasters who suffered such horrendous treatment in that scandal. I am concerned that this new deal for postmasters comes at the expense of post office branches across the country, including at Kensington Park in my constituency. Does he agree that there should not be a choice between giving postmasters a fair deal and losing essential high street services? Will he please meet me to discuss that further?

Gareth Thomas: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I recognise that post offices are a fundamental part of every one of our communities in the UK. That is one of the reasons why the Government have been clear that we adhere to and support the commitment on various access requirements to ensure that every community has good access to post office facilities. On directly managed branches, she will know that no decision on the future of all those branches, or indeed any individual branch, has been taken. I recognise that she has particular concerns about the branch in Kennington, and I am happy to meet her to discuss that.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am glad that the Minister chose to reference the excellent work done on behalf of the postmasters by Lord Beamish, who is better known to many of us as our former colleague Kevan Jones. I hope that the whole House will join me in congratulating him on his appointment today as the new Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee—an appointment, by the way, by his fellow Committee members, which is exactly as it should be done.

May I gently ask the Minister—this may go slightly outwith his Department's responsibilities—whether there is any news or progress about the question of prosecutions for criminal conspiracy? That is something I have raised before. That is one thing that might act as a deterrent to this sort of terrible behaviour by a gilded, self-selecting class of people who think that their institutional importance is greater than truth or justice.

Gareth Thomas: I am certainly happy to echo the right hon. Member's congratulations to the noble Lord Beamish and to emphasise again my appreciation for his work on championing the concerns of those who are victims of the Capture software. He is one of those whom we will continue to work with going forward as we put together redress and think about these issues more generally.

Specifically on prosecutions, the right hon. Member may be aware that the Metropolitan police has confirmed that it has established a unit and is looking at a number of issues to do with how the Post Office operated. He will understand that, quite rightly, Ministers are not involved in those decisions, but the information that I have set out is publicly available. We will obviously all have to wait to see what happens in that regard.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend rightly said that there is an urgent need to speed up the redress process. What we know is that while £500 million has been paid out in claims, £267 million has been spent on lawyers. Nigel Railton told us that between 80% and 85% of all claims are simple cases, so

does my hon. Friend agree that there is a real opportunity to automate the process so that we handle claims far more quickly?

Gareth Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Specifically on what further action we can take to speed up the process, one of the reasons why we introduced a fixed-sum payment of £75,000 for those whose claims had been accepted as part of the Horizon shortfall scheme was deliberately to offer an option of faster redress for victims.

On the question of automation, we encouraged Nigel Railton and the senior leadership at the Post Office to look at what further steps they can take to speed up the consideration of claims under the Horizon shortfall scheme, where there is particular pressure given the numbers that are still coming forward. I welcome the fact that they are coming forward, but we need faster action to get through them and to support all those whose claims are being accepted to get redress under the Horizon shortfall scheme.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Recently I met a couple of constituents—Tony Hibberd, a former sub-postmaster, and Colin Chesterton, a solicitor who is representing him pro bono. During our meeting, they raised concerns about the delays and inadequacies of the Horizon shortfall scheme. My constituent has waited in excess of four years since his claim application and 14 years since he was forced to lose his livelihood. What percentage of the claimants to the Horizon shortfall scheme have received an interim payment, and what percentage have had their requests settled in full?

Gareth Thomas: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the details of that case, I will happily look at where it is at. The Horizon shortfall scheme has been run by the Post Office for some time. Initially, it was closed and then it was reopened under pressure. All those who came forward in the initial tranche of claims have had them assessed and offers have been made. The majority of the compensation that was offered has been paid out. When the scheme was reopened, there was a substantial increase in the numbers of people applying for redress. Indeed, we are still seeing people coming forward now and we would expect, as a result of all the letters that we have asked the Post Office to send out to sub-postmasters who might have a claim, that there will be further substantial claims under the Horizon shortfall scheme. With the Post Office, we are looking at what more we can do to speed up the assessment of those claims.

The fixed sum payment that we announced in September of some £75,000, which sub-postmasters can choose to accept in full and final settlement of their claim, has been welcomed and accepted by a significant number of sub-postmasters. That is helping to speed up redress under the Horizon shortfall scheme. I accept that there is more to do, and we are looking at what else we can do in that regard.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement and the fact that he is putting more resources and manpower into processing people's claims. But I wonder where the complexity of these claims is coming from. Are we asking for too much information from people in the first place? I watched the evidence of Sir Alan Bates at the Business and Trade Committee, and I have read some of the cases in

the news. In one case, a person with breast cancer had their compensation reduced and I thought, hang on a minute, this may be going too far and is a bit churlish. Just how much information is being gone through in order to process these cases? I wonder if we may want to go back and look at that. I have spoken to the Minister about this, and I know that he wants to speed the process up as much as possible. Is it possible that we could streamline the process?

Gareth Thomas: I have looked at this issue, which came up at the Select Committee. We write out to ask for further information in order to be able to justify the payment of more compensation, not to query the information that has been provided by sub-postmasters to date. To try to provide reassurance on that point, we are making that explicit in the letters that we send out to sub-postmasters. We are anxious to reduce the stress and concern and, essentially, the trauma that people have gone through already. We do not want that process to be repeated, if at all possible, during the compensation process. Asking for more information is designed to enable us to offer more and fairer compensation to the individuals concerned.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I am listening in detail about the processes you are going through looking for more information on Horizon. You have mentioned Capture, which goes back to 1992—30 years ago. You have mentioned a lack of information and that you are looking for more detail—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Three times, “you”—it needs to be “he” or “the Minister”, please.

Chris Law: Bad habits—must get rid of them. My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am concerned about the Capture system, which is more than 30 years old and had 19 different versions. We do not know who used it, and we do not know who has been convicted for it. The people who have been convicted are probably dying every other week just now. The Minister talks about working at pace, but can he make a flying sprint to get to those people urgently, to ensure that investigations are carried out and that compensation deserved is duly received?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point—it is something I feel acutely. I have met a number of the sub-postmasters who used the Capture software and were treated very badly as a result by the Post Office, so I am acutely conscious of our collective responsibility to those individuals and their families. Some of the sub-postmasters who used Capture software have already passed away, which only underlines the points he and I have made. I can assure the House that we will work at pace. We are working with the Post Office, and have asked the organisation to go through its records so that we can identify, inasmuch as we can, how many people were potentially victims of Capture. We are also supporting the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission in looking at whether convictions are safe.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): The devastating case of Susan Cain, the mother of my constituent Zoe Stokes, highlights the profound human cost of this scandal. Susan, who ran the post office in

Hampton in Arden, was falsely accused of theft, and forced to sell her business and home in order to repay £25,000 to avoid prison. Tragically, she later died from emphysema, which medical evidence links to the immense stress that was caused by these false allegations. Despite her exoneration, her family have been offered just 40% of their claim, with the Post Office refusing to accept responsibility for her illness. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the compensation programme for families like Zoe’s is fair and transparent, and fully accounts for the harm caused by this scandal?

Gareth Thomas: I commend my hon. Friend for championing the cause of the family of a sub-postmaster in his constituency. He will forgive me if I do not know the exact compensation scheme that his constituent applied to. However, in general, independent elements are built into each of the compensation schemes to try to ensure that as fair a sum of redress as possible is offered. On the Horizon shortfall scheme in particular, in September we committed to setting up an independent appeals process, and I hope to have more information for the House early next year. We are determined to establish that process to provide a further independent element for that particular scheme.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent Donna is one of the 555. She was audited through Horizon, which found a loss of £186,000. An employee admitted fraud and was later imprisoned, but Donna was made bankrupt for the loss—for not just £186,000, but £250,000, which, of course, she could not pay. It was never challenged; we do not know whether the real amount was £180,000 or £180. She was awarded an interim payment, most of which was taken by the receivers. Now, the amount the receivers took has been taken from the final £75,000 fixed amount, and she has only been offered £20,000, despite losing everything. Will the Minister personally look at Donna’s case and ensure she gets proper redress for this obvious miscarriage of justice?

Gareth Thomas: I would be very happy to receive further information from the hon. Lady, and I will endeavour to reply to her as quickly as I can. I recognise that there are concerns about the fairness of the compensation process. There are complex cases that are still to be settled. We are working at pace to ensure, where we can, that those cases are settled, particularly with regard to the GLO scheme. We have made it clear that for all the remaining cases that are with us by Christmas, we will be able to get substantial redress paid out to those individuals by the end of March. As I say, if she writes to me I will happily look at her letter.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): It is known as the Horizon scandal, but the real scandal is not the failings of software but the action and deeds of individuals and institutions, as Sir Alan Bates said. In that light, I would include the misuse and potential abuse of private prosecutions. Will the Government commit to acting on that?

Gareth Thomas: Yes. My hon. Friend raises a very good point. The Ministry of Justice has made clear its concern about this issue and is set to bring forward a consultation document early in the new year, I believe, to address exactly that concern.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's statement, but does he recognise the frustration that many, many sub-postmasters still experience? We put legislation through this place months ago on the quashing of convictions. The compensation scheme has been in place for many years now, yet well over half of the individuals still have not had their cases dealt with. I met some of them when they came over for the inquiry a few weeks ago, and there is real fear among them that the Post Office is still in denial and is therefore still reluctant to proceed with these claims. Two people gave me examples. One has been asked for information that he does not have because the Post Office seized all the information. For the other, the delay is caused because she meticulously kept records and now the Post Office says it has so many records to go through that it will take some time. Does the Minister understand why many people feel that, despite the decisions of this House and the commitment of Ministers, there is still reluctance on the part of the Post Office to deal fairly with these people?

Gareth Thomas: I understand completely the frustration of sub-postmasters who have waited so long to get redress and have their cases heard. The right hon. Gentleman will understand that there are four Horizon scandal compensation schemes. In the case of the convictions that were overturned by this House this year, the fourth compensation scheme, the Horizon convictions redress scheme, was set up on 30 July and has begun paying out significant sums of money to sub-postmasters who have had their convictions overturned—some £79 million, as of the end of November. As I said earlier, the MOJ has sought to contact all individuals who had their convictions overturned as a result of that legislation. It has said that it will complete its work by the end of January and I understand that it is on course to do so, but I am acutely aware of the right hon. Gentleman's point. It is why we continue to look, as much as we can, at what further efforts we can take to speed the delivery of compensation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Last but by no means least, I call Emma Foody.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement and his commitment to providing redress as soon as possible. One of my constituents, a former sub-postmaster who wished to remain anonymous, attended a surgery recently to share their experience. Accused of stealing over £40,000 due to the Horizon system, they lost their home, their job and their business, and were forced to pay thousands from their and their family's savings. Compounding the financial loss was the reputational loss: ostracised by the community, experiencing racial abuse and forced to move away—appalling in its own right but, as we have heard today, just one of many, many examples. Does the Minister agree that any redress must address not just the financial loss, but the further damage done to people's lives as a result of the actions of the Post Office?

Gareth Thomas: I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say that I wish the experience that my hon. Friend has described was just an isolated example, but sadly there have been far too many similar examples

of what sub-postmasters have been through. We absolutely must get more speed into the compensation process, and we are very much working on that, but we will also look carefully at the recommendations of the Sir Wyn Williams inquiry when they are published next year. His work will be crucial in helping to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

BILL PRESENTED

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT (BRITISH GOODS AND SERVICES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sarah Champion presented a Bill to make provision about public procurement in respect of British goods and services; 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 153).

Point of Order

4.30 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on behalf of the independent alliance MPs in relation to our correspondence with Ministers.

We have written to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary on numerous occasions without receiving a reply. On 5 August, we wrote to the Home Secretary asking for a meeting following the far-right riots. We have yet to receive a response. On 25 October, we wrote to the Chancellor asking her to abolish the two-child benefit cap and to reverse the cuts in the winter fuel allowance. We received a holding reply which read

"we have received your submission to the Autumn Budget process", but no further reply has been received.

On 18 November, we wrote to the Prime Minister asking him what legal advice he had received on the definition of genocide in relation to the situation in Gaza, and what action he was taking to prevent genocide. We have not received a response. On 18 November, we also wrote to the Attorney General asking him what legal advice he had offered the Prime Minister on the definition of genocide in relation to the situation in Gaza. We have not received a response to that either. On 21 November, we wrote to the Prime Minister asking him if the Government would enforce the arrest warrants from the International Criminal Court, and what action he was taking to prevent genocide. Again, we have not received a response.

We wrote those letters on behalf of our constituents, and they deserve answers to our questions. Could you please advise us, Madam Deputy Speaker, on the best way to secure a reply to our letters, and to ensure that Ministers reply to letters that we may write in the future?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. He has put his concerns on the record, and I am sure that those on the Government Front Bench have been listening to them carefully. If he and his right hon. and

hon. Friends have not done so already, I recommend that they make contact with the private offices of the Ministers concerned. If that does not lead to prompt replies, a number of options are open to them, including tabling questions, both written and oral, and seeking an Adjournment debate. I suggest that the Table Office could be very helpful in giving them further ideas as to how they can best hold Ministers to account.

Office of the Whistleblower

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

4.33 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an independent Office of the Whistleblower to protect whistleblowers and whistleblowing; to make provision for the Office of the Whistleblower to set, monitor and enforce standards for the management of whistleblowing cases, to provide disclosure and advice services, to direct whistleblowing investigations and to order redress of detriment suffered by whistleblowers; and for connected purposes.

So it is quite a small Bill.

If I may, I shall start with a couple of thank yous. All too often, being a whistleblower is a thankless task. Whistleblowers risk so much: their personal standing, their reputations, and their homes. I think that this ten-minute rule motion, coming so soon after the statement that we heard from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, highlights the importance of those who are willing to speak up and draw attention to wrongdoing when they see it. I should like—on behalf of the House, if it will indulge me—to thank those people who have the bravery to stand up, say that there is wrongdoing, and put themselves at risk.

I also want to pay a short tribute to my immediate predecessor in this place, Jo Gideon, who now serves as the chairperson of WhistleblowersUK. She did a lot in this House to progress the issue, and it is a testament to her that progress was made in the last Parliament. I hope that we can continue it in this place.

I am grateful to the Government for the work that they have been doing on improving current arrangements for whistleblowing. The duty of candour Bill, which will place on our public servants the requirement to speak out and tell the truth when an investigation is happening, is an important part of shining a light on some of the dark recesses of our public sector when things go wrong. I am also grateful to the Government for recognising that whistleblowing can be important for tackling sexual harassment, and for the work that they are doing on the Employment Rights Bill.

The whole purpose of whistleblowing is to try to prevent things from happening in the first place. All too often we end up in circumstances and situations in which something terrible happens, and somebody stands up and gives evidence about what has happened. As we have heard over many hours of debate in this place, it then costs an awful lot of money to redress the wrongdoing that has happened. In such circumstances, not having in place an effective and efficient whistleblowing system that is available to anybody who sees wrongdoing costs taxpayers a huge amount of money.

The current framework for whistleblowing in this country is very much looked at through the lens of employment law. Technically, someone is considered a whistleblower only if they are employed by, and have a contractual relationship with, the organisation about which they are making a disclosure. That means that the remedy and redress that is available to the whistleblower normally ends up in an employment tribunal, which looks at the occupational and work-related loss that the individual has suffered, and not necessarily at some of

[Gareth Snell]

the social and reputational damage that they suffer as a result of being the person who stands up and speaks out. We all know that standing up and speaking out is so important, because it is instilled in new Members of Parliament when we arrive here. We are told that if we see wrongdoing, we have a duty to say something.

Anyone who travels on trains will hear the slogan, “See it. Say It. Sorted.” If people see wrongdoing in life, however, saying something about it is often a risk too far. They might make a disclosure about their workplace, and suddenly they will be put on gardening leave. They find themselves in a situation in which they are labelled as the troublemaker in the organisation. Then they end up down the employment tribunal route, and the issue does not necessarily get dealt with.

One aspect of my Bill that I hope the Government will consider taking forward—if not through this Bill, then perhaps by bringing forward other Bills—is the proposed office of the whistleblower, which was supported by my party in opposition and in amendments tabled to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023. Such an office has been talked about in this House; the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), who is no longer in his place, said in a previous debate that it would have helped us to prevent some of the scandals that we have seen in this country. The proposed office of the whistleblower would provide a genuine levelling effect for people who stand up and say the right thing, and who then suddenly find themselves opposed by the legal and financial resources of huge companies that seek to discredit them, isolate them and put them in a position in which their reputation and home life struggle. With an office of the whistleblower, we could remove the David versus Goliath situation and genuinely ensure that speaking up and doing the right thing counts.

I would hope that the proposed office of the whistleblower would be a designated body to which people can report when they have made a disclosure. Currently, 88 different regulatory bodies can take a whistleblowing declaration. In fact, Members of Parliament are prescribed people: whistleblowers can make a declaration to us without necessarily incurring a penalty. Very few of us know that, and very few of us are able to progress a disclosure to the next stage. The proposed office of the whistleblower would be required to collate data on where whistleblowing declarations are being made from public bodies and other organisations. Crucially, that would tell us where there is a problem. I am sure that

even today there will be employees in the NHS, the civil service, other public sector organisations and the private sector who make a disclosure to a manager, while yesterday somebody else made a disclosure to a different manager about the same problem. But no one is collating that data to say, “Actually, this is a problem in a particular sector; we should probably look at this and take some action now and prevent a genuine wrongdoing, malpractice, malfeasance or even death from occurring.”

Our current whistleblowing arrangements are far too reactive. They rely on somebody standing up and speaking out, and they rely on that person taking a risk after an event has happened. It becomes almost a situation of saying, “Here is the evidence to correct the wrongdoing that has occurred.” We need to change whistleblowing culture in our country so that when something is happening and we see it or somebody else sees it, they feel compelled and also supported to make that declaration. That is very important because quite often the people who are doing the wrongdoing in the first place—the people who are undertaking malpractice, malfeasance or corruption—do it because they think they can get away with it. They do it because they think nobody is watching. They do it because they think the risk is less than the reward they can personally derive from a cover-up, fraud or any form of non-criminal activity. By making it clear that we now empower individuals—citizens of the country—to stand up and make a declaration, and be protected and supported in doing so, those who want to do wrong will think again. That will prevent our having to spend millions of pounds on redress—money that we can put to better use in this country.

I hope that this short Bill, although it has a long title, will go some way to rebalancing power in this country by allowing those brave souls—who often take on the mighty giants—the opportunity and the support they need to do the right thing, knowing we have got their backs.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Gareth Snell, Liam Byrne, Robin Swann, Richard Foord, Sarah Champion, Mr Jonathan Brash, Tonia Antoniazzi, Dr Allison Gardner, Mr Alex Barros-Curtis, Jim Shannon, Jodie Gosling, Will Stone and Anna Dixon present the Bill.

Gareth Snell accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April 2025, and to be printed (Bill 152).

Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill [Lords]

Considered in Committee

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

AMENDMENT OF LORDS SPIRITUAL (WOMEN) ACT 2015

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to consider clause 2 stand part.

I remind Members that in Committee they should not address the Chair as Madam Deputy Speaker. Please use our names when addressing the Chair. “Madam Chair”, “Chair” and “Madam Chairman” are also acceptable.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Madam Chair.

As I said on Second Reading, this is a straightforward Bill with only one substantive clause and a singular aim: to extend by five years the provisions agreed by this House in the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015. It will mean that vacancies among the Lords Spiritual continue to be filled by the most senior eligible female bishop, if there is one in post, in preference to the most senior male bishop.

The Government introduced the Bill at the request of the Church of England, as was the case in 2015. As we witnessed on Second Reading last month, the Bill has widespread cross-party support, and I am pleased that the spirit of co-operation has continued. I note that no amendments have been tabled to frustrate, challenge or change the aim of the Bill.

The purpose of clause 1 is to extend, by an additional five years, the arrangements made by the 2015 Act. Without this clause, the arrangements would cease to have effect on 17 May 2025. The Bill has been introduced to extend the provisions until 18 May 2030. Clause 2 sets out the commencement and short title of the Bill.

And there we are. It is clear that this Bill commands broad consensus, and I am grateful to colleagues for their approach to this legislation. I very much look forward to the rest of today’s debate, and to seeing the Bill on the statute book soon.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It is a privilege to speak again on this Bill. As the Minister outlined, by extending the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 by five years, this Bill does exactly what it says on the tin. It is very quick and straightforward.

I note that the Church of England introduced its own legislation in 2014 to allow for the ordination of women bishops, and this Bill stems from that. The 2015 Act was introduced by the last Government, and we look forward to seeing its quick progress today.

Overall, the 2015 Act has been successful in ensuring that women have a fair chance of sitting alongside their male counterparts in the other place as one of the Lords Spiritual. Five of the six women bishops were appointed under the Act’s provisions, showing that we have progressed since then.

When further bishops retire, the Bill will give more opportunities for even more women to progress, depending on the situation in each eligible diocese. I think it is good for our Parliament to continue pushing this forward.

Does the Minister foresee another five-year extension? When the measure was first introduced, it was to last for 10 years. How many appointments does she feel are needed before the 2015 Act becomes redundant in and of itself?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He asked whether the Government foresee extending the Act past these five years, and we will review the situation at that time. As the Opposition know, we are honouring what the Church of England has asked us to do. Since the 2015 Act received Royal Assent, we have seen six female bishops take their seats earlier than they otherwise would have done. We will have to review the situation and see what happens with this five-year extension.

As was outlined on Second Reading, we will shortly see the value of this legislation again, when we welcome Debbie Sellin, the Bishop of Peterborough, to the Lords Spiritual. We can already see and feel the benefits of the 2015 Act, and we believe that this extension will be positive. We look forward to seeing what comes out of it.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Bill, not amended in the Committee, considered.

Third Reading

King’s consent signified.

4.50 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I will say, first of all, what a remarkably efficient Committee stage that was. In that tradition, which has now been set, I will keep my remarks brief.

The Bill will continue the positive effects seen from the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 for a further five years. The 2015 Act followed the very welcome decision made the year before by the Church of England to allow women to be ordained as bishops, and the legislation passed the following year began to allow ordained women bishops to enter the other place as Lords Spiritual earlier than would otherwise have been the case.

I want to take the opportunity to thank all the officials who have worked on the Bill for their support to me and to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare), as well as to my right hon. Friend, the Leader of the House of Lords.

I thank all those who spoke on Second Reading and today: my hon. Friends the Members for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), as well as the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and the shadow Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), who showed that wonderful talent today of being succinct in the passage of the Bill. In all seriousness, I wish to put on the record my thanks for the spirit in which the official Opposition have approached the Bill. We are grateful for that. Finally, I give particular thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) in her position as the Second Church Estates Commissioner.

During the passage of the 2015 Act, the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), described the legislation as “unopposable”. I am pleased to say that nearly a decade later, that sentiment continues to ring true. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.52 pm

Mr Holden: I thank the Paymaster General for the spirit in which he has spoken today, as well as the entire Bill team behind this. We should let matters rest there and let the Bill proceed as quickly as possible.

4.53 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues are supportive of the extension of this legislation and its ambition to make our second Chamber a more equal and representative place. I am glad to see the legislation move so swiftly through Parliament and I plan to play my part in that.

We are glad of the intention of the Bill to address the stark gender imbalance that exists among our Lords Spiritual. We are supportive of that aim and welcome steps to ensure that Parliament better reflects the country it serves.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill

Considered in Committee

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): I remind Members that in Committee, they should not address the Chair as Madam Deputy Speaker. Please use our names when addressing the Chair. “Madam Chair”, “Chair” and “Madam Chairman” are also acceptable.

Clause 1

PROVISION OF LOANS OR OTHER FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO UKRAINE

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider:

Clause 2 stand part.

New clause 1—*Reports on loans or other financial assistance to Ukraine*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must—

(a) prepare reports on the operation of assistance provided in accordance with section 1(a),

(b) lay a copy of each report before Parliament.

(2) Each report must provide details of the amount of—

(a) monies provided by the United Kingdom to Ukraine under section 1;

(b) the United Kingdom’s share of the principal loan amount and interest accrued under the scheme; and

(c) receipts of extraordinary profits from the Russian immobilised sovereign assets under the scheme.

(3) Each report must also provide a summary of discussions between His Majesty’s Government and other G7 governments about discussions on any subsequent arrangements that are supplemental to or modify or replace the arrangements referred to in section 1(a), including any discussions concerning—

(a) the range of Russian assets to which the arrangements might apply, and

(b) the use of those assets.

(4) The first report must be laid within the period of 6 months of the passing of this Act.

(5) Each subsequent report must be laid within the period of 6 months beginning with the day on which the previous report was laid.

(6) The duty under subsection (1) ceases to have effect 12 months after the arrangements referred to in section 1(a) or any subsequent arrangements of the kind referred to in section 1(b) cease to operate.”

This new clause establishes an annual reporting requirement relating to the UK share of loans to Ukraine and receipts from the extraordinary profits from the freezing of Russian state assets and to any G7 discussions to extend the arrangements.

4.54 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Madam Chair.

We had a very constructive debate on Second Reading of the Bill. In particular, I wish to express my appreciation for the universal support that the House has shown for the provision of this vital funding. It is clearly a subject

close to the hearts of many of us across the House. I look forward to further discussion on this important Bill today.

As the Committee is aware, the extraordinary revenue acceleration is an ambitious scheme designed to provide Ukraine with a total of \$50 billion in additional support, to be repaid by the extraordinary profits generated on Russian sovereign assets held in the European Union. The United Kingdom's contribution of £2.26 billion is joined by pledges from the United States, the European Union, Canada and Japan.

The Bill contains only two clauses. They are both straightforward. Clause 1 grants the Government the legal spending authority to fulfil the commitment we have made to provide Ukraine with the UK's contribution to the extraordinary revenue acceleration. The clause empowers the Treasury or the Secretary of State to provide the Government of Ukraine with funds approved by Parliament as a result of the extraordinary revenue acceleration loans for Ukraine scheme, or

"any subsequent arrangements that are supplemental to or modify or replace those arrangements."

Payments made under clause 1 will be those that are necessary to perform the UK's commitment to the ERA scheme.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In of course welcoming the Government's measures, I note that the Minister referred to the extraordinary interest from the frozen Russian assets. Have the Government permanently set their mind against any possible actual seizure of the assets themselves, perhaps in agreement with other G7 members or EU members?

Darren Jones: I thank the right hon. Member for his contribution. As we debated on Second Reading, this is a commitment across G7 partners and with the European Union to take action on the proceeds of the assets that are held. For other complicated legal reasons, there is no intention to seize those assets at this time.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his acknowledgement of the cross-party support for this measure, but to back up my colleague, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the \$3 billion from the UK is generous and will make a difference, but the \$300 billion in frozen assets would be utterly game changing. I accept the Minister's argument at the moment about some of the more complicated legal issues. I know that he accepts the very serious situation that the Ukrainians are facing on the front, defending all of us. May I encourage him merely to continue to look at this issue and see whether he can work with G7 colleagues to find a way of unpicking the difficulties that he has highlighted?

Darren Jones: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's encouragement, which I take in good faith. He will know that these matters are multilateral and subject to negotiation with other allies and G7 colleagues, but he will also know, as I am sure the whole House does, that we go into 2025 with a strength of resolve across those G7 countries to do all that we can to help Ukraine continue to mount its defence against the illegal invasion from Russia.

Any other payments beyond the extraordinary revenue acceleration loans to Ukraine or any other country that are unrelated to the ERA scheme are not covered by the provisions of the Bill; this money is in addition to other grants and payments that have been referred to in the House previously.

The clause contains provision for the UK to provide funding towards subsequent arrangements that are supplemental to, modify or replace the ERA. This provision allows for flexibility in the unlikely event that the scheme itself should significantly alter. It is not intended to be used without this change in circumstances.

Clause 2 simply sets out the short title of the Bill.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for opening the debate. The Conservative Government were a vociferous advocate for mobilising Russia's frozen sovereign assets to support Ukraine. We drove G7 and European partners to try to coalesce around the most ambitious solution possible to achieve that outcome. The announcement on 22 October marked progress on that journey and is a step in the right direction. We understand that the Government's position is that the United Kingdom's contribution should be earmarked for supporting Ukraine's military expenditure, including on air defence, artillery and other equipment. The Opposition would support that. We need to persevere with our efforts to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position to counter Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion.

Matters since Second Reading have been fast moving, so let me pose some questions to the Minister. Since Second Reading, the United States has given Ukraine \$20 billion, funded by the profits of frozen Russian assets. That economic support forms a significant part of the overall \$50 billion package agreed by G7 member nations and announced in June. The US Treasury said that it had transferred the \$20 billion to a World Bank fund, where it will be available for Ukraine to draw. Money handled by the World Bank cannot be used for military purposes.

The US Administration had initially hoped to dedicate half the money to military aid, but that would have required approval from Congress, which the President did not seek. Perhaps the Minister can update the House on what discussions the UK Government have had with the US Administration, Canada and the European Union about the use of funds provided for military purposes. Are any strings attached to the funds that will be provided by the UK? As the US has already provided its share of moneys anticipated in the G7 package, can the Minister advise the House on the timing of the UK's contribution? I think it was made clear on Second Reading, but it would be helpful to have an update, given the move by the US since then.

As the Minister and the Government have advised, the loans that the UK will pay will form part of the extraordinary revenue acceleration loan agreement by the G7. The loans that the UK will provide will be repaid by the Ukraine loan co-operation mechanism, established by the European Union under regulation 2024/2773 on 24 October. The ability of the UK to have its loans repaid depends in large part on a decision by the European Union to maintain its freeze on Russian assets. The EU renews Russian sanctions every six months, and efforts to extend that to a three-year review cycle were rebuffed

[Richard Fuller]

by Hungary earlier this year. Will the Minister confirm that there is a risk, in the event that the EU does not extend its sanctions on Russia, that the costs of the loan will be borne by UK taxpayers, and what mitigations he might consider if that situation arises?

Finally, the EU controls more than two thirds of Russia's \$300 billion of sovereign assets that have been frozen by western allies following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Of those EU-held frozen assets, 90% are held by the Belgian-based financial services company Euroclear. The profits from the EU-held assets, estimated to be between \$2.6 billion and \$3.2 billion per year, have been used to arm Ukraine and finance its post-war reconstruction. We understand that the EU's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, said in an interview with *The Guardian* on 12 December that the European Union should use the billions in frozen state assets to aid Ukraine. She emphasised that Ukraine had a legitimate claim for compensation, and described the Russian assets held in the EU as

"a tool to pressure Russia."

The Minister responded to earlier interventions, but can he confirm the UK Government's position? Has he discussed the matter with the EU and Belgium, and does he have any plans for the UK to go further on the use of those assets?

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I want to speak to new clause 1, which I have signed, but I first want to reiterate my support for the Government and the Bill. As I said on Second Reading, it is absolutely right and proper that Russia pays for the damage it has done to Ukraine and its people. The Bill is an important first step in providing that financial assistance from Russian assets to Ukraine. Echoing the comments from around the Chamber, we need to move with allies towards a position of seizing Russian assets, but it is a positive first step that we are using the proceeds of the interest on those assets to support Ukraine.

On Second Reading, I mentioned that

"Canada has passed the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations, which collects data on Russian assets, freezes them and publishes the value, which currently stands at 135 billion Canadian dollars".—[*Official Report*, 20 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 312.]

I asked if the Government could disclose Russian assets held in the UK in the same way. New clause 1 goes a long way to providing that. It would ask the Government to lay a copy of a report before Parliament showing under the Act, as it will hopefully become,

"monies provided by the United Kingdom to Ukraine"

to the following level of disclosure:

"the United Kingdom's share of the principal loan amount and interest accrued under the scheme"

and

"receipts of extraordinary profits from the Russian immobilised sovereign assets under the scheme."

It would to an extent mirror what our close ally Canada has done. Although I do not expect to divide on new clause 1, I would appreciate it if the Minister would comment on how he will report progress to the House, disclose the level of Russian state assets that are here,

and state how much of the interest accrued from those assets has been mobilised to support Ukraine in its war efforts.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for outlining some of the things in the new clause we have tabled. I want to outline in some detail what is in new clause 1 and what we hope to achieve with it, and hopefully the Minister will be able to respond and outline some of his thoughts around reporting in particular.

New clause 1 would impose a reporting requirement on the Secretary of State to keep Parliament informed about three critical aspects of our support to Ukraine under the scheme. The reports would detail the monetary support provided to Ukraine, including the amounts disbursed and how that fits into the broader multilateral agreement. That ensures transparency and allows Members and the public to understand the precise scale of our financial commitment. The reports would also provide clarity regarding our share of the principal loan amount and any interest accrued. Such information is vital for proper scrutiny and public trust, ensuring that funds allocated are achieving their intended purpose.

Finally, and most importantly, the reports would shed light on any extraordinary profits arising from immobilised Russian sovereign assets under the scheme. While we cannot legislate here to seize those assets directly, the provision ensures that the question does not simply fade away. By requiring regular reports, we maintain focus on the issue and keep pressure on the Government to engage with our G7 partners. If, at some future point, there is an opportunity to use Russian state assets more directly for Ukraine's recovery, Parliament will be fully informed and ready to act.

The reports must highlight any discussions the UK Government have had with other G7 countries about future steps, including expanding the range of assets considered or using them in new ways. That ensures ongoing diplomatic transparency and accountability. Parliament will know if the Government are pushing for more ambitious measures internationally or if they are hesitating while others lead. In practice, the first report would appear within six months of the Bill's passage, with subsequent reports every six months until one year after the relevant international arrangements cease to operate.

The structured timeline guarantees sustained oversight, rather than just a one-off glance. Given the complexity and duration of the challenges Ukraine faces, such ongoing engagement is critical. It sets a framework for continued scrutiny, encourages more ambitious future action and underscores that, despite the Bill's limited scope, our resolve to hold Russia accountable remains unwavering. Through those measures, we would ensure that Parliament remains fully informed and ready to stand by our Ukrainian allies when the opportunity to take bolder steps arises.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Bill. The battle for Ukraine is one of the defining issues of our age. In February 2022, Putin launched an illegal and reckless invasion of a sovereign European democracy. Seeing that happen in the third decade of the 21st century was a sobering moment; we had seen nothing like it on European soil

since world war two. It put beyond any doubt the revanchist and irredentist ambitions of the Russian regime, and the need for all freedom-loving democratic peoples to resist those ambitions at all costs.

The Ukrainian people are fighting not just for Ukraine, but for all of us—for the values we hold dear: democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and freedom from global gangsters like Putin. By helping Ukraine to stand strong against Russian aggression, we are sending a clear message to dictators and autocrats around the world that we will not tolerate violations of national sovereignty or the use of force to change borders.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Last week I met Ukrainian refugees in my constituency who conveyed not just their gratitude for our country's steadfast support for their war action against Russia, but their sense of desperation because many of their visas run out early next year. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should act quickly to give those people the certainty that they will continue to be welcome in the UK for the foreseeable future?

Gregor Poynton: I agree with my hon. Friend about visas. We need to do everything we can to support the Ukrainian people, whether here in the UK or abroad.

Our support for Ukraine is an investment not just in its future but in the security and stability of Europe and the world. Russia's war against Ukraine has not only devastated the lives of millions, but challenged the very foundations of the international rules-based order. The brutality of Russia's actions, the targeting of civilians and the displacement of more than 8 million Ukrainians are stark reminders of the atrocities that war brings to ordinary people. This is a tragedy for the Russian people, too. Many tens of thousands of Russian troops have been needlessly killed in Ukraine—victims of the vainglorious and deranged ambitions of their leader. Our quarrel is not with ordinary Russians; it is with the regime that oppresses and lies to them.

Ukraine, meanwhile, has shown resilience, courage and an unwavering determination to protect its land, its people and its freedom. President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people have stood firm in the face of adversity. As I have said before, they are fighting not just for Ukraine, but for all of us. Let us make no mistake: if we do not send the weapons and financial support that the Ukrainians need to fight this war, we will one day have to send our sons and daughters to confront Putin and his regime.

I am proud to say that our unwavering support for Ukraine unites Members on both sides of the House, and it has united our country, too. I am very proud to walk around my Livingston constituency and see Ukrainian flags in windows and gardens as a sign of our solidarity. From providing military aid to offering humanitarian assistance, and from imposing sanctions on Russia to offering refuge to those fleeing war, we have acted with purpose and resolve, and many British people, including individuals in this House, have opened their doors to Ukrainian refugees.

The UK has provided £450 million in humanitarian assistance since the start of this full-scale invasion, including £20 million to double this year's support for Ukraine's energy system, and £40 million for stabilisation and early recovery, which the Foreign Secretary announced in Kyiv in September. The Labour Government have

stepped up for Ukraine. The UK will deliver £3 billion of military aid to Ukraine every year for as long as it is needed—their fight is our fight. The UK's military, financial, diplomatic and political support for Ukraine is ironclad. The Bill provides the Government with the spending authority to enable the UK to provide the Ukrainians with financial assistance, as part of the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loans to Ukraine scheme, which is an important part of this effort. It represents an advance of approximately \$50 billion, repaid from the extraordinary profits made on immobilised Russian sovereign assets held in the UK.

We must continue to stand with Ukraine, confront Russian aggression, and pursue Putin for his war crimes. Our response must be one of strength, resilience and unity for as long as it takes.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): At a time of existential threat to Ukraine, I have been heartened by the tone from across the House towards the Ukrainian people. It is critical at this moment in history that this House and all European Governments step up and do not give up. While I welcome the details of this short Bill, we should be focusing on the untapped countermeasure and counter-offensive that is at our disposal. Like a number of colleagues, I gently say to the Minister that we should think about the use of frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine in its non-violent economic and political reconstruction. The UN General Assembly has already endorsed an international mechanism for compensating Ukraine, but we cannot wait for the war to be over before we enact that countermeasure. Back in 2022, Ukraine lost 29% of its GDP, so if it only receives its compensation at the end of the war, that will be far too late.

5.15 pm

By using the \$300 billion in Russian central bank assets held by free and open countries now, we can give Ukraine a lifeline as it continues its honourable defence of its country. I believe that this action would be not just morally justified, but underpinned by sound legal grounds. The true centre of gravity in this war is Ukraine's economic endurance against Russia's strategy of attrition and ruin, but despite the efforts across Europe, there is currently a leadership vacuum when it comes to pushing through the use of frozen Russian assets to assist the decisive action that is needed for Ukraine's victory. We are seeing Putin's increasing isolation, with civil unrest in Russia, and it is imperative that we take advantage of that.

To date, European countries and the United States have provided roughly \$3 billion per month to the Ukrainian people in order to keep their Government functioning. I think all Members of this House would endorse that approach, but in the long term, it is neither right nor practical to expect western taxpayers to foot the bill for reconstructing Ukraine when there are legal means for Russia to pay. There can be no credible scenario whereby Russia gets its money back after waging an unprompted war against Ukraine while the victims go uncompensated. That would effectively give the rights of an aggressor precedence over those of its victims.

We must show that the UN rulings and international law have teeth, and that Russia will face consequences for waging its illegal war. We cannot live in the blind hope that Russia will fulfil its legal obligations. As such,

I gently say to the Minister that taking action now and using those frozen Russian assets as a form of down payment on the reparations that Russia will one day have to pay is a route that the Government should pursue at the earliest opportunity.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of this Bill, and to pay tribute to the Government for their support for Ukraine and to the consensus across the House that Ukraine must be supported against the barbaric and illegal invasion of a sovereign nation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) said. The invasion of one European state by another in February 2022 was something I never thought I would see in my lifetime—we all thought that had been consigned to the history books, where it belongs. I am very pleased that we are backing the Ukrainian people in their struggle, and I hope that in time, the Russian people can vote in free, fair and democratic elections to choose their own path.

I also pay tribute to the community of Northumberland, who have come together to welcome families from Ukraine in Hexham, in Riding Mill, and in other towns and villages across my constituency. When I am out and about in my constituency, I am always struck by the Ukrainian flags that I see, sometimes in the most incongruous places—on country lanes, on the sides of churches and in private homes. It really gives me a renewed optimism to see those flags flying beneath the beautiful Northumbrian sky. One question that has been put to me by constituents, and on which I would like to gently probe the Minister, is the future of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Many families who have taken in Ukrainian refugees have asked me to pursue clarity on that scheme, so I would be grateful if the Minister could give some assurance about it, or some timetable for it.

Ultimately, this short Bill is needed to promote and protect one of our sovereign democratic allies, to protect our institutions, and—as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston said—to avoid the need for further conflict in the years to come. Putin's war machine could quite easily continue to impinge on our lives and on people's lives across the rest of Europe.

Stephen Gethins: I would endorse the comments that have been made by colleagues. I think we sometimes need a little bit of perspective. In my constituency and in Tayside and Fife—the hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) will be well aware of this—we have defensive barriers that were built during the second world war. The barriers in Tayside and Fife were built by Polish and, as they now are, Ukrainian soldiers who were standing up to tyranny. They built those defences to defend Scotland, and to defend the rest of the United Kingdom as well. They knew that there is no point in standing up to tyranny just in one corner of Europe; we have to do it throughout Europe. Those defences stand as a testament to the time when the Poles and the Ukrainians stood by us. Now is the time for us to once again stand by them.

I echo the remarks made by the hon. Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) about the way that Ukrainians have come to our homes and have enriched our society and our communities. I know they are keen to go home, but we can just give them that little bit of certainty.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) for his work and that of others on frozen assets. That speaks to the enormous challenge that Ukraine is facing, and that the rest of us are therefore facing at exactly the same time.

I acknowledge the work of the Minister in seeking to untangle those assets. I welcome his remarks—I really do—but some of the administrative burdens are as nothing compared with the burdens that have been carried by Ukrainian troops on the frontline in Kursk, Donbas and elsewhere, and compared with the challenge we will see from conflict and a refugee crisis should that front collapse at any point. I know he gets that, and there is agreement across the Chamber on it, but I think it is worth underlining.

I also welcome the remarks made by the Conservative shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), about engaging with our European partners on this, because that is pivotal. I fully endorse his remark about where a number of these funds are being kept, and about how if one moves, we all need to move. There is unanimity in this Committee, and I have been struck by the outstanding work done by a number of colleagues. That unanimity and resolve reflect the magnitude of the challenge that each and every one of us faces if we do not stand up to tyranny and secure the future of Europe right now.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I wholeheartedly welcome this Bill, which allows us, alongside our G7 partners, to provide £38.6 billion of loans to Ukraine to be repaid using profits from sanctioned Russian assets, and I wholly support this Government's commitment to stand unequivocally with Ukraine. I believe that Putin and his cronies should be the ones who pay for the damage they have caused across Ukraine. To that end, while this is a very welcome first step, does the Minister agree that we should be doing all we can within the rule of law to seize frozen Russian assets, both private and state, and use them to finance the reconstruction of Ukraine?

Moreover, may I gently suggest to the Minister that we must secure a swift resolution on the proceeds of the sale of Chelsea football club? In March 2022, Roman Abramovich pledged to sell Chelsea football club and donate the £2.5 billion—nearly seven times the value of the humanitarian assistance that the UK has pledged since the invasion in 2022—to support victims of the war in Ukraine. However, as I think all Members know, two years on from the sale, this has hit a stalemate, and regrettably no money has been delivered to the victims of the conflict.

With that in mind, the Government should commit to a number of recommendations that the campaign group Redress has worked on, and all of which I support. The first recommendation is taking steps to ensure that the proceeds of the sale of Chelsea football club are swiftly transferred to a charitable foundation in the UK, or adopting other existing mechanisms set up to deliver reparations to victims of the conflict. The second is ensuring that a substantial percentage of the funds is used for reparations for victims of the conflict, particularly victims of gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian, such as survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. The third recommendation is to engage Ukrainian civil society, victims and survivors

in guiding the repurposing of those funds. The fourth and final recommendation is to establish a working group between the Government, civil society and survivors to ensure that funds are distributed in an effective and timely manner.

I very much welcome the substantial progress that the Government have made in the past few months in standing shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people, including the recent announcement of a new anti-corruption champion, the further designation of vessels in the Russian shadow fleet and increasing collaboration across Government to tackle Putin's war economy, bearing down on both the Kremlin and the wider network of cronies who enable his unlawful and persistent invasion of Ukraine. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) said, the Bill is an important step, and I welcome further initiatives to support the Ukrainian people as they continue their struggle to protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Putin's unlawful invasion.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell). He has demonstrated why he will be such a valuable addition to the Foreign Affairs Committee, and I congratulate him on his election to it. I associate myself with his comments and those of other Members. We often find ourselves disagreeing over the smallest of details, so I am proud that we can all come together on an issue of such magnitude in unity with the people of Ukraine. Long may that cross-party support continue.

Earlier this year, as some Members may know, I had the privilege of visiting Ukraine. I went over with an Estonian charity, driving a couple of military pick-up trucks over from the UK as part of a much larger convoy that went into Kyiv. Those vehicles were handed over to the Ukrainian soldiers, and it brought home that there was not only support and solidarity in this country for Ukraine, but solidarity across the whole of Europe. That is why we are coming together on the measures in this Bill. Hopefully we will have an opportunity to go again, and I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel). We were both on a call earlier, and I know that he and other Members have also made trips to Ukraine and been part of aid convoys to help people, and long may that continue.

This Bill is another tool in the arsenal when it comes to fighting one of the world's greatest tyrants. Ukraine's fight against Russian tyranny is not just for Ukraine's sovereignty, but for the freedom and security of the whole of Europe. One striking thing in making that journey is realising just how flat Europe is. I know that seems a silly point, but it brings home that there is nothing stopping Putin at the borders of Ukraine if we do not stand up against him now. The fact that another of the world's tyrants, Assad, is now cowering in Moscow demonstrates the importance of curtailing Russia's aggression.

I am proud that this Government and the Government before have stood foursquare behind Ukraine. As other Members have said, the Bill will land a deafening blow on Putin's war machine and unlock a £2.26 billion contribution from the UK to the extraordinary revenue acceleration scheme, which crucially will not be paid by

Ukraine or by British taxpayers. It comes from dodgy cash from profits owned by sanctioned Russian assets held in the EU.

I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton), who listed the various ways in which the previous Government and the current Government have supported Ukraine. Long may that continue. It is so important that we continue to stand four-square behind Ukraine for as long as it takes. I urge the Committee to do all in our power to ensure that the Bill receives Royal Assent as urgently as is feasible, especially as we approach winter, when the battle conditions will become even tougher. Finally, I use this opportunity to pay tribute to the Ukrainian forces fighting on the frontline, the British troops involved in training and equipping them and all those showing resilience in the face of Putin's illegal war.

Darren Jones: In closing, I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), for Livingston (Gregor Poynton), for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), for Hexham (Joe Morris), for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) and for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) and the hon. Members for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) and for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins), the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), and the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for being here for this important debate.

5.30 pm

All of us across the House want the same thing: for Ukraine to win the war and for the UK to provide the best possible support to make that happen as quickly as possible. I assure the House that this will remain a priority for the Government, and the Bill is an important step towards that goal.

I turn to new clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary). I will explain why the Government will not support it. The new clause would impose reporting requirements on the Secretary of State in relation to the ERA. As I see it, those would broadly fit into two categories. The first would require financial reporting to Parliament on the progress of the £2.26 billion ERA loan itself. That would include providing information on the disbursements made by the UK and our share comparatively to the G7, and providing details of the repayments that we will receive from the EU's Ukraine loan co-operation mechanism.

The second category would involve producing a written summary for Parliament of discussions between the UK and our G7 allies regarding any subsequent schemes. The reference to subsequent arrangements tracks to the language in paragraph (b) of clause 1, which provides the Government with the flexibility to provide funds to Ukraine via alternative arrangements that are supplemental to, modify or replace the ERA: for example, where necessary, to respond to unforeseen future events or material changes in circumstances beyond our control. I will approach each of those categories in turn.

The additional financial reporting requirements in subsection (2) of the new clause are unnecessary because the information required to be reported under that

subsection will be reported in any case through the Treasury's existing channels. The first tranche of the loan will be disbursed from the Treasury in the financial year to 31 March 2025. The spend will therefore be reflected accordingly in the Department's detailed annual report and accounts for this financial year alongside disclosure of any narrative associated with the spend.

The annual report and accounts will be laid in Parliament before they are made public; that usually happens in mid-July. Any future spending and repayments in future years will be reflected in the annual report and accounts in the normal way. The Treasury plans to make the ERA support package separately identifiable in the notes to the accounts, which will allow the financial impact of the scheme to be readily understandable. That will be included alongside full disclosure of the risks—for example, credit risks and market risk—associated with the ERA spending.

I turn to subsection (3), which would require the publication of a summary of discussions between the Government and other G7 lenders on subsequent arrangements. As the House might expect me to say, the Government should not tie their hands by agreeing to provide a public report on the nature of private discussions between G7 lenders. That would threaten to undermine the UK's credibility with our established partners and allies; I hope that is an obvious point. Privacy allows our international partners to speak candidly to us and vice versa, which is key to our diplomatic efforts. The House will understand that that is especially important for matters of global security, such as the debate before us. When discussions are made and milestones reached, the G7 issues statements and communiqués in the normal way. We do not want to undermine that process with mandatory additional reporting to Parliament.

The Government are committed to transparency and accountability, however, and Parliament will be updated in the usual way when major decisions are taken. That includes through oral and written ministerial statements, as the Chancellor did when the UK's contribution to the ERA was announced in October, but that does not extend so far as to provide a running commentary, which would ultimately serve to undermine our ability to resolve sensitive matters, including those relating to Russian assets, with our closest allies. I thank the hon. Member for tabling the new clause and hope that my answers were satisfactory in explaining the Government's position.

Before I close, I turn to other points made by right hon. and hon. Members in the debate. The shadow Chief Secretary asked me a number of questions. First, of course, G7 allies will co-ordinate our approach to the scheme in the round, including repayments and mechanisms for the future. However, as he noted, different countries are using contributions in different ways. As we have reported to the House, our intention is to use the money for military aid to Ukraine. The terms of the loan and how the loan will be executed is currently being discussed between our Government and the Ukrainian Government and will be managed in the normal way as part of our portfolio of loans.

On timing, as I said, we intend to get the money to Ukraine as quickly as possible next year, which is why we will progress to Royal Assent for this enabling Bill as quickly as possible. The terms of the ERA say that all money should be paid at the latest by the end of 2027,

although we intend to be quicker than that. A number of Members raised the correct point that, under international law, Russia is liable for the damage it has caused in Ukraine and must pay for that damage.

A number of hon. Members asked about asset seizures. I have set out the Government's position on that, but I can reassure the House that although this Bill is not about seizure of assets, the Government and our allies continue to keep all available opportunities under review so that we can pursue lawful avenues to ensure that Russia pays for the damage it has caused. My hon. Friends the Members for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy and for Hexham raised the Homes for Ukraine scheme and visas. I assure them that I will pass those points to my colleagues in the Home Office to consider and respond to in due course.

Members rightly pointed out the support that this country has given to the people of Ukraine, the Ukrainian armed forces and our allies in supporting them. It was timely going into the Christmas period, when we have many images of England on our Christmas cards and our TVs, to note the number of Ukrainian flags on houses, churches and community buildings across the United Kingdom. That is a gesture of solidarity between the British people and the Ukrainian people, and shows that we are keeping them in our hearts this Christmas time, and in our minds as we think about our resolve going into 2025 to do all that we can to help them through these atrocious situations on the border with Russia.

Sir Julian Lewis: Among some of the excellent contributions we heard in this debate was the remark by the hon. Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) that if Putin is not seen to fail in Ukraine, British troops will ultimately end up being involved in some sort of conflict directly. Will the Minister take that message back to his Treasury colleagues? Some of us feel that the arguments about whether 2.5% of GDP should be spent now or in a couple of years' time rather miss the point, because if we get to the stage where British forces are engaged, we will be spending far more than that. As a Treasury Minister, he should realise that investment in defence in peacetime can deter a much more expensive conflict.

Darren Jones: The Government's position, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, is that we will set out the trajectory to 2.5% of GDP on NATO qualifying spend in 2025, following the conclusion of the strategic defence review and the spending review. He will also know that we fund our armed forces not just to be prepared, but to be ready to contribute. But clearly, I cannot comment on hypothetical scenarios in 2025. He was right to allude to contributions in the debate that rightly highlighted the Ukrainian armed forces on the battlefield fighting not just for their own country but for the security of Europe and the United Kingdom. I think we are all clear-eyed about that and, therefore, our responsibility to help them. That is why the Bill is one part of the package of support that we are putting in place and will continue to put in place over 2025.

I think I have answered most of the points substantively, and so I conclude my remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.
Bill reported, without amendment.
Bill, not amended in the Committee, considered.
Third Reading

5.39 pm

Darren Jones: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Once again, I extend my gratitude to Members from across the House for contributing to today's debate and facilitating the swift passage of the Bill. Today, and throughout the Bill's passage so far, this House has made clear its strong feelings on the plight of the Ukrainian people. Members of all political stripes have spoken eloquently in favour of continued support for Ukraine in its ongoing fight against Russia's tyrannical, unprovoked and illegal aggression. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, no matter which party has been in office, the UK Government have remained committed to fully supporting Ukraine for as long as it takes.

The G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration scheme and this Bill, which facilitates the UK's contribution, are another demonstration of the UK delivering on that promise. Beyond the ERA, the UK has now committed £12.8 billion in military, humanitarian and economic support to Ukraine. Earlier this year, the Government announced that we will continue to provide guaranteed military support of £3 billion per year to Ukraine for as long as it takes, and our ERA commitment goes further still. As hon. Members will know, the Bill unlocks the UK's contribution of £2.26 billion, which constitutes a fair and proportionate contribution to the scheme based on our GDP share within the G7 and EU. It remains crucial that we pass the Bill as swiftly as possible to begin disbursing funds this winter to meet Ukraine's urgent needs. Taken together, the ERA will provide Ukraine with an additional \$50 billion in support. I pay tribute to our G7 partners for their collective determination to bring the ERA to fruition in just a few short months. We all remain united in our support for Ukraine against Russian provocation.

We in this House recognise the sacrifice that the people of Ukraine are making. They are fighting not only for their own survival and national identity, but for the security of Europe and the United Kingdom. The Bill will enable the Government to provide Ukraine with the essential support it requires to continue its battle against Putin's unjust and illegal aggression.

At this point, Madam Deputy Speaker, given that this is probably my last contribution to the House this year, I wish you and the House a very merry Christmas, and say to the Ukrainian people that we hold them all in our hearts over this difficult period. I commend the Bill to the House.

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

5.42 pm

Richard Fuller: On behalf of the official Opposition, I thank the Government for bringing forward the Bill and concluding its stages in this House before we break

for Christmas. I also thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for the way he has handled the discussions on the Bill at each stage, providing Members with all the information they need at any stage and in answer to all questions. He has done an exemplary job.

I note the uniformity of support across this House from Members, whichever party they represent. However, it goes deeper than that: since former Prime Minister Boris Johnson galvanised the west into defence of Ukraine, through former Prime Minister Liz Truss, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), and now, with our current Prime Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the United Kingdom Government have been determined in support of the people of Ukraine. It says something of the depth of support in this country for the people of Ukraine that if we swept away a large proportion of the Members of this House and replaced them with different representatives from across the country, the resolve in support for Ukraine would remain the same.

We must not give up our efforts. Since we started our debates, there have been further actions in Ukraine. I will quote the latest summary from the Institute for the Study of War, which demonstrates the urgent need for the support set out in the Bill that we are passing today:

"on December 14...Russian forces fielded more than 100 pieces of equipment in a recent assault in the Siversk direction and noted that there were 55 combat engagements in this direction on December 13—a significant increase in tempo in this area of the frontline."

It goes on:

"The GUR reported that a contingent consisting of Russian and North Korean servicemen in Kursk Oblast lost 200 personnel as of December 14 and that Ukrainian drones swarmed a North Korean position, which is consistent with recent reports of North Korean forces engaging in attritional infantry assaults."

Our support, the military support the United Kingdom provides under this measure, is desperately needed, but the need goes further. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an estimated 8 million Ukrainian citizens have been displaced and 6 million people have left the country as refugees, with many still unable to return. As hon. Members have said, over 200,000 Ukrainian citizens are living in the United Kingdom. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families. We should also note the work of British charities and non-governmental organisations, including the British Red Cross, which estimates that, with other Red Cross and Red Crescent societies around the world, assistance has been provided to over 18 million people in Ukraine.

As we take our break, many of us will be celebrating Christmas. I hope that the Christian message of peace and hope will resonate in the new year, and that all of us in western Europe and particularly in Ukraine can look forward to a peaceful future.

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

5.46 pm

James MacCleary: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in support of the Bill and to highlight the importance of our unwavering commitment

[James MacCleary]

to Ukraine. I thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for his detailed response to the points raised in my new clause, which I really appreciate.

When I addressed this House a few weeks ago, I expressed my desire for measures that would go further, particularly to empower the Government to seize Russian state assets frozen in the UK and use them to help rebuild Ukraine—an issue many hon. Members touched on in the Committee of the whole House. It remains, in my view and that of the Liberal Democrats, a critical step that must be taken. While procedural constraints have made such an amendment impossible within the scope of the Bill, the importance of ensuring accountability and justice cannot be overstated. The repurposing of frozen Russian assets is not just a financial issue; it is about ensuring that those who have enabled the Kremlin's actions face tangible consequences. The UK has an opportunity to lead by example in demonstrating that aggression will not go unpunished.

The Bill, by enabling the UK to participate in the G7's ERA loans programme, provides vital financial support to Ukraine at a critical time in its fight for freedom. Beyond financial measures, we must continue to stand resolutely with our Ukrainian allies in other ways. That includes providing advanced military aid, bolstering Ukraine's defences, and working closely with NATO and the EU to co-ordinate our collective response to Russian aggression. The UK must lead by example, showing that our commitment to Ukraine is unshakeable even in the face of uncertainty about the future of US support.

Ukraine's fight is not just for its own sovereignty, but for the principles of freedom and democracy that we all hold dear. With winter looming and the conflict showing no sign of abating, the UK must be a steadfast partner, ensuring that Ukraine has the resources, support and international backing it needs to endure and prevail. The Bill is a welcome step forward, but it cannot be the final word. Let us seize the moment to demonstrate moral leadership and resolve. Let us ensure that Ukraine's struggle for freedom remains our shared cause, paving the way for a future of peace and resilience.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

**COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY
ASSOCIATION AND INTERNATIONAL
COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (STATUS)
BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)**

Ordered,

That the Order of 22 October 2024 (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [Lords] (Programme)) be varied as follows:

- (1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.
- (2) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.
- (3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—
(*Stephen Doughty*.)

**Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
and International Committee of
the Red Cross (Status) Bill [Lords]**

*Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading*

5.49 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a particular pleasure to follow the swift passage of that important Bill on financial assistance to Ukraine. It was also a particular pleasure to join the Ukrainian Foreign Minister twice in the last two weeks and to assure him of our continued support at this time, especially as we approach the Christmas season, but also, crucially, to assure him that we will continue our financial commitments and that there is unity across the House and, indeed, the country.

This too is an important Bill, on which there is again a huge amount of unity across the House. I hope that it will not detain us long. I pay tribute to all Members for their co-operation in getting the Bill this far so quickly in the new Parliament and under this new Government. It is a rare occasion when the House finds itself in such agreement, but the Bill has continued to receive unwavering support from Members in all parts of the House. That is a true testament to the importance that Members ascribe not only to the aims of the Bill, but to the aims and values of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I strongly endorse the sentiments that the Minister has expressed. May I offer my thanks and support to the CPA, which recently staged an excellent visit to Reading on behalf of the Barbadian Parliament? It was a wonderful experience, which was interesting and supportive both for me as a parliamentarian and for my colleagues from Barbados. It helped the Barbadian community in Reading to build and develop vital links. Our town once had the largest concentration of Barbadians outside Barbados itself, and there is a strong heritage there. The visit was much appreciated, and I wholeheartedly support the CPA and thank it for its work.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, which underline the importance that we ascribe to our relationships with our Commonwealth partners as parliamentarians and, of course, as a Government. As my hon. Friend will know, the Foreign Secretary made his own visit to the Caribbean just last week. Those ties are hugely important, and it is important that we maintain them in the House as well.

This is a significant moment for both organisations. The CPA has been seeking this change in its legal status for more than 20 years, and the ICRC has been doing so for over a decade. We are now finally able to deliver that. The passing of the Bill will ensure that the CPA's headquarters remain in the UK, and its treatment as an international organisation will allow it to continue to operate fully across the Commonwealth and international fora. It will also allow the CPA to participate fully in areas where it is currently restricted.

As I have said, we ascribe great importance to our membership of the Commonwealth, a vibrant global network of 2.5 billion people united in the pursuit of freedom, peace and prosperity. In October this year, Samoa hosted the first Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in a Pacific island country. It was His Majesty the King's first CHOGM as head of the Commonwealth, and there was a strong Government attendance. I was especially delighted that the representative of the UK overseas territories was present—the current president of the UK Overseas Territories Association and Premier of the Cayman Islands. This is the crucial context within which the CPA operates, and it is crucial that we secure status change so that it can continue its work in promoting democracy and good governance across the Commonwealth. Having participated in its work in the past, with both incoming and outgoing delegations—I think fondly of my visit to Ghana a few years ago, working with Commonwealth parliamentarians from across Africa—I have seen that work at first hand.

Throughout the Bill's passage, Members have been vocal about the crucial role the ICRC plays in conflicts to protect civilian lives. It has a unique mandate under the Geneva conventions to provide humanitarian assistance to people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence and to promote the laws that protect victims of war, and it works globally to promote international humanitarian law. It also has a unique legitimacy to engage with all parties to conflicts, and has unparalleled access to provide protection and assistance to vulnerable groups in conflicts around the world. It is therefore critical that it can operate in the UK in accordance with its international mandate, maintaining its strict adherence to the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence and its working method of confidentiality. I know from our previous debates that Members are in agreement on why the Bill is so important in enshrining those principles.

We will continue to work with both the CPA and the ICRC to agree the written arrangements that will set out the parameters of the status change, as well as the privileges and immunities that the Government have decided to confer on both organisations. Those arrangements will be specified in Orders in Council, which will be brought to the House to be debated and voted on before being implemented.

As Members are aware, this is not the first time the House has considered the Bill. It was first a private Member's Bill that was introduced in the last Session by the former Member for Basingstoke, and I pay tribute to her for her efforts in pushing it forward. I also want to put on the record my gratitude to the team of FCDO officials and lawyers who have worked tirelessly to ensure the Bill's readiness and provided support to various Ministers throughout its passage. I thank my noble Friends in the other place, Lord Collins and Baroness Chapman, for their work in ensuring the Bill's smooth passage. I also express my thanks and appreciation to the drafters in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel for preparing the Bill, and to the House authorities for all their work behind the scenes.

Given that this is likely to be my last outing before the festive season, I want to wish a very happy Christmas to Members of the House—Nadolig llawen—and I wish everybody a successful festive season. I am delighted that we will get this Bill to its conclusion imminently.

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

5.55 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am pleased to stand here as the shadow Minister representing His Majesty's official Opposition, and to support this Bill. Sadly, I note that the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) is not in her place.

The Opposition support the Bill, as we have done throughout its passage—both here and in the other place. We supported the Bill in the last Session, when it was a private Member's Bill. I, too, pay tribute to Dame Maria Miller, who is no longer a Member of this House and who originally promoted the Bill. We continue our support in this Session as it comes before us as a Government Bill. I thank their lordships, who have taken a lot of interest in the Bill and made valuable contributions, particularly Baroness Anelay of St Johns. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) for their work on Second Reading and in Committee respectively.

This is a sensible Bill for two really important organisations: the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross. These organisations do vital work that is often aligned with UK foreign policy objectives. It is important to resolve the issues that the Bill seeks to address, and we want to see it on the statute book. The Bill is to be welcomed, and it will now be key for the Government to take advantage of the new structures it puts in place.

On the CPA, we welcome the fact that the Bill makes a number of legal changes and supports the work of the courts in dealing with privileges and immunities. As we said on Second Reading, it is important that the Government now stretch every sinew to support both the work of the UK delegation and the CPA more widely. Perhaps I might also say that the performance of the Government at their first Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting was found a little wanting. That said, we very much hope to see future engagement with the CPA, particularly in the democratic institution-building work that was signalled in the Samoa communiqué.

The Commonwealth is a community of like-minded nations with shared history, but it is about so much more. It is about our public institutions, an independent judiciary and the rule of law. I recall my own visit to Barbados in 2021, when I was a Minister at the Foreign Office. I accompanied the then Prince of Wales, who is now His Majesty the King. It is surely a testament to the value of the Commonwealth that Barbados has chosen to remain a member of the community of nations.

The CPA does so much to strengthen the Commonwealth, and I praise the work of colleagues serving on the executive committee, in particular my hon. Friends the Members for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) and for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), who are not in the Chamber today, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who is sitting on the Benches behind me. I also thank my colleagues in the other place, Baroness Sugg and Lord Kamall, who are on the executive committee.

[Wendy Morton]

The ICRC has a unique legitimacy that allows it to engage with parties to conflicts across the world, and to gain important access to vulnerable people in conflict zones. The Bill recognises that, which is to be welcomed. The ICRC does vital work; I hope the Government will continue to recognise that, as we did in government, by committing generously to supporting its activities. The ICRC employs 18,000 staff around the world who work under incredibly difficult circumstances in some of the worst crises, and I would like to thank them on behalf of those of us on the Opposition Benches for their service.

I will conclude as I started, by reiterating our support for the Bill before us today. It makes a number of welcome changes that support the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross, and I again pay tribute to all who support their vital work. As the Minister said as he concluded, I hope this is my last outing at the Dispatch Box this week before Christmas, and I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all Members a very merry Christmas.

6 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): First, I declare my interest as a member of the UK CPA executive.

It has been great to see the swift progress this Bill has made thus far and the cross-party support it has received. It is a short but important Bill that defines the status of the CPA and the ICRC. This is the third time it has been brought before the House, and I am sure, given the cross-party support it has already received, it will pass Third Reading smoothly.

The Bill is essential in providing the CPA and the ICRC with the required protections to operate as trusted partners of the UK and continue work in promoting democracy and meeting humanitarian needs. The UK continues proudly to reaffirm the vital role of the Commonwealth family in tackling the issues we face in an ever more uncertain world. I recently met the high commissioners of a few Commonwealth countries, including Zambia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Cyprus, who truly value their relationship with the UK. We must continue to foster good relations across the Commonwealth, and we can do so only if leaders and parliamentarians have the opportunity to work together.

I fully support the proposals for elevating the CPA and the ICRC status within the UK to stand alongside their vital international partners. This Bill will allow the CPA to operate as an international organisation headquartered in London rather than within limited scope as a UK charity. The CPA does incredible work in engaging parliamentarians across the Commonwealth, fully embodying its mission in promoting the advancement of parliamentary democracy. The threat to democracy and our liberal values has never been greater since the second world war, so this mission is more important than ever. The ability to engage openly with parliamentarians globally, particularly in fragile and conflict-ridden regions, and to exchange knowledge, good practice and an understanding of good democratic governance could make a world of difference.

Globally, the CPA operates in over 180 legislatures in 60 nations and encompasses over 18,500 parliamentarians. The cross-parliamentary engagement conferences and the forums allow for fruitful discussion on common values and aspirations. Importantly, this Bill will provide parliamentarians with the credibility and authority to operate fully on the international stage. The status of the CPA as an international organisation will facilitate an active role in global diplomacy in addressing the challenges of our time. Expanding its organisational scope will also bring the ability to sign international conventions and pursue political purposes such as denouncing the political persecution of parliamentarians in several countries. Granting the necessary privileges and legal immunities to the CPA places it on an equal footing with other international organisations, thus ensuring its global influence in promoting parliamentary democracy and good governance.

Crucially, the Bill seeks to elevate the status of the ICRC. As an independent humanitarian organisation, the ICRC has a unique mandate to protect victims of armed conflicts, enshrined in the Geneva conventions of 1949. This Bill will provide the necessary mechanisms to enhance the work of the ICRC in a way befitting its mandate in international humanitarian law. Granting the ICRC certain immunities and privileges will bring the UK into line with over 110 states and alleviate many operational challenges under its current status.

The ICRC's efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and rebuild communities need to be protected. It is important to recognise that the ICRC works in many dangerous zones around the world, and that allowing the legal protection of information and testimonies will in turn protect its workers and benefit the people it is helping. Its work in Gaza, Sudan, Congo, Ukraine and in over 90 countries must be protected and must maintain its principles of neutrality, independence and confidentiality.

This Bill provides a critical step in ensuring that both the CPA and the ICRC, through their new status as international organisations, are entrusted by the Government to operate fully within the UK. Both organisations will continue to be valued partners in the UK's central role in global diplomacy, through the promotion of good governance, democracy and the Commonwealth, and in addressing global humanitarian needs.

I hope the whole House will support the Bill on Third Reading.

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

6.5 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Thank you for your forbearance, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for my hasty entry into the Chamber, which does not detract from the high importance that the Liberal Democrats and I attach to this Bill.

I am pleased to welcome the Bill back to the House on Third Reading and, having listened to hon. Members over the past weeks, I acknowledge the reservoir of support across the House for both the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

On the Liberal Democrat Benches, we want to see Britain deepening trust and building partnerships with our allies; we want to see Britain setting an example in its support for international humanitarian law; and we want to see Britain countering the rise in global authoritarianism through our commitment to institutions such as the Commonwealth.

Set against the scale of these ambitions, the changes made by this Bill may seem comparatively narrow. They are, however, no less important. By altering the status of the CPA and the ICRC so they can be treated as international organisations, with associated privileges and immunities, we will safeguard the critical missions of both bodies while ensuring they can retain their particular relationships with the United Kingdom.

In the case of the CPA, the importance of this is readily apparent. The CPA's present designation as a UK charity limits its participation in the work of the Commonwealth to that of a civil society organisation and fails to respect the spirit of co-operation and voluntary association that animates the Commonwealth. This Bill is an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the Commonwealth and to continue hosting the CPA's headquarters here in the United Kingdom.

The Commonwealth charter, signed by the late Queen Elizabeth II, lays out the 16 core values and principles of the Commonwealth. These include democracy, human rights, gender equality, protecting the environment, and the rule of law. These are all principles and values that the Liberal Democrats are pleased to champion.

I turn now to the International Committee of the Red Cross and its thousands of dedicated employees who, along with millions of volunteers in national and international Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, comprise the rest of the broader Red Cross and Red Crescent movement. The ICRC is an organisation without parallel. Its unique mandate is an exclusively humanitarian one: to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence, and to promote and strengthen humanitarian law.

I am sad to say that the ICRC's mission is as indispensable now as it was at the committee's founding in 1863 and when it was affirmed by the Geneva conventions in 1949. Today the world is racked by more than 120 armed conflicts. In Sudan, Ukraine, Gaza and across the wider world, millions have been made refugees and tens of millions have been internally displaced. The UN estimates that 87% of the casualties resulting from recent hostilities have been civilians.

Aid workers, such as those in the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, are increasingly at risk, and even news welcomed by this House, such as the fall of the brutal Assad regime, is accompanied by urgent humanitarian need. Since the beginning of the war in Syria in 2011, the ICRC has registered more than 35,000 cases of people who have gone missing. Now, with Assad's prisons finally cast open, the ICRC has been working to reunite families and to support ex-prisoners.

In Sudan, where some 25 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian aid, the shameful Russian veto of the UN Security Council resolution drafted by the UK and Sierra Leone, which called on both the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese armed forces to increase aid access, must now encourage the Government to redouble their efforts to see humanitarian law upheld.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Gaza, the ICRC has facilitated the release, transfer and return to their loved ones of 109 Israeli hostages held in Gaza. The committee also performed the same function for 154 freed Palestinian detainees. Presently, the ICRC has been denied access to the hostages even now held by Hamas in Gaza, as well as to the Palestinians in Israeli detention. The ICRC therefore has no assurance that either the hostages or the detainees are receiving humane treatment, nutrition or healthcare. Will the Minister affirm that the ICRC must be given immediate access to the hostages in Gaza and to the detainees in Israel and the occupied territories to fulfil its mandate under the third Geneva convention? Will he also inform the House of what actions the Department is taking to ensure combatants adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law to treat prisoners and detainees humanely?

By treating the ICRC as an international organisation, we can provide it with a legal basis to protect its neutrality and continue its work in the world's most dangerous and fraught regions, and that will be a positive step. However, we must also recognise that while changes to the ICRC's status are necessary, they are far from sufficient to ensure that humanitarian law is upheld and humanitarian aid is delivered where, when and in the quantities that it is needed. I urge the Government to stand up to the permissive attitude in international law that we witness today in many war zones, affirm our shared values in support of international humanitarian law and impress upon warring factions the need to deliver aid without interference.

I am glad that the FCDO's support to the ICRC this year looks likely to exceed the £133 million provided last year. However, I remain concerned that the cuts to the UK's international development spending from 0.58% of gross national income to 0.5%, announced in the Budget, will be reflected in reduced support to the ICRC in 2025 and beyond. At this dangerous time, when support for humanitarian aid organisations is so critical, I hope the Government will commit to increasing the funding next year for the ICRC and the indispensable work it does.

We Liberal Democrats come from a long tradition of liberal internationalism, which prizes co-operation based on shared values. The efforts of both the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross is of vital importance. We are proud to support them and proud to support the Bill.

6.12 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who made it just in time. I say, better late than never. It was an important contribution.

I want to assure the Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell), who put it to me that it looked like I had rather a lot of pieces of paper in my hand and asked how long I intended to speak, that it is more a case of the font being a bit bigger so I can read it, as opposed to the temptation of speaking for far too long. *[Interruption.]* Never? You should be so lucky.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly on Third Reading of this much needed and very welcome piece of legislation. I want to start, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green

[Adam Jogee]

(Bambos Charalambous) did, by declaring my interest as a member of the executive of the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth. I congratulate the Minister on his work getting the Bill through the House and pay the same tribute to Baroness Chapman, alongside noble Lords of all parties and none—I think of Baroness D’Souza particularly. That the Bill has worked its way through the House with no substantive amendments speaks to the collective commitment on all sides to our role on the world stage and to being good citizens.

I noted on Second Reading that the Bill has been through the wars and was rudely interrupted by the general election, although I would not be here without that, so I am grateful to a point. I am therefore delighted that Royal Assent is within touching distance. With that in mind, I accept that the sooner I sit down, the faster the Bill will get on the statute book. However, I want to say a couple of things.

In many ways, I am a child of the Commonwealth: my grandfather was born in Jamaica, that wonderful island in the West Indies, and my father, as Members will know by my surname Jogee, is of Indian heritage, but was born and raised in Zimbabwe—Rhodesia at the time, but now Zimbabwe. Notwithstanding Zimbabwe’s departure from, and intention to rejoin, the Commonwealth—an issue I shall raise with the Minister for Development in the new year—all three nations, alongside our United Kingdom, were or are important members of the Commonwealth of Nations.

This Bill is important to me, as it ensures that we lead by example, gives real, tangible effect to our commitment to the Commonwealth, and makes it clear that we will play our full part. That is important, because, following our departure from the European Union, making global Britain work, making it real and making it a success has to happen with the Commonwealth at its heart. A successful and effective Commonwealth can be a vehicle for our values, for trade, for the sharing of ideas, and for delivery.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association does such important work, and the new legal status that this Bill affords it allows us, as a United Kingdom, to take our seat firmly at the table. It brings parliamentarians here together, allowing us to form friendships—the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), and I are now pals—and creates alliances and working relationships at home and abroad. It allows us to learn from others, to share our successes and, importantly, to pick up best practice. As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson noted, it is important that the CPA will remain headquartered here in our United Kingdom.

I would like to say thank you to Sarah, Josh, Helen, Daisy and all the team who have supported me since my election to the executive of the UK branch of the CPA. My thanks also go to the secretary-general of the CPA. Stephen Twigg is a former Member of this House and the man who sent Portillo packing in Enfield Southgate back in 1997. I saw Stephen’s effectiveness, patience, and diligence up close at the CPA conference—I am sure that the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale will agree with that. Just to

reassure Opposition Members, I would also like to pay tribute to Dame Maria Miller, formerly of this parish, for the role that she played in getting us to where we are today.

This Bill is about our standing on the world stage and our role as a leader in the fight for human rights, democracy, respect, good governance, decency and, importantly, togetherness. The Bill, when signed into law by His Majesty, will specifically grant international status to both the ICRC and the CPA and will enable both those reputable and long-standing bodies to benefit from the immunities and privileges of all other international bodies. That is a win for all of us. It is a technical Bill, but an important one. I know that colleagues in Parliaments and Assemblies across the Commonwealth are looking to us to get this done, and today, all being well, we will do just that.

Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II always said that she had to be seen to be believed, and she was right. The same goes for us, Madam Deputy Speaker, because as this Bill becomes law—subject to the will of the House—we will be able to look our partners, neighbours and friends in the eye and prove our commitment to the Commonwealth in deeds as well as in words.

The Committee stage of the Bill was the first Committee that I sat on following my election to this House. I accept that it was a little less demanding than the Committees on some of the other Bills before us, but that speaks to the cross-party nature of the Bill. I welcome the support of colleagues from across the House, including the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) from the Liberal Democrats.

I join the Minister in paying tribute to all the officials in the Foreign Office who have worked on the Bill, some of whom are listening, and to the Clerks and officials here in this House. They are all wonderful and very talented people. I wish the Bill well when the Question is put shortly, and I look forward to supporting it on Third Reading. I feel sure that it will receive the overwhelming support of the House.

As this is the last time that I shall speak in the House in 2024—[*Interruption.*] I am going home. Newcastle-under-Lyme needs me and I am going home.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): How will we cope?

Adam Jogee: You’ll cope just fine.

I just want to wish all colleagues here in our United Kingdom Parliament, our Commonwealth kith and kin, and, of course, the good people of Newcastle-under-Lyme, who I shall see tomorrow, a very happy Christmas and a peaceful, calm and tolerant new year.

6.19 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What a pleasure it is to follow so many positive speeches on such a unifying issue. I cannot help but observe that it is singularly appropriate that the amiable Minister should be making his last contributions before Christmas on this issue rather than the more fractious one earlier of the future of the Chagos islands.

Right hon. and hon. Members may recall that I spoke on Second Reading in support of the very sensible changes that the Bill will make to the status of the

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross. By giving each organisation the status of a body corporate, the Bill ensures that the independence of their staff is sufficiently protected, and that the staff are able to continue with their work unhindered. The Bill gives a clear and welcome signal that the UK is committed to supporting democratic institutions in carrying out their important and independent work. I have been encouraged by the Minister's positive comments throughout the parliamentary debate regarding the importance of safeguarding the institutional independence of such organisations, and the same is true, indeed essential, for the office of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament.

I had hoped, as I said on Second Reading, that the Bill would be expanded to include the ISC, given the very clear read-across. Unfortunately, it has not proved possible to extend the scope of the Bill to cover the ISC within the available timeframe, so I will not repeat my earlier comments. However, I hope that the Government have heard the strength of feeling on this issue, which is about upholding the commitments given to Parliament. It is about ensuring that this House is able to hold secret organisations to account, without the independent staff who do that work being subjected to undue pressure, inappropriate influence or improper interference.

Following the recent appointment of the new Committee under its highly experienced Chairman, elected today by the other Committee members, Lord Beamish, formerly Kevan Jones MP, with whom I served on the Committee for four years, I trust that the Government will find another suitable legislative vehicle to allow the important changes that we are making to the CPA and the ICRC to be applied to the ISC as well. Given the very clear similarities between the two democratic institutions covered by the Bill and the office of the ISC and its secretariat, I am confident that that measure would receive the same level of strong cross-party support that has rightly been achieved for this important Bill.

6.22 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I should declare that I am the treasurer and international representative of the CPA UK branch. The scale of the resentment, and indeed anger, among Commonwealth countries at the previous structure of the CPA is sometimes not clear in this House. A body had been set up to consider alternative structures, in particular the CPA leaving the UK and being based elsewhere, because of that concern and the many years that it had taken to bring the issue forward.

I was therefore very pleased to be able to go to the interim committee, which had been set up to consider alternative locations for CPA International, and provide it with a copy of the *Hansard* report of the Second Reading of the Bill, which I am grateful that the Minister and the FCDO brought forward in a timely fashion that tied in, deliberately or otherwise, with the Commonwealth parliamentary conference. Given undertakings that had been given repeatedly by UK representatives, there was a demand for evidence that that would be done. The unanimous support that the Bill achieved on Second Reading went a long way towards doing that, opening up the opportunity for CPA International to start to focus on many other issues.

The issue of the CPA's structure and legal status has preoccupied it at an international level for many years. I attended the conference in Ghana last year and, at that conference, that was the dominant issue that took up virtually all the debate. This year, I was pleased that there was an excellent debate on climate change. We have a new international chair in Dr Christopher Kalila, who will visit London shortly. He has set out his wish to bring a renewed sense of purpose to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which will focus not so much on structure and constitutional issues as on bringing together the Commonwealth parliamentary family on issues of importance across the Commonwealth.

As the Minister knows, we cannot disguise the fact that there are difficult issues out there. The LGBT+ issue remains extremely challenging, and we cannot duck that. We have to look at ways in which we can take that forward. Certain Commonwealth countries are promoting the criminalisation of not just members of the LGBT+ community but their allies. That is not acceptable, and we have to take a stand and show leadership on it.

We also have to acknowledge that other actors are at work. It will shock Labour Members that when I was in South Africa, I was condemned as a neo-colonialist by the Economic Freedom Fighters party, who wear fetching red boiler suits in Parliament to display that, in fact, they are ordinary working people and not part of the elite. They are not supportive of the Commonwealth or South Africa's role in it. We know Russia and China are active in many Commonwealth countries, so we cannot just take it as given that everybody will proceed on the basis that we would wish them to. But I, like others who have spoken, regard the Commonwealth as a great force for good. There is huge opportunity at both parliamentary and governmental level to make a difference to those on the ground across the Commonwealth, and I hope that will be at the heart of the Government's approach.

There are one or two people who I would like to thank and acknowledge, not least my former colleague Dame Maria Miller, who tried to get the Bill through. Whether the arrival of the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) was worth pausing the Bill for might be a matter for debate on another day. I praise our former colleague Ian Liddell-Grainger. Ian would have done well in the diplomatic service, if he had chosen to do so. He had to step in when the former chair of the CPA international died suddenly and there was a vacuum. Ian came in and steadied the ship, as well as pursuing the issue within this Parliament and identifying its importance.

Of course, as has already been mentioned, our former colleague in this House, Stephen Twigg does a hugely important job as chief executive of CPA International. On his behalf, I ask the Minister to ensure that the subsequent orders that have to be brought forward are done so in a timely fashion and that we can continue to confirm to the Commonwealth family the momentum behind the process. The international executive committee of the CPA is due to meet here in London in May, and it would be helpful if the other parts of the process could have been completed by then.

My final plea to the Minister is for the Government to make more use of the CPA by working more closely with it. As he has acknowledged, having been on many visits, the CPA UK—with Members of this Parliament—

[David Mundell]

has the capacity to act in a soft power role for the Government. As he and others know, MPs can share and discuss things that it is not necessarily possible for our Ministers or high commissioners to discuss. In fact, when we were in Ghana last year, we had good discussions around the LGBT+ issue, which would not have been possible in more formal settings.

Adam Jogee: I just want to say to the Minister that the point that the right hon. Gentleman has just made has support across the House. Many Labour Members want to see exactly the urgency and focus that he has just mentioned.

David Mundell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that and for his wider comments. The CPA UK in particular is a good way of bringing together colleagues from across the House. I know that Mr Speaker fully endorses and supports that. It has been a pleasure to attend many events over the years, both overseas and here, with colleagues from across the House.

To return to my point, I hope that the Minister and the FCDO in its current guise will endorse and embrace the CPA, and the opportunity to use its soft power, to take forward matters that are in the interests of everybody across the United Kingdom.

6.31 pm

Stephen Doughty: I did not intend to speak again, but with the leave of the House, I will respond to some of the important questions that were raised.

It is good to see the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), who asked important questions about the terrible situation for the hostages held by Hamas. We want to see those hostages released. The ICRC has called for the immediate release of the hostages and for access to them, it continues to request information on the hostages and their current health conditions, and it continues to try to get access to the hostages as part of its mandated role to assess their welfare, pass messages to family and provide medical and other support. However, for that to happen, all parties to the conflict need to reach agreement, and the ICRC has no means to compel them to do so. We understand that the ICRC continues to meet representatives of the families—as do the Government. We all want to see the hostages brought home.

The hon. Lady also raised the important matter of funding for the ICRC. In 2023, the funding was £133 million, including £52 million core unrestricted funding. However, in 2024, the UK is on track to provide over £165 million to the ICRC. The current spending review is under way, so the total amount for 2025 and beyond is not confirmed, but our intention is to continue structuring future funding within a new multi-year business case, to give the ICRC the predictability of income that it needs to plan ahead for its crucial international humanitarian law and protection programme around the world, to which many Members have referred.

I join the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) in congratulating Lord Beamish on his new role. I noted carefully the points that the right hon. Member made, and I have no doubt that he will continue to pursue them in the way he does.

I thank all Members who have contributed to Third Reading and the other debates on the Bill, including my hon. Friends the Members for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), and the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell). I join the right hon. Member in thanking Stephen Twigg for his excellent work, particularly in relation to the CPA. I am glad that there has been agreement across the House on these issues. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

BROADCASTING

That the draft Local Digital Television Programme Services (Amendment) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 5 November, be approved.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Question agreed to.

Internet Service Providers and Suicide-related Content

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Taiwo Owatemi.)

6.34 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): The reason I have sought this Adjournment debate on internet service providers and suicide-related content online arises from a terrible tragedy that happened in my constituency. My constituent Joe Nihill was aged just 23 when he took his own life back in 2020 after accessing a horrific website. The purpose of that website is something that will alarm every Member of this House: it is dedicated to pushing people towards suicide. In fact, the website—which I will not name for reasons of public safety—was the subject of a BBC investigation linking it to more than 50 deaths in the UK, but it is linked to many more deaths around the world. That BBC investigation, which took place a year ago, rightly identified multiple warnings to the UK Government by coroners, and a number of police investigations.

To be clear, this website pushes people to suicide by encouraging suicide, and by actively attempting to dissuade them from seeking mental health support or the support of their family and friends. It provides people with instructions on how to take their own life, it has links to where substances can be purchased, and it has even livestreamed suicides.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate before the House. I spoke to him before the debate; this is an issue that needs airing, and he is doing us all justice by doing so.

I am aware that some streaming services such as Disney+ will put disclaimers in place for graphic self-harm and suicide scenes. Netflix took a step further: its programme “13 Reasons Why” removed its final episode, as it contained a highly graphic scene of suicide that many found distressing. Does the hon. Member agree that streaming services that screen scenes of suicide must, as an industry standard, have a responsibility to consider the age range of their target audience? What we are asking for tonight is for the Minister and this Government to take action.

Richard Burgon: The hon. Member is correct that everyone should exercise great moral responsibility when putting stuff out there for people to see and be influenced by.

Joe Nihill’s mother Catherine and his sister-in-law Melanie have run an inspiring campaign in the wake of that tragedy to stop what happened to Joe back in April 2020 happening to other people. Before he took his own life, Joe left a note for his family, and in that note, he asked them to do everything they could to get this website taken down so that others were not pushed down the same path as him. Catherine and Melanie have saved lives as a result of their interventions, personally preventing people from going down that path. What is needed, though, is not the heroism of people such as Catherine and Melanie—it has saved lives, but it is not enough. What is needed is a change in the law. Of course, I welcome the advance made in this regard through the Online Safety Act 2023, which I will turn to later.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. My constituent David Parfett has been in the news speaking about his son Tom, who sadly took his own life following his visits to a very harmful site—quite possibly the same one that the hon. Gentleman is talking about—that promotes how people can take their own lives. He sourced poison that way and took his own life. There are 97 Britons who have lost their lives after using this website. We need to take action on these very small but very harmful websites. The Online Safety Act contains a provision for such websites to be included in category 1, the most highly regulated category, yet the illegal harms code published yesterday does not include them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is a massive oversight, and that these websites should be included in category 1?

Richard Burgon: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and I will mention her constituent’s horrific experience later in my speech. I agree that there is much further to go to ensure that the Online Safety Act does what it needs to do to protect as many people as possible.

Of this website, Joe’s sister-in-law Melanie said yesterday on social media that

“the problem with these websites is that they are accessed by people at their most vulnerable and children. I’m Joe’s sister in law and I know Joe would still be here if he hadn’t accessed that website because the method he used is only discussed there he wouldn’t have known any other way. These sites are run by people who prey on the vulnerable and say they too are going to end their life but 4 years later they are still here doing the same thing pushing methods. We are never going to end suicide, but we know that so many people can be helped.”

The BBC investigation identified one of the creators of the site, and tracked him down to his home in Huntsville, Alabama in the US. He was doorstepped by the BBC reporter and he refused to answer any questions, but an account associated with this creator of the site issued defiant responses about the UK’s wanting to block the site.

As part of its investigation a year ago, the BBC contacted internet service providers, as did Joe’s sister-in-law and his mother. Sky Broadband, for example, responded by saying that it had blocked the site. Catherine and Melanie said at the time:

“It’s really important to us both, as it means access is becoming limited to prevent others...finding it—which is a step in the right direction.”

The hon. Member mentioned her constituent David Parfett, and David’s son Tom was 22 when he ended his own life in 2021 after accessing this site. Responding to Sky Broadband’s decision as an internet service provider a year ago to block this site, Mr Parfett said:

“It made me cry. It’s pure relief, mixed with anger that Tom may still be here if”

it

“had been regulated two years ago. My sole aim has been to stop other people being influenced to take their own life.”

Responding to a defiant response from the site linked to the founder of the website, Mr Parfett added:

“These people encourage others to die and celebrate death”.

In a statement at the time, Ofcom told BBC News—this was just over a year ago—about the then Online Safety Bill:

“If services don’t comply, we’ll have a broad range of enforcement powers at our disposal to ensure they’re held accountable”.

[Richard Burgon]

In a recent Westminster Hall debate, I intervened on the Minister about this, and I congratulated the internet service providers Sky and Three on taking action to block access to this site. The Minister very helpfully welcomed that intervention, and made the important point that

“internet providers do not have to wait for the Act to be enacted; they can start making such changes now.”

She went on to say that

“the Online Safety Act... is a landmark Act, but it is also imperfect. Ofcom’s need to consult means a long lead-in time; although it is important to get these matters right, that can often feel frustrating.”—*[Official Report, 26 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 250WH.]*

It is right that internet service providers do the right thing and take responsibility.

Just as Joe’s family have been contacting internet service providers, so have I. I very much welcome the fact that Three has responded to representations by blocking this site, which I will not name, as has Sky. Other responses were not quite as positive or as practical. Vodafone responded by saying that the site is blocked

“where customers have adult content filters enabled”.

BT responded by saying that

“our fixed network level broadband parental control settings for all ages block the site”.

The response from Virgin Media O2 concerned me, and I want to put it on the record. It originally came back to me saying that it would block the site if a court order told it to. We need to be clear that it is not impressive to say, “If a court tells us to do something, we will do it.” A court order is a court order, and companies have no choice other than to comply. Virgin Media O2 also referred to people changing settings so that they cannot access this site. Virgin Media O2 needs to get real. Somebody who is in the mindset of considering taking their own life—somebody who is struggling to control that impulse—is not likely to disable the setting to stop themselves from looking at it.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I did not come here to speak, but he is discussing a key topic. As we move into Christmas, many of us are looking forward to it, but it can be a low time for people. I worry about people accessing this content and content around eating disorders. The question for any internet service provider—hopefully they are watching this debate—is, what possible justification can they have for continuing access to this site? Are they hiding behind freedom of speech? To me, there is a complete imbalance between the need to protect the rights of these young people and the wider freedom of speech argument.

Richard Burgon: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. This is not a freedom of speech issue; this is a particular website linked to the deaths of 50 people in our country and many more worldwide.

In its reply, Virgin Media O2 also said that it was handling this matter through its partnership with the Internet Watch Foundation. I contacted the Internet Watch Foundation, and it replied that

“we work with companies to block child sexual abuse material specifically, so don’t work on suicide related content I am afraid”.

It was therefore a poor reassurance from Virgin Media O2 to point to a partnership with an organisation that does great work, I am sure, but not in relation to this specific issue.

I pressed Virgin Media O2 further, and it said:

“We will review the specific website you raised with us and consider if further action should be taken”.

Of course further action should be taken. There are technological limits that sometimes mean a block cannot be 100% effective, but lives can be saved and will be saved by restricting the number of people who access this site.

I put on record that I have had no answer from EE. It should answer, and it should act. I encourage all internet service providers to do the right thing and, in whatever way they can, to block this specific site, which is linked to 50 UK deaths, is the subject of police investigations, as we understand it, and is referred to in various coroners’ reports.

To give a sense of the scale of the challenge, Three UK has kindly provided me with data today that shows that it has blocked 10,025 attempts to access URLs that it has categorised under suicide and self-harm in the past month alone. Three UK should be congratulated on what it has done. The fact that it can inform me of the number of attempts to access such sites that it has blocked shows why it is fundamentally necessary for other companies to do the right thing.

The site is hosted by Cloudflare, a major company with a good reputation and a corporate office in London. I draw the House’s attention to a written question asked by the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), who I emailed earlier about this. On 24 October 2023, he asked a written question that was passed to the Home Office. It said:

“To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, whether her Department has held recent discussions with Cloudflare on removing the website linked to deaths by suicide reported on by the BBC on 24 October 2023.”

He was asking what the then Government had done to pressure Cloudflare, which hosts this site, to take it down and disrupt its operation. No answer was given to that. He is still awaiting a response to that question that was due an answer on 31 October 2023.

On 29 May 2024, I wrote to the chief executive officer of Cloudflare, Matthew Prince, making it clear what had happened in this situation. I said:

“The reason I am writing to you today is because it appears your company is hosting this website and I would like to draw this to your attention so you can terminate your hosting of this site, to protect the public in both our countries”—

the USA and the UK—

“and across the world. I know a successful company of over a decade’s good standing like Cloudflare with an excellent reputation, would not wish to be associated with such harmful content, linked to the deaths of many vulnerable people across the world.”

I detailed the whole matter, as I have detailed it to the House, and then I put:

“I would be very grateful if you look into this matter as a matter of urgency before any more vulnerable people are encouraged or enabled to harm themselves due to this website’s activities. Cloudflare ceasing to host its website would not be a contravention of the principle of freedom of speech but a choice of a reputable and respected company not to give a platform to a website which has been linked to the death of 50 people in the UK alone. Such a decision by Cloudflare could well save lives.”

I said:

“It should be noted that both Sky Broadband and 3 mobile have blocked access to this website”.

I got no response to that letter on a really serious matter. I hope not only that internet service providers will do the right thing, but that the major company Cloudflare will do the right thing and stop hosting this website. Disrupting its operation in that way could save lives, and I believe that it would save lives.

To conclude, I will ask the Minister, who has been doing a fantastic job on these sensitive issues, a number of questions. Will she congratulate those internet service providers who have done the right thing in taking action to block this site? Does she agree that those who have not should step up to save lives? Will she assure me that once Ofcom’s powers are fully enacted, the Online Safety Act 2023 will deal with this specific site regardless of the number of people who access it and whether those people are under or over 18?

I find it frustrating when internet service providers get back to me and refer to child protection. My constituent Joe was 23 when he took his own life, and the constituent of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) was 21 or 22 when he took his own life, so it is ridiculous to assume that harmful suicide-related content of this type is only a danger to people under 18.

In relation to the question to the Home Office tabled on 24 October 2023 by the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington, will the Minister take action to ensure that her Department answers that question? Will she agree to the Government contacting Cloudflare as the host of the site and raise concerns and make representations? We are talking about the deaths of 50 citizens in our country.

I will finish my remarks by again paying tribute to Catherine and Melanie, Joe’s mother and sister-in-law. They have been navigating this complex, ever-changing world of dangerous activities that go on online and their actions have saved lives. They have been struggling to do so against great odds—it sometimes feels like a David and Goliath situation.

I note that when people are, for example, illegally streaming football matches, action is taken very quickly, yet this website, which is linked to the deaths of 50 people, remains up there. I look forward to the Minister’s response and thank Members for attending the debate.

6.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): I thank the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for opening the debate and all other colleagues who have contributed. I know that this issue will be close to the hearts of many of us, because it is about protecting the safety of everyone, including our children and young people.

This evening I want to talk about why this issue matters and what the Online Safety Act will do about it. First, I would like to share my deepest sympathies with family and friends of Joe Nihill—a 23-year-old man who ended his life after finding suicide-related content online. Unfortunately, stories such as Joe’s are not uncommon—we have heard about Tom, a 22-year-old young man, who also died from suicide. As part of our work in online safety we speak to groups that have campaigned for years for a safer internet, often led by

bereaved families. I thank Joe’s mother Catherine, his sister-in-law Melanie and all the bereaved families for their tireless work. We continue to listen to their expertise in this conversation.

People who are thinking about ending their lives or hurting themselves might turn to the internet as a place of refuge. All too often, what they find instead is content encouraging them not to seek help. That deluge of content has a real-world impact. Suicide-related internet use is a factor in around a quarter of deaths by suicide among people aged 10 to 19 in the UK—at least 43 deaths a year. Lots of research in this area focuses on children, but it is important to recognise that suicide-related internet use can be a factor in suicide in all age groups. These harms are real, and tackling them must be a collective effort.

On the hon. Member’s first point, we welcome efforts by all companies, including internet service providers, to tackle illegal content so that no more lives are tragically lost to suicide. Online safety forms a key pillar of the Government’s suicide prevention strategy. However, we are clear that the principal responsibility sits squarely with those who post such hateful content, and the site where it is allowed to fester—sites that, until now, have not been made to face the consequences. The Online Safety Act has been a long time coming. A decade of delay has come at a tragic human cost, but change is on its way. On Monday, Ofcom published its draft illegal harms codes under the Online Safety Act, which are a step change.

On the hon. Member’s second point, I can confirm that from next spring, for the first time, social media platforms and search engines will have to look proactively for and take down illegal content. These codes will apply to sites big and small. If services do not comply they could be hit by massive fines, or Ofcom could, with the agreement of the courts, use business disruption measures—court orders that mean that third parties have to withdraw their services or restrict or block access to non-compliant services in the UK. We have made intentionally encouraging or assisting suicide a priority offence under the Act. That means that all providers, no matter their size, will have to show that they are taking steps to stop their sites being used for such content.

The strongest protection in the Act’s frameworks are for children, so on the hon. Member’s third point, I assure him that under the draft child safety codes, any site that allows content that promotes self-harm, eating disorders or suicide will now have to use highly effective age limits to stop children from accessing such content. Some sites will face extra duties. We have laid the draft regulations setting out the threshold conditions for category 1, 2A and 2B services under the Act. Category 1 sites are those that have the ability to spread content easily, quickly and widely. They will have to take down content if it goes against their terms of services, such as posts that could encourage self-harm or eating disorders. They will also have to give adult users the tools to make it less likely they will see content that they do not want to see, or will alert them to the nature of potentially harmful content.

A suicide forum will be unlikely to have terms of services that restrict legal suicide content, and users of these sites are unlikely to want to use tools that make it less likely they will see such content. However, that absolutely does not mean that such forums—what people call “small but risky” sites—can go unnoticed.

7 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).**Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

Feryal Clark: Every site, whether it has five users or 500 million users, will have to proactively remove illegal content, such as content where there is proven intent of encouraging someone to end their life. Ofcom has also set up a “small but risky” supervision taskforce to ensure that smaller forums comply with new measures, and it is ready to take enforcement action if they do not do so. The Government understand that just one person seeing this kind of content could mean one body harmed, one life ended, and one family left grieving.

Munira Wilson: The problem is that the sites that the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) referred to—and there are many others like them—do not necessarily fall into the illegal category, although they still have extremely dangerous and harmful content. Despite a cross-party vote in Parliament to include in the Online Safety Act these very small and very dangerous sites in category 1, there has been a proactive decision to leave them out of the illegal harms codes, which were published yesterday. Can the Minister put on record exactly why that is? Why can these sites not be included in that category? There is all sorts of content glamourising suicide, self-harm, eating disorders and other hate speech that is being promoted by these small sites. They should be regulated to a high level.

Feryal Clark: Based on research regarding the likely impact of user numbers and functionalities, category 1 is about easy, quick and wide dissemination of regulated

user-generated content. As Melanie Dawes set out in her letter to the Secretary of State in September, Ofcom has established a “small but risky” supervision task, as I mentioned, to manage and enforce compliance among smaller services. It has the power to impose significant penalties and, as I say, to take remedial action against non-compliant services. As the hon. Member for Leeds East mentioned earlier, the Online Safety Act is one of the biggest steps that Government have taken on online safety, but it is imperfect. It is an iterative process, and it will be kept under review.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter, and for bringing to our memory Joe Nihill and those like him, who turned to the internet for help and were met with harm. On his final point, on the effective implementation of the Online Safety Act, we will continue to engage with all providers in this space. I am confident that these measures are a big step in making tech companies play their part in wiping out those harms and making the internet a safer place for us all. The hon. Gentleman raised the matter of an outstanding question. I do not know whether he has gone to the wrong Department, but I will commit to looking up that question and ensuring that he receives a response to it.

With that, I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and wish you and the whole House a very happy Christmas.

Question put and agreed to.

7.4 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 18 December 2024

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Employment Rights: Terminal Illness

9.30 am

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the employment rights of people with a terminal illness.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

For some time, the fundamental ask of this campaign has been the right of working people who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness not to face the sack. We have spoken a lot about terminal illness over the last few weeks in this place, and I do not want us to lose momentum. We now know the legal definition of a terminal diagnosis; it is life expectancy not foreseen beyond a six-month period. Our campaign aims to protect that period of employment. We protect the period of employment at the start of life—an employer cannot sack a pregnant worker. What we are saying is that they should not be able to sack a worker who has received a terminal diagnosis.

I want to declare an interest: before I got elected, I was the midlands regional secretary for the Trades Union Congress, and one of the campaigns I worked on was called the Dying to Work campaign. The campaign was about people with a terminal illness in the world of work. We found that some employers would dismiss a worker with a terminal illness based on the grounds of capability—the bulk of employers would not dream of doing so—and we wanted to protect workers during that period, so we developed a voluntary charter that employers could sign up to that would protect workers from being dismissed because of their condition and protect their freedom to choose whether to keep working, reduce their hours or step away all together.

We put the choice into the hands of the individual. The only time that that choice is taken away from the individual is if an employer wants to take that choice for them by dismissing them from work due to their diagnosis. The charter protects employees' benefits, such as death in service payments, protects workers' access to a supportive and understanding workplace, and gives terminally ill workers the freedom to make the choices that are right for them without the extra stress and worry. We launched that charter in 2016, and it now protects over 1.5 million working people in this country, because employers have signed up.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done on the campaign across the midlands and across the country. I was very proud to support it when I was last in this place. The sheer volume of workers who are now protected is testament to my hon. Friend's hard work and his ability to tell such a compelling story. Could he enlighten me on whether the House of Commons, the

House of Lords and the various Government Departments, which are huge employers, have signed up to the campaign? If they have not, could I extend a hand of friendship to him to help him ensure that they sign up as soon as possible?

Lee Barron: We managed to get the campaign promoted as best practice by the Department for Work and Pensions—meaning that if employers, through their disability awareness scheme, ever go to the Government in relation to how to treat workers with a terminal illness, they are always signposted to the campaign—but no Government Departments have signed up. However, I am aware that with the new Government coming in, those discussions are now taking place.

Although the progress made so far is commendable, it is not universal. That is why we have called this debate—so that we can extend this right to all those who are ill. I want to recognise Richard Oliver, who is in the Public Gallery and who has been part of the campaign right from the outset; it is great that he has been able to join us today.

As I said, it is still legal in this country to sack a terminally ill worker on the grounds of capability. At a time when someone is dealing with a devastating diagnosis, they could also face the loss of their livelihood and their financial security. That is not acceptable. There has been significant discussion about dying with dignity recently, particularly relating to the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. Although that Bill has rightly captured our attention, I do not want us to lose momentum now that it has gone to Committee. These people are on a path—a journey, if we can call it that—and they should not have to worry about whether they will lose their job while they face that.

Most people will never have to think about the implications of working with a terminal diagnosis, and most employers would not dream of firing their terminally ill workers.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Big congratulations to my hon. Friend on the work he has done on this issue over many years. Does he agree that the six-month rule, which determines that a person is terminally ill—that they are dying and will not be here in six months—is too stressful? People need to get clarification from their doctor, in the most difficult circumstances, that they are going to die. I think that is absolutely stressful, and I speak with a personal situation in mind.

Lee Barron: One of the things that has always got me is the number of personal stories people tell about what they have faced. We cannot remove those stories and those situations. I cannot imagine the distress, and I do not know if anybody else in here can. All I know is that I have met people who have gone through this experience, and that should never happen in our society. I have always said that the compassion and values that we hold as a society should not end at the front door of the workplace; they should be part and parcel of the workplace. That is why it is so important that we discuss issues like this.

Most people will never have to think about the implications of working with a terminal diagnosis. Those who receive a terminal diagnosis and their families should not have to worry about paying the bills or

[*Lee Barron*]

about their job, on top of everything else. The reality is that not all terminal illnesses are treated equally under the law. The prior part of employment, when people fall under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, is protected. It is when they get a terminal diagnosis, and when capability comes into it, that they are not protected. That is the part that needs to be protected; that is the loophole in the law.

I met a lady who worked for Nottinghamshire county council. The council signed up to the Dying to Work charter on a Thursday, although she had passed away on the Friday of the previous week. She had decided that she wanted to stay at work because that was where her friends—her social outlet—were; she did not want to sit at home, bouncing off the walls. She took that decision for herself, and her employer did the right thing by saying, “We’ll give you the freedom as far as that decision is concerned.”

Many people are proud of the work they do. They often wake up early to work long, hard days to provide for themselves and their loved ones. They greet and talk to their colleagues, who they see almost every day. They deserve dignity and respect, and they deserve our support.

Some terminally ill people may want to continue working as long as they can, finding peace and distraction in their professional lives. Others may decide to step away, prioritising their family and themselves. While the Government are rightly levelling up workers’ rights, we must seize the moment to ensure those with terminal illness are treated with fairness, compassion and the respect they deserve in the workplace. Protections like those enshrined in our Dying to Work charter should be universal, not optional. Legislation must be introduced to best protect vulnerable people in our workplaces. In the meantime, it is essential that we persuade as many employers as possible, including Government Departments, to sign up to the Dying to Work charter to protect as many workers as possible. Dignity at work is not a privilege; it is a right.

Some organisations do have death in service payments, but if a person is fired, they and their family are no longer entitled to any of those benefits. Every worker deserves to know that they will not be forced out of their job when they need it most. People at the end of their life should be able to decide whether they want to continue to work.

I was delighted to hear that the Government will be implementing the Dying to Work charter as best practice in Departments, but we need to go further. We need to review the Equality Act 2010 so that there are not gaps in rights for those who are terminally ill. We need to protect people’s employment when they are ill. We need to give the most vulnerable people in our society the right to choose and the right to dignity. We need to implement new legislation to protect these workers.

Protecting employment for those who are terminally ill means that they can focus on what truly matters, whether that is continuing to contribute to work or stepping away to spend their remaining time with their loved ones. Ultimately, that choice should be theirs and theirs alone, and if we need to we should protect that choice in law.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that if they wish to speak, they must bob.

9.40 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I commend the hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (*Lee Barron*) for giving us the opportunity to participate, and congratulate him on his introduction, which showed an understanding of what the issue means to his constituents. I hope I will convey that too.

This is an opportunity to highlight the much-needed help and support that the Government must facilitate. I am pleased to see the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (*Greg Smith*), in their places, and look forward to their contributions. I believe that the Minister understands the necessity for this debate, and I understand that the Government are going to make changes; the Minister will respond to that later.

This is one of those bread and butter issues, which I love because they make a difference to people’s lives. There are important constitutional and foreign policy issues but these matters are the ones we deal with every week in our offices. These are not just bread and butter issues; they are literally life-and-death issues, and the hon. Gentleman has set that scene so well.

I want to advocate for the tremendous work of the wonderful charity, Marie Curie. We all deal with many charities in our constituencies, as others will mention. I have lots in my constituency, but I am a supporter of Marie Curie in word and deed. I am not better than anybody else—I never claim to be and I never will be—but I support that charity’s work financially and in other ways. I have been to the Marie Curie centre in Knock, Belfast, where the staff provide real help to each person and their family. That must be an incredibly hard job and every Marie Curie nurse deserves credit.

I am thankful for the support that Marie Curie gives to patients and families in the throes of cancer journeys. Those are journeys that I and constituents have dealt with over the years. I am also grateful for the information that Marie Curie consolidates and provides us with to enable our fuller understanding. Information from those in the thick of funding and practical issues is invaluable. We need to dig deep individually and collectively within our constituencies. When loved ones pass away, they often leave something in their will to Marie Curie or other charities, which helps them do more for other people on life’s last journey.

I want to focus heavily on the recently published report, “Dying in Poverty 2024”. If hon. Members have not had the opportunity to read it, I suggest it may be worth a look. It looks at the financial insecurity faced by many people at the end of life. Research found that some 111,000 people each year die in poverty. Wow; I can hardly take in that figure, especially in this modern society—this wealthy Britain—that we live in. That figure needs to settle into all our minds. The report also found that working-age people are at much greater risk of dying in poverty: 28% of those who died in 2023 died in poverty, compared with 16% of pension-age people. Anyone who is not shocked by those figures must be unfeeling—they must not understand—but I believe that everyone in this room is as shocked as I am.

For that reason, a lot of workers with a terminal diagnosis decide that they must continue working for as long as they can. The hon. Member for Corby and East

Northamptonshire referred to one lady who wanted to keep working right up until the end, because work was where her social group was, even though she would have found doing so incredibly difficult. Unfortunately, the experience of many workers is that their employer either is unsympathetic—I am sure that some are sympathetic—or puts up barriers to their continuing in work. A 2022 survey of human resources decision makers found that only 44% of organisations and workplaces have policies in place for staff with a terminal illness. If businesses do not have those policies in place, they should. They have to prepare for that eventuality and be able to help workers through the process.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): A number of employers might either not have a policy or simply be unaware, for some reason, of the need to be more empathetic with people who find themselves in such a horrendously difficult position. The advantage of a debate such as this one, secured by the hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) and supported by all hon. Members, is that it can raise awareness and hopefully bring action from Government Departments and employers, which need to take action and show support.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I do not want to give him a big head, but his interventions often capture the focus of a debate in one sentence. If the companies have forgotten or are unaware, it is time that they were aware. The question is how we can make that happen.

As I say, only 44% of organisations and workplaces have policies in place for staff with a terminal illness, so if a worker with a terminal illness loses their job, they lose their income. The impact could not be any more real: they may lose any death in service payments that they have earned through their lifetime of work, because those are payable only to those who die while still in employment. The hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire referred to the lady who stayed at work for her social circle of friends. Perhaps it helped her—I am sorry to say this—to ensure that when she passed away she had the payments that she should have had.

I agree with the Marie Curie charity that there is therefore a need for strengthened employment rights for people with a terminal illness, alongside an improved safety net to provide safety or support through our welfare system. When the Minister responds, I am sure that he or his civil servants and staff will have some figures from Marie Curie; if there has not been engagement with the organisation, I suggest that there should be.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) for raising this important issue. Does my hon. Friend agree that there also needs to be workplace protection for the parents of children who have been given a terminal diagnosis? When a child is given a terminal diagnosis in such tragic circumstances, parents are worried because they have to leave their work to care for their children. Does he agree that there needs to be better protection for them?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend. Others might not have thought about that issue, because there are always the two adults—the mum and dad who are in a

relationship—and it is their child, but if their child has a terminal illness, how does that impact them in work? They need to be there to take their child to the hospital, and to be there for their child in the last days of their life. I know that the Minister understands those issues; perhaps he can give us an encouraging answer to these questions.

Life is tough for families in full-time employment, never mind those with reduced income and greater costs. Changes must be made to universal credit—I know that that is not the Minister's responsibility—to allow those in full-time employment to access help and support for their care and time off work. All my staff members understand the benefits system very well, but I am fortunate to have one particular staff member who spends every day of her five and a half days a week—the half day is probably voluntary, because she is a lady with compassion and understanding—working on benefits. As elected representatives, we try to offer all we can to our constituents. All Members do. That lady fills out universal credit applications, personal independence payment applications, employment and support allowance applications or, probably in most cases, attendance allowance applications, although sometimes it is for families with small children.

These are really difficult times. I do the forms myself; I am not better than anybody else. There is a box on the second or third page that asks whether the applicant has a terminal illness. When you tick that box, it moves you into a different system. I have to be fair to the Department: when that box is ticked, the Department moves immediately. I know that from cases that we have done through my office, and other Members will confirm it when they get their chance to speak. An urgency is put into the process and it quickly moves on.

The hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire highlighted in communication to Members that the purpose of this debate is clear:

“The last thing someone with a terminal diagnosis and their family should be worrying about at the end of their life is how they will be able to pay the bills.”

Wow. The Government should remove that equation for people. Many people's key social networks exist at work, and I believe that those who are terminally ill should have the choice of when they finish work. That is what the debate is all about.

I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman's view. More than that, I will work with him and with the Government to achieve that—to simply do more for those with terminal cancer. Just because charities do such an incredible job of raising funds and caring, that does not absolve our Government and our Minister of their responsibility; I say that with fairness and with respect. It is our duty to ensure that we fulfil these obligations. We must do better.

9.51 am

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) for securing this important debate on the employment rights of people with a terminal illness. I pay tribute to his tireless advocacy on behalf of workers facing unimaginable challenges.

[Lizzi Collinge]

Receiving a terminal diagnosis is one of the most devastating things that can happen to a person. In that moment, the focus should be on spending precious time with loved ones, seeking medical care and living the life you have left. As a humanist, I believe we have only one life, so a good life and a good death are very important to me.

Unfortunately, for too many people a terminal diagnosis is compounded by the fear of losing their livelihood and the security that employment provides. As things stand, it is still legal in this country to dismiss someone with a terminal illness on grounds of capability. That is not only deeply unjust, but fundamentally inhumane. The last thing that anyone with a terminal illness should have to worry about is how they will keep a roof over their head or provide for their family. People's lives do not end at the moment they get a terminal diagnosis. They are still mums, dads, colleagues and breadwinners.

Many people with a terminal illness live longer than six months. I associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery). I also acknowledge the Dying to Work campaign, which has already secured protections for more than 1.5 million workers through its voluntary charter. The charter, developed in partnership with the TUC, encourages employers to commit to supporting workers with a terminal illness, ensuring that they have the choice to remain in work for as long as they wish, without the fear of dismissal. The campaign's success demonstrates that compassion and practicality can go hand in hand in the workplace.

The voluntary charter is laudable, but it is not enough. It is not right that the ability to work at the end of life depends on the good will of individual employers. Workers should not have to rely on luck to ensure that their rights are protected at the most vulnerable time of their life. The current patchwork approach creates inequality. Perhaps larger employers with more resources are more likely to sign up to the Dying to Work charter; perhaps smaller employers do not have the capacity or simply do not know about it. This disparity underscores the need for consistent, nationwide standards to ensure that no worker with a terminal illness is left behind.

Some may argue that mandatory protections could place an undue burden on businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises. I think we can find a balance. Being offered reasonable adjustments, flexible working and the ability to work from home can enable terminally ill employees to continue contributing in ways that are meaningful for them and for their employer. Many employers already see the value of retaining experienced workers who want to stay engaged.

Let me share some statistics from my constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale. According to recent figures, over 25% of the workforce in my area are employed in industries such as retail and hospitality, where job security is often already precarious. Those sectors also report higher levels of sickness, making the need for robust protections even more pressing. Additionally, local advocacy groups have highlighted that the financial strain of a terminal diagnosis can have a disproportionate impact on low-income families, with many struggling to take on the extra costs of a terminal diagnosis, particularly

in the light of the recent cost of living crisis. The lived experience behind those numbers is a stark reminder of the urgency of the issue.

Ensuring that terminally ill workers in Morecambe and Lunesdale and across the country are protected from unfair dismissal is not just about individual dignity; it is about strengthening the social fabric of our communities. There is also a compelling economic case for action. Retaining employees with terminal illnesses can reduce turnover costs, maintain productivity and strengthen workplace morale by fostering a culture of compassion and respect. Even beyond those practical considerations, the moral imperative is clear. A just society does not abandon its citizens in their greatest time of need.

As policymakers, we must lead the way in ensuring that every worker facing a terminal diagnosis has the legal protection that they deserve. That includes the right to remain in employment, if they want, for as long as they wish; access to reasonable adjustments; and the reassurance that their job and their dignity are secure. I urge the Government to take inspiration from the Dying to Work charter and enshrine its principles in law. Let us send a clear message that terminal illness is not a reason to strip someone of their livelihood. Let us ensure that no worker faces the additional burden of financial insecurity or social isolation as they navigate the most challenging period of their life.

In closing, I want to reflect on the experience of those who have lived this reality. Work is not just a means of earning a living; it is often a source of identity, purpose and community. For those facing a terminal illness, having the choice to continue working or to leave should not be a luxury. It should be a right.

9.57 am

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) for securing this important debate.

As a proud trade unionist woman from the east midlands, I am hugely proud to speak in this debate. The campaign to give terminally ill people rights in the workplace was kick-started with the incredible voice and determination of an east midlands GMB member Jacci Woodcock, who in June 2012 was sadly diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. It became apparent very early on to Jacci that her workplace was not going to support her. Jacci drove this campaign and was quoted as saying:

"I happily accept my fate, but I am not happy that other workers who don't have my vision, tenacity and strength suffer at the hands of unscrupulous employers."

I had the honour of meeting Jacci in Nottinghamshire, when Nottinghamshire county council adopted the Dying to Work charter—something that I know has benefited many workers to this day.

Sadly, I have personally witnessed the trauma, anxiety and upset that is caused when a terminal illness is diagnosed. In times of such upheaval and distress, I am a strong advocate for those who are suffering to have options and be able to make choices. Some will want to stop working straightaway and are financially able to do so, but others will not or cannot. Some will receive a lot of comfort from being able to continue as normal a

life as possible for as long as they can. Workers should be able to make that choice, and workplaces should be equipped and ready to support that. There are still far too many HR departments and bosses across the country who see terminal illness as a reason, based on capability, to end a person's employment status.

But I say this must change. That is why, over 12 years ago, Jacci made that stand not only for her, but for others—for those who have not even been diagnosed yet, for those whose only contact with the real world was through their workplace, for those who have dedicated their whole life to a particular business or trade. I wish to thank Jacci and her family. I place it on the record that I will continue to campaign for that choice for those diagnosed with a terminal illness. Dignity in the workplace is a right. We here have a duty and a crucial role to make sure that that happens.

10 am

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron), whom I have known for a long time, for securing the debate.

I declare an interest: I am a member of the Justice Committee, a solicitor and a member of the GMB executive council. The GMB was instrumental in running the “Dying to Work” campaign, and the TUC subsequently adopted the charter. As of March 2024, over 1.5 million workers in the UK have employers who have committed to the charter, which requires employers to

“Review sick pay and sickness absence procedures and include a specific statement that they will not dismiss any person with a terminal diagnosis because of their condition”, as well as take other steps to support the terminally ill employee at work.

There is very little employment law that deals with terminal illness, but we do have laws relating to disability discrimination and laws under which an employer has a duty to make reasonable adjustments for employees at work, and those laws will apply to employees who are terminally ill. The NHS defines a terminal illness as a health condition

“that you'll most likely die from”.

Under the Equality Act 2010, people with disabilities are protected against discrimination at work. Disabilities are defined as any impairment that has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on the person's ability to carry out “normal day-to-day activities”. Terminal illness will be classed as a disability, at least from the point where the illness begins to have an impact on the person's ability to carry out day-to-day activities; so the Equality Act will give the employee the right not to be treated less favourably at work, and the right to reasonable adjustments to enable them to stay at work. People with cancer, HIV infection or multiple sclerosis will automatically be considered to have a disability, regardless of their symptoms. Correspondingly, anyone who is terminally ill should also be considered to have a disability regardless of their symptoms.

Under the Equality Act, the employer must make reasonable adjustments so that disabled employees, including those who are terminally ill, can continue in their job if they wish. The employer may, for example, change the employee's working hours and working patterns, reduce their workload, reallocate duties, grant time off

for treatment and medical appointments, and allow working from home. An employer must consider an employee's terminal illness and symptoms when deciding what reasonable adjustments should be made to retain them in employment, rather than dismiss them in accordance with a sickness absence policy.

A lot of workers with a terminal diagnosis will decide that they want to continue working for as long as they can because they need the financial security, or to avoid losing any death in service benefits, as my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire mentioned, or because they find that work is a helpful distraction from their illness. Parliament recently gave Second Reading to a Bill that would give people a choice to die with dignity. Surely we can give those who are dying the dignity of work for as long as they need it.

10.4 am

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) on securing this important debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my membership of the GMB.

I add my thanks to midlands TUC for the work it has done for many years to promote and champion this campaign. I will also mention the work that the GMB midlands region has done in connection with the cause. Two names are on the record, and I echo the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Corby and East Northamptonshire and for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh). I pay tribute to Jacci Woodcock, who struck the spark that lit the flame, and my friend of many years, Richard Oliver. It is a pleasure to see him in the Public Gallery. He has brought real passion and expertise to the cause.

We have heard today that there are weaknesses and gaps in the Equality Act. I hope that this is the subject of consensus across the House. When in 2022 the then Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), responded for the Government to a debate on the Terminal Illness (Support and Rights) Bill, although he acknowledged that many workers who have a terminal illness are covered by the definition of disability under the Equality Act, he added:

“I say, ‘the overwhelming majority’, but one thing that we might want to look at offline, as it were, is trying to ensure that that is everybody”—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 1010.]

who is covered. We are still not in that place today. Although a terminally ill worker can in principle bring a case before an employment tribunal, in too many cases, sadly, there are obvious barriers to doing so. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) has already pointed out that there is very little case law in this area. Although in theory a posthumous employment tribunal case can be brought, in practice it rarely happens.

Although the definition of disability inherited from the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was probably not written with terminal illness in mind, there are circumstances where a terminally ill worker who is discriminated against at work would not fall under the protections of the Act, but someone in the early and possibly asymptomatic stages of a terminal illness would

[Laurence Turner]

fall into that category. So there is a strong and compelling case for revisiting the Equality Act, but there are steps that can be taken in the intervening period.

Section 22 of the Equality Act established powers to bring in regulations on matters to be taken into account when employers and other bodies make reasonable adjustments. If regulations were brought in for the purpose of establishing that it is reasonable to take certain steps to accommodate the needs of workers with a terminal illness, that would be a helpful and clarifying step, which would be welcomed by employers as well as workers who develop a terminal illness, because employers are looking for clear guidance in this important area.

Similarly, the Equality and Human Rights Commission statutory code of practice on employment is the consolidated set of statutory guidance on the application of the Equality Act in the workplace, but that code of practice has not been updated since 2011 and it does not clearly or explicitly cover or reference terminal illness at any point. Were that code updated to take account of the particular problems facing workers who have a terminal illness, that would also play a positive and constructive role. Tribunals must have regard to the guidance from the Government Equalities Office, now the Women and Equalities Unit, on matters to be taken into account in determining questions on the definition of disability. That code has not been updated since 2013, and it does not clearly cover matters relating to terminal illness. Some helpful clarification that could be introduced through that guidance. Nevertheless, some problems cannot be addressed unless and until the Equality Act itself is revisited. The point has already been made that workers who develop a specified illness—cancer, for example—automatically fall under the definition of disability, but people who develop a different terminal illness do not. There is a very strong case for revisiting the Equality Act in that regard.

It is welcome that the new Government have made commitments in the “Make Work Pay” document, which states:

“Terminally ill people deserve security and decency during the hardest period in their lives.”

The Government encourage employers and trade unions to negotiate and sign up to the Dying to Work charter, and will work with trade unions and others to ensure that workers diagnosed with a terminal illness are treated with respect and dignity and supported at work. We all look forward to hearing from the Minister about the progress that has been made on those commitments.

We have heard a lot in this Parliament about the importance of a good death and the steps that we need to take in all areas of public policy and law to ensure that people are entitled to and receive support and dignified treatment at the close of their day. That must apply in the field of work and employment as much as in the health service and in all the other respects that we have considered during very emotive and considered debates in this Parliament. It must be hoped that, in the course of the four or five years of this Parliament, real and meaningful progress will be made to extend the charter and other protections to the hundreds of thousands of people who will, sadly, fall ill with a terminal illness and need support at work.

10.12 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Sir Edward. I extend my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) on securing this important and timely debate on the Dying to Work campaign and all that it entails.

I want to highlight the work of the TUC, particularly in the east midlands, spearheaded by Richard Oliver of the GMB trade union. He was the first person to introduce me to the Dying to Work campaign and to Jacci Woodcock, a long-term champion of the campaign. I have met her in this place, at the Labour party conference, at the Labour party east midlands regional conference and on a number of other occasions. She has been absolutely tireless and should be proud that her work on the issue she brought to the attention of her trade union has made such a significant difference to so many people in this country. It went from being one person's personal issue to making over 1.5 million people's working lives easier in very difficult circumstances.

Jacci's work continues to make a difference. Last Thursday in my constituency, I was delighted to join Rachel Harvey and Lesley Charlesworth-Brown, the chair and deputy CEO respectively of Saint Andrew's Hospice, when they signed the Dying to Work charter. Having been made aware of it during my previous time as a Member of Parliament, they had considered it and had been implementing it in practice anyway, but they decided to formalise their commitment to their staff, reflecting the area of work they are all involved in, and demonstrate their support for the charter. On the practical impact that has had for their staff, they said it has put in place an additional level of reassurance and flexibility. It has also had an impact on their patients: those who are in hospice care facing the end of their life find it reassuring that those caring for them do not have to deal with workplace precarity, and the staff are able to focus their time and energy in the way that they want to.

St Andrew's Hospice has a reputation not only as a care giver but as a caring employer, which says a huge amount about those leading the organisation. It also helps to spread the word further that employers are still continuing to sign up, and that the momentum is still there. I sincerely hope that by taking this step, St Andrew's will lead the way and encourage more employers in my constituency and across the country to sign up to the charter and to continue to give support and reassurance to people in their final months.

10.16 am

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) on bringing this extremely important debate to the House and on his work over the years before he became an MP, particularly in the midlands, which was exemplary, to say the least.

Sir Edward, can you imagine what it is like when the consultant tells you—perhaps you are at work and you get a phone call—that you have got terminal cancer? Your life flashes before you. It is horrendous, and not only for you; your family, your workmates and everyone

else is completely devastated. Yet here in the UK employers still have the ability to decide whether to dismiss somebody under those circumstances, on the basis of capability, or allow them to remain in employment. Quite frankly, it is appalling. It does not befit this wonderful country that we live in.

When they get told they have terminal cancer or a terminal illness, and are in work, different people have different views, but many have not got different options, because it is down to employers. There are good employers and bad employers. That has always been the case and it always will be. That is why it should be enshrined in law that people with a terminal condition cannot be dismissed on grounds of capability in any way, shape or form.

Different people are different. Some people want to work, because they see it as a distraction from their condition. Some people have a condition that makes it impossible for them to work. Some people want to fight their grave illness; others want to lie under the duvet and sadly spend the rest of their days in the house, not in work. But people need to have options, and people need to be supported by the Government.

I can give personal testimony, because I have experienced this situation only this year. A very close relative—it was my brother, actually—was in this position, and it was terrible. For pension reasons, to continue in employment and to receive other support, he had to prove to his employer that he really was terminally ill. For someone to do that, they have to get a letter from their GP to prove that they are going to die. The definition of “terminally ill” is that someone will die within six months, so he and his family had to seek a letter saying that he was not going to be around in six months. That is absolute stress of the highest level; it is a pre-death certificate.

Can it be right that working people are told in this way? You have got enough stress when you have been told—by the consultant, the doctor, the hospital, the GP—that you have not got that much time left. Some people want to get on and put their affairs in order; others want to spend time with their family. But people should have the right to work, and the right to continue in employment, if they can.

Other speakers have mentioned financial issues. Of course, lots of people who get a terminal illness while they are in work have family, including kids, as well as mortgages, cars and loans, and they cannot just have their financial position severed because of bad employers. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire who said that dignity at work is not a privilege, but a right. I agree. Basically, I think that the Government should consider the position of terminally ill individuals in the workplace.

With regard to needing absolute proof that you are dying, I am not sure. Imagine having to ask the doctor, “Can you put it in writing that I’m not going to be here?” It is dreadful. That is something we need to look at. I think it is right that the Government should enshrine in legislation that employers cannot dismiss anyone on grounds of capability if they can prove that they have a terminal illness, whether that proof is a letter saying they have six months to live—a pre-death certificate—or not. The employer should recognise that proof and it should be up to the individual worker to decide which of the options available to them to take.

It is commendable that 1.5 million workers and a whole number of companies have signed up to the Dying to Work campaign, but I think we have about 44 million workers in this country, and we have good employers and bad employers. We need to take the choice away from the employers; we need to enshrine it in law and support people who face the most dreadful situation that could ever be imagined.

10.23 am

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) for securing this debate and for all the campaigning that he has done on this issue for many years.

Around 900,000 people of working age live with cancer and each year 127,000 people of working age are diagnosed with cancer. Cancer charities, with the University of Loughborough and the Centre for Progressive Change—they have been particularly helpful to me in preparing for the debate, so I send them my deepest thanks—estimated earlier this year that upwards of 30,000 people are going through their cancer treatment on statutory sick pay, which offers them an income of just £23 a day. We are in a situation in which people do not receive adequate sick pay. Although that impacts millions of people with all types of illness, it is especially pronounced for those with a more advanced or terminal diagnosis, as Macmillan Cancer Support has told me. People are left with very serious concerns.

These types of cancers involve prolonged treatment, often leading to substantial additional costs. In 2023, Young Lives vs Cancer, whose representatives I met last week, found that young cancer patients and their families spend almost £700 extra a month following a cancer diagnosis. Reportedly, that figure has increased by 15% since 2017. Quite simply, there are financial costs that follow a cancer diagnosis. Young Lives vs Cancer research found that 96% of young cancer patients and their families had to pay extra for their travel. The average came to more than £250 a month, with £30 extra on childcare, £144 extra on food and £68 extra on energy every month, along with other costs. Higher costs coupled with an inadequate income can put people’s recovery at risk. In the case of a terminal diagnosis, it can cause financial hardship at the point that the person is receiving end of life care.

Anthony Nolan’s 2023 survey revealed that the cost of living issues were so severe for some patients that they cut back on food and avoided turning the heating on, and three in 10 people were unable to afford their rent or mortgage during the 12-month treatment period. Does the Minister agree with the Liberal Democrats that the current, broken rate of sick pay should be fixed, and that reform must be on the table as soon as the financial situation allows? Importantly, does he also agree that we should support small employers with statutory sick pay costs and consult them on the best way to do that?

Before I conclude, I want to address a key point about children and young people’s cancer. Although some may not know that they are terminal, the aggressive nature of cancers such as blood cancer, skin cancer and brain tumours means that the situation can change very quickly. Therefore, they may not have immediate access

[Clive Jones]

to things such as the special rules for terminal illness route for benefits, because they do not perfectly fit the criteria, which include things such as being on curative treatment or falling under the strict six-month definition of “terminal”. That leaves young patients liable to the three-month qualifying period for access to disability living allowance and personal independence payment, despite having a confirmed diagnosis. On top of that, application processing takes about 20 weeks, so some young people have passed away before their benefits have come through because of red tape. Perhaps the Minister is not aware of that, but how can the Government allow that state of affairs to continue? It really is time for change.

Why does having cancer for three months suddenly make it more real to the Department for Work and Pensions than it was at the moment of diagnosis? I would be grateful if the Minister met me and cancer charities to discuss that. It seems deeply cruel to allow this state of affairs, which prevailed under the Conservatives, to continue under the new Government.

10.29 am

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. We have heard a good and powerful debate this morning. I thank the hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) for securing and leading the debate. As he said, he has championed the Dying to Work campaign for many years, including in his role at the TUC in the midlands before his election to this place.

As we have heard from many hon. Members, the campaign was founded by Jacci Woodcock, a sales manager from Derbyshire, who was forced out of her job after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2012, when she was given 12 months to live. Jacci was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen’s birthday honours list in 2019, and I commend her hard work over the years.

As a result of Jacci’s work, many people have been protected from unfair dismissal and provided with invaluable support following the tragedy of a terminal diagnosis. It is clear from this debate, and more widely, that there is more to be done to support people with a terminal diagnosis. Being diagnosed with a terminal illness is often sudden and unexpected, meaning those with the diagnosis and their families are forced to adapt to the new reality with little or no notice. People often decline quickly and, by the time the family work out what support is available, their loved one is in desperate need of help or, in some cases, has tragically already passed away.

In other cases, despite the diagnosis, the person may have many months or even years left, and is willing and able to keep working, with some minor adaptations to their workplace arrangements. In my research for this debate, I found some startling statistics. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, just a third of UK organisations have specific provision for those with a terminal illness, meaning they have no policy, guidance or line manager or awareness training. It appears that the hesitancy of so many Brits to discuss

health and serious illness has created a stigma about raising this issue in the workplace. That means that employers and employees often have to make it up as they go along, rather than follow standardised guidance developed by experts in the field.

As the Dying to Work campaign highlights, terminally ill people often do not have time to adapt to the reasonable adjustments put in place by employers, and are often forced to undergo stressful HR procedures. There are many financial worries left behind for families, as other hon. Members have mentioned. Cancer Research UK projects that one third of Brits will be diagnosed with cancer in their working life. According to a Macmillan Cancer Support survey, 37% of cancer patients have experienced discrimination on return to work.

It is vital to end the employer lottery. Individuals are currently at the mercy of their employer far too much, and often do not know their rights or what support is available. As the population ages and treatment options improve, more and more Brits are going to be living and working with a terminal illness. At present, the legal position of terminally ill employees mainly depends on the written and verbal agreement between employee and employer.

There is little specific law covering terminal illness, when it is clearly going to become ever more present in society. I suggest one of the best ways to help people with a terminal illness is to improve the information available on diagnosis, and to encourage employers to develop best practice guidance and training, so that any employee diagnosed with a terminal illness can receive support as quickly as possible. That would avoid the situation where even compassionate employers are playing a game of catch up or having to make it up as they go along.

It is vital that people understand their rights under the Equality Act 2010, which makes it illegal to discriminate against people with a disability and legislates that employers must make reasonable adjustments so that employees can do their work. That would include flexible working hours, reduced workload, reallocation of duties, time off for treatment and, where appropriate, working from home. Employees must be made aware that they can and should make the most of sick leave, extended special and compassionate leave, annual leave and flexible working.

There is no benefit specifically designed to help people with a terminal illness, but special rules are in place to expedite access to benefits for those with less than 12 months to live. Previously, that was limited to those with less than six months to live; I am proud that the last Government extended that period to 12 months, which in turn has provided quicker access to benefits, higher payments for certain benefits and the avoidance of the need for a medical assessment. Those with a terminal illness can access benefits designed to help with the additional costs of disability and ill health, such as disability living allowance, personal independence payments and attendance allowance. For those with a disability or in ill health, there are also the benefits designed to act as income replacements, such as employment and support allowance and universal credit.

I will end by mentioning the employment rights of not just those with a terminal illness but those who care for them—the spouses, children, brothers and sisters forced to take time off work to care for a terminally ill

loved one. I am proud that the previous Government passed the Carer's Leave Act 2023, which created a new statutory right to carer's leave that came into effect in April 2024.

Employees are now entitled to take one week of unpaid leave a year if they have caring responsibilities, and that leave entitlement is available from the first day of employment, with no qualifying period. On top of that, employees also have the right to reasonable time off if a dependant is ill or injured or if their care arrangements are disrupted. Carers are protected at work from discrimination by association, and the Equality Act 2010 protects those caring for disabled or elderly people from discrimination or harassment.

I am aware of previous attempts to introduce legislation to address the injustices that come with a terminal illness—most recently, a private Member's Bill proposed in 2022 by the former Member for Stockton North. For a range of reasons, these past attempts have not succeeded but I am committed to working with right hon. and hon. Members across the House to get these issues back on the agenda and improve the lives of those who, tragically, have a diagnosis of terminal illness, to make sure that in their final months they are supported and cared for with the compassion that they deserve.

10.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this morning, Sir Edward. I start by referring to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, including my membership of the Unite and GMB unions; obviously, there is a particular reference to the GMB from one of the leading proponents of the campaign.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) on securing this important debate. We have been talking about death recently: the Second Reading of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill was an important moment in its own right and clearly raised a lot of interest across the country. It was also a wider discussion about how we approach the end of life as a society and as individuals—and indeed as employers, who are the subject of today's debate. Today we are continuing the discussion about how we handle this important issue.

The private Member's Bill proposed that only those with a terminal diagnosis who were expected to live for six months or less could come under its auspices, but there can be a considerable time between diagnosis and death. It is important that that time, however long it is, is considered carefully when it comes to how we better support people to live with dignity and fulfilment. Today's debate has raised interesting points about how we best do that. My hon. Friend was right to say that the vast majority of employers would not dream of dismissing a terminally ill member of staff, but of course the Dying to Work campaign is a much broader look at how employers can support employees in that situation; the issue is not just the prohibition on dismissal.

We had contributions from a number of Back Benchers. As always, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a thoughtful contribution. He paid tribute to Marie Curie's work to provide wider support for individuals in this situation. I understand that colleagues in the

Department for Work and Pensions continue to engage with Marie Curie on the issue. He mentioned the "Dying in poverty" report, which I have not read, but will.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) highlighted a number of measures that are already available—I will talk about those shortly—such as reasonable adjustments and flexible working, which enable those who want to carry on working to do so in a way that suits them. She made the important point that continuing to work is particularly important for people on lower incomes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) paid tribute to the campaigner Jacci Woodcock; I echo her tribute, and those of all the other hon. Members who praised her work. Jacci Woodcock has brought the campaign to the attention of many parliamentarians over a number of years, and the fact that we are having this debate is a tribute to the work that she started all those years ago.

As I would have expected him to do, my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) gave a thorough legal analysis of the protections available. He noted, as did a number of hon. Members, that there is a lack of direct protection for people with a terminal illness. Equally, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) gave a characteristically thorough analysis of the situation. He made the important point that employers want clear guidance, and mentioned a number of relevant codes that may need to be updated. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), also made the point that a number of employers do not have any policy at all; we can certainly take that away and look at it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) made an important point about St Andrew's hospice in particular: both the people who work there and those they help in their last days of life have protection, should it be needed. That is a reassurance to those in the hospice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) spoke movingly about the awful moment when someone gets a diagnosis. He made the point, as did a number of hon. Members, that different people will react differently: some want to continue to work and carry on as best they can. He mentioned the potentially traumatic experience of having to notify one's employer—seeing, in black and white, that there is a terminal illness. That is one of the challenges we would face if we were to legislate in this area.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), raised questions about statutory sick pay. He will be aware that the Employment Rights Bill will significantly increase the scope of those who are eligible for statutory sick pay by removing the lower earnings limit and the waiting days. I hope that his party will be able to support that Bill on Third Reading. He also mentioned raising benefits, and I will pass on his request to colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions who are responsible for the matter.

The hon. Member for Strangford, as well as a number of other Members, made the point that people with a terminal illness want the choice to work if they can. For some people, work forms a big part of their social group. Work is about dignity; it is about finding something

[Justin Madders]

that occupies a person's mind other than thoughts about the terrible situation they are in. People should be able to continue to work if they want to. Of course, not everyone wants to, and not everyone can—this issue is not simple to characterise. Everyone reacts differently, and everyone is in a different situation: their medical conditions and prognoses will all be very different. People will therefore need very different kinds of support, depending on their situation.

We must deal with this issue with sensitivity, but also with flexibility. We must not only make sure that protections are in place, but enable employers and employees to have the space and freedom to come to the arrangements that suit them best. A number of hon. Members referred to protections under the Equality Act. I remind hon. Members that anyone with a health condition that has a substantial and long-term effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities is classified as disabled and therefore has protection under that Act, whether as an employee or a job applicant. Certain chronic illnesses, such as cancer, entitle the employee to automatic protection under the Act.

The vast majority of people with a terminal illness should be covered by the Equality Act. However, I have heard what various Members have said—indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire, who introduced the debate, mentioned people who may not fit within the protections of that Act, and I am happy to have a further conversation with him to understand where the gaps are. There are also more general protections relating to unfair dismissal under the Employment Rights Act 1996.

As we know, terminal illness is a longer journey for some than for others. Some facing it may wish to carry on working; some may not. However, we need to think about what support is available for people. The individual placement and support in primary care programme provides support to unwell people who are out of work and to those who need support with their health to stay in work. The support available includes physical and psychological treatment, in recognition that illness, including terminal illness, can take many forms. Alongside that, the Government provide Access to Work grants to help with the extra costs of working beyond standard reasonable adjustments and tailored support for individuals through work coaching, among other support.

More generally, the Government provide employers with guidance on health disclosures and having conversations about health, as well as guidance on legal obligations. However, I take the point that that guidance is not well understood out there. We think our guidance is helpful for employers, but we need to make sure that they are aware of it and that it is as up-to-date as possible.

As we have already touched on, terminally ill people who wish to remain in work may need reasonable adjustments to do so. One of the options for people is to look at flexible working. Quite often, terminal illnesses have a debilitating effect on people's energy levels, so being able to take time off flexibly is important. All employees have a statutory entitlement at the moment to request flexible working from day one of their employment. The new Employment Rights Bill will update that entitlement to introduce, among other changes,

a requirement that any rejection of a flexible working request be a reasonable one. We hope that will make it more likely that any such request made by an individual with a terminal illness will be accepted.

If terminally ill people do fall out of work, they are eligible for enhanced access to a range of benefits under the special rules for end of life. Those rules allow for faster, easier access to certain benefits without needing to attend a medical assessment, and in most cases entitle the recipient to the highest rate of benefit. It is important to note that the rules apply to those who are unable to work and to those who wish to continue working, but require support to do so. The special rules for end of life aim to positively impact the quality of life of people with limited time left by ensuring that they can receive the financial support they are entitled to quickly and easily.

However, as hon. Members have already referred to, we are determined to go further. As we have heard, many employers have signed up to the Dying to Work charter, a TUC initiative that aims to unite employers under a standardised action plan to support employees as and when they are concerned. The charter represents a commitment from employers to ensure that all employees experiencing terminal illness have

“security of work, peace of mind and the right to choose the best course of action for themselves and their families which helps them through this challenging period with dignity and without undue financial loss”.

The Government have worked with ACAS to promote the charter and the TUC encourages union negotiators to seek clear agreement that their employer will abide by the charter's principles. I am among 130 Members in this place who have already signed the charter as a commitment to my staff, because I believe that we should be setting an example as employers.

I understand that, as has been mentioned already, we are looking closely at being to implement the charter in full across Government. The Government People Group, which is in the Cabinet Office and responsible for civil service human resources, is currently working to develop a package of measures for all Departments as employers, including this Department, to introduce the Dying to Work charter. The Government People Group is due to meet the TUC in January to discuss that and a Minister will then be appointed to lead that work across Government. Once we are in a position to say that we have adopted the charter, we can hopefully be much more forward in encouraging others to sign up.

I conclude by thanking everyone for their contributions in the debate. It has been a very thoughtful and considered debate; we understand that there are concerns about how the law currently operates, but the employer needs space with the employee to agree arrangements appropriate to their own situations. We therefore believe that our current flexible approach is probably the right one and will deliver the best practical working arrangements, hopefully giving people not only the protection they need, but the flexibility and space to deal with this awful situation in the way that best suits them.

10.51 am

Lee Barron: I thank everybody for coming to the debate. I do not see this as the end of something; I do not see this as a 90-minute debate where we just say, “That's good enough.” I see this as the start of a conversation that I think we need to have. I welcome the

fact that the Government People Group is looking into this and I know it has had those discussions. That is a step in the right direction, but ultimately we need to ensure that people cannot slip through where there are gaps—and currently they can. That is where the conversation needs to continue. I think this debate has started that conversation and put us in a good place to continue it so, once again, many thanks indeed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the employment rights of people with a terminal illness.

10.52 am

Sitting suspended.

Gatwick Airspace Modernisation Review

11 am

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I will call John Milne to move the motion, and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates. It is not normal for other Members to make a speech unless they have the permission of the Member in charge and the Minister, but they can intervene. I call John Milne.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential impact of the Gatwick airspace modernisation review on local communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. My constituency of Horsham lies to the west and south of Gatwick airport. I have brought today's debate in order to represent growing concerns from residents regarding the airspace modernisation process around Gatwick, which is part of the future airspace strategy implementation south, known as FASI-S.

Before I start, I would like to make it clear that I wholly support the modernisation process in principle. It is a vital step if we are to improve the efficiency of civil aviation, cut flight times and reduce carbon emissions. What I do question, however, is how we will get there. The process as it stands involves a significant conflict of interest. I would also like to emphasise that the airspace modernisation process is entirely separate from the second runway application at Gatwick, although it is going on at the same time and naturally gets confused in the public mind. The airspace modernisation process will go ahead whether or not Gatwick obtains permission to expand and is in fact part of a national process also being conducted at 19 other airports across the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I hope I can help him and the Minister as well. For all airport modernisation reviews, the issue of sound is always of extreme importance. For example, both major airports in Northern Ireland, Belfast International and Belfast City, have residential areas nearby. Provisions must be in place to tackle excessive noise at certain times. So does the hon. Member agree that any airspace modernisation review must make the matter of noise a top priority to ensure that local communities are not negatively impacted by airspace expansion?

John Milne: Indeed, as I will come on to, noise is the primary issue at stake here. Gatwick Airport Ltd, referred to as GAL, is a private company. As the operator at Gatwick, it has been tasked with masterminding the airspace review process. It is subject to oversight from a public body, the Civil Aviation Authority. Similarly, Heathrow and other airports across the country are carrying out their own strategy implementation consultation processes for their own areas. The assumption is that each airport knows its own patch better than anyone else, so they are the best qualified to do the job. However, in the case of Gatwick, serious concerns have been raised. Now that we have reached stage three, which is the public consultation phase, many of my constituents

[John Milne]

and parish councils are concerned. They are worried about the impacts the proposals will have on public health, the objectivity of the process itself and whether the three shortlisted choices actually represent any kind of choice at all.

The proposed changes all involve using a new, previously not overflown flight path. Currently, planes taking off to the west climb for about 6k out before turning south to the coast. But the new route makes a much earlier turn south at about 2k out. The net effect of this change is to separate the western and southern route paths much earlier than currently, which enables a reduction in the interval between flights from two minutes down to 60 seconds. That in turn would enable the airport operator to build significantly more take-off slots into their schedules. The value of that increase in capacity is enormous, potentially hundreds of millions of pounds over the long term.

Why should the change in flight path matter so much to my constituents? Because the sharper turns mean that thousands of flights a year will henceforth directly overfly the villages of Rusper, Warnham and Slinfold at a relatively low height, radically increasing noise pollution, loss of sleep and other negatives.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): As the Member for Mid Sussex, I have been concerned for some time about potential expansion at Gatwick airport, in particular bringing the emergency runway into commercial use. Does my hon. Friend agree that should the decision be approved, the problems he outlines will only be exacerbated?

John Milne: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Indeed, there is a suspicion that part of the motive behind this is to enable an expansion, which has not been permitted yet.

In this new design, flights would be concentrated over a much narrower band of countryside. The introduction of satellite-based navigation, which is another part of the modernisation process, also has the effect of pushing flights along the same narrow route. GAL started out its review with hundreds of possible designs, but for the public consultation it has narrowed it down to just three. All three make that sharp turn to the south at 2k out. All three add millions to GAL's potential income. All three create massive noise pollution for Rusper, Warnham and Slinfold. They are not three different options but one and the same.

Is it credible that by fluke all three have exactly the same financial benefit to GAL? It is no wonder that many residents have come to suspect that profit and share price is being put before people's interests. The absence of an independent member in the design process leaves the outcome open to a perception of bias, at the very least. Perhaps the CAA has recognised this risk, because it proposes to set up a new UK-wide airspace change service that would serve to remedy the problem of

"scarce expertise in the industry".

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): The hon. Member is making a very powerful point, and completely correctly. This is something that has been going on for many years. We have been speaking about the Noise Management Board at Gatwick for a very long time. It has completely

failed to be anything other than a talking shop in order to placate Bo Redeborn's complaints at the last review. What we are actually dealing with here is a snake's wedding above our airspace. It is particularly bad over southern England, but the truth is that it extends all the way to Manchester. This is something I have been fighting for a number of years, so I certainly do not blame the current Minister.

Until the Civil Aviation Authority, NATS and the Department for Transport are willing to address this, we are simply not going to be able to progress. Is it not essential that we look at this in a proper review of the whole of the airspace across southern England and not just exert greater pressure on communities like Cowden in my constituency and no doubt others in the constituency of the hon. Member for Horsham? All we are doing is building a motorway in the sky above people's homes but without the same protections people would get if a real motorway were to be built alongside them. There will be no compensation, planning or oversight. Is this not the real problem we are facing?

John Milne: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. I am aware that he has been fighting this cause for a very long time. I certainly agree with his comments and the need for a truly national process on this.

The problem is identified by the CAA as a

"scarce expertise in the industry...leading to inconsistent standards and variable quality"

in airport change process submissions. Unfortunately, the Gatwick review will be completed before this new body is even established. Could we be overestimating the negative impacts of this new route? Are residents exaggerating the damage it might do to their wellbeing? We can confidently say that it is no exaggeration, because the same route has already been experimented with before. Back in 2014 a trial was run called ADNID, following more or less the same line. The impact was immediately disastrous, causing a storm of complaints—so much so that the CEO at the time said that the trial route would never be used again. Yet here we are, 10 years later, and ADNID mark II has arrived.

Although Gatwick claims that these proposals would remove traffic from the existing pathway population swathe, not a single population centre would actually benefit from the change. For the first time, the options being presented to the public consultation bring in thousands of residents who were not previously overflown, contradicting GAL's own policy of deconfliction. The forceful objections raised in 2014 are being ignored.

Gatwick's route selection cannot be justified on environmental grounds either. Airspace modernisation is designed to reduce carbon emissions from air travel through more efficient flying. Although that may be achieved as a whole in the FASI-S project, the reduction in emissions is largely achieved by the changes made above 7,000 feet. The emissions and their impact under 7,000 feet are simply not being analysed and nor are the potential harms, which are not even mentioned in stage two of GAL's FASI-S consultation.

The consultation process as a whole lacks transparency. There are many questions that I believe the public need answers to. No defined methodology for shortlisting flightpath options has been put forward for public

consultation. Why is GAL allowed to pick and choose proposed flightpaths without independent review or scrutiny? As stated, the options show little or no variation. It is not three choices—

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I am well aware of many of the points the hon. Member is making. In fact, back in 2014 I was on Gatwick's consultative forum as a community representative and I was well aware then of the impact that the trial route had, in terms of concentrated noise in some areas and the consequent storm of community feeling. However, I suppose that one of the key problems will ultimately be that if we are trying to rationalise airspace with a complex set of interconnecting airports, there will only be a finite number of routes that can reasonably be taken in order for that rationalisation to happen.

Beyond that point, my broader concern is that in enabling a far more efficient set of flightpaths, ultimately what we are doing is enabling far greater capacity in terms of flights in our region. As I am sure both the hon. Member and the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) will agree, north Sussex's infrastructure is already completely overloaded from dealing with the existing levels of demand from the airport and the associated industries. Any growth in capacity will require someone—either the airport or the Government—to step in and significantly invest in our communities to make sure that they do not suffer the ill effects of far greater levels of aviation in our region.

John Milne: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Indeed, part of the problem is that this process is in isolation from 100 other issues; infrastructure is very much one of them, because, as he says, it is already sadly lacking.

As I was saying, the options show little to no variation from each other. It is not three choices; it is one choice repeated three times. Without sight of a genuine alternative that builds on the structure already in place—using routes that already bear traffic—how can the public understand the trade-offs of different pathways? It is worth noting that Heathrow has three clearly varying pathways, which differ in direction and geometric shape from each other, for the public to consider.

If the Gatwick consultation is sound, why has the CAA launched a separate consultation about setting up a national body for the review? That implies that the current model of individual airports designing individual strategies is not working. Is the current governing policy from the CAA, which is known as CAP1616, up to date? Does it consider modernisation of satellite technology and the impact that technology is having on flight concentration? If not, the modernisation of Gatwick could have serious environmental and health consequences for communities such as mine in Horsham.

Why does GAL seem to be rushing for this consultation to be implemented in 2027 when full technical technological roll-out cannot be achieved by 2030 at the earliest, or by 2035 according to other estimates? Why have alternative routes been dismissed on the basis that they conflicted, due to inter-airport conflict, despite there being a pre-agreed process to deal with that by using the Airspace Change Organising Group at a later date? That is not a basis on which to dismiss alternative options.

Airport modernisation is a nationally important ambition: I certainly do not dispute that. Opportunities to make large-scale, comprehensive changes to the entire national network come only once in a lifetime. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that we carry out the process using the most up-to-date guiding principles, with high levels of scrutiny and consultations that provide residents with a real choice. Without doing so, how will we obtain an outcome that is balanced and fair to both airports and communities?

Retaining the southerly route would make negligible difference to carbon emissions or efficiency, but the benefits to residents would be enormous. Public wellbeing is supposed to be a key part of this process, but it seems that we are sacrificing those three villages for no good reason. I therefore ask that the process be reconsidered such that all the communities around Gatwick and the other 19 airports can be presented with a credible and rational set of alternatives. That process must account for the findings of the recently published "Fair and Equitable Distribution Interim Report", which was financed by the CAA specifically for that purpose. If we carry on as we are and take no action, we risk that important review being vulnerable to unwanted outcomes and a conflict of interest. I urge the Minister to consider the process again and ensure an outcome that will be accepted as legitimate by the public as a whole.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on securing this timely and important debate.

The UK's airspace is some of the most complex in the world, yet there has been little change to its overall structure since the 1950s. If a pilot from that time came back to the future in a TARDIS, he would be flying the same pathways as he did in the 1950s. The system was designed closer to the time Yuri Gagarin was in space than to today.

Modernising our airspace can deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys. Airspace modernisation will use new technologies to create direct routes and faster climbs, and will reduce the need for holding stacks. It will mean that the aviation industry can grow safely and that customers will experience more reliable services, which are particularly needed at Gatwick. Importantly, there will be opportunities to reduce noise and carbon emissions.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): In my constituency of Tunbridge Wells there is only one noise monitor, in the village of Rusthall. Although we are all in favour of airspace modernisation—the Minister makes some great points about it—how can we know that it will not merely move the noise problem around, or even make it worse? Will the Government commit to expanding the number of noise monitors in affected communities, such as mine in Tunbridge Wells, before they implement the proposal?

Mike Kane: I gently remind the hon. Member that I grew up under the flight path at Manchester airport, so I remember the BAC One-Elevens, the Tridents and the Concorde. I even saw the space shuttle do a low pass on a jumbo jet. Through modern technology, noise envelopes are reducing considerably.

[Mike Kane]

The hon. Member for Horsham talked about carbon; who knew that if we actually flew our planes in straight lines, we would reduce the carbon emissions from our aviation sector by up to about 10%? That would benefit not just every community but the planet too.

The first step in modernising Gatwick's airspace affects routes heading south to the airport, as the hon. Member for Horsham said, which have minimal interactions with other airports. To achieve those changes, Gatwick is following the Civil Aviation Authority's CAP 1616 process, as he mentioned. The process was revised earlier this year to make it fairer and more transparent and to provide an opportunity for comprehensive engagement with local communities and stakeholders who may be affected by airspace changes. It is worth pointing out that that was a key manifesto commitment of ours at the general election. That was right because, given the implications of airspace changes for local communities and the environment, it is necessary that they are subject to robust and transparent procedures.

One of the most complex and pressing aspects of airspace modernisation is the need to redesign the outdated flightpaths into and from our airports, such as those at Gatwick. Gatwick airport participates in a fundamental component of the Department's airspace modernisation programme: the future airspace strategy implementation programme. FASI is a UK-wide upgrade of terminal airspace, involving 20 airports working in collaboration with the Airspace Change Organising Group and NATS to co-ordinate a more efficient airspace system.

Tom Tugendhat: I appreciate the tone with which the Minister is approaching this issue, which he knows has been a matter of great frustration for the past few years that I have been in Parliament. The key to the FASI programme is surely making the efficiency work. I will not comment on the Minister's understanding of aerodynamics, given his comment about the TARDIS flying, which is a slightly different question—

Mike Kane: It is the space-time continuum.

Tom Tugendhat: Exactly—it is not quite aerodynamics, and not exactly a flight route.

But this debate does involve flight routes, and there is extra pressure on communities. The Department's policy, certainly until now—the Minister may have changed it—was to reduce the number of people significantly affected by aircraft noise. Yet going from a flight every 20 minutes to a flight every 100 seconds will apply enormous pressure in a community like Cowden, right next to where I live in west Kent. That is clearly a major change.

I appreciate that noise management has changed in the years since the Minister was growing up near Manchester airport, and I appreciate his points about efficiency—we all welcome efficiency in aircraft routes and, I hope, the greater profit for aircraft users and the resultant cheaper tickets—but will he also recognise that that efficiency needs to be shared with compensation on the ground? If we were to build a motorway next to somebody's house, we would compensate them, or it would at least require various permissions. This should be no different. It is a motorway in the air.

Mike Kane: Gatwick did pass stage 2 of the CAA's CAP 1616 process. That is a transparent process, and it is fully consulted on at stage 3. The right hon. Member mentions noise in particular, which I know is a sensitive issue. I understand how the changes to flight paths as part of the airspace modernisation process can also change how noise is distributed. As ever, we need to strike a fair balance between the impact of aviation on the local environment and communities, and the economic benefits that Gatwick brings to its local community, as well as its national importance. With airspace modernisation and performance-enhancing beacons, we can be more flexible.

As Gatwick has more than 50,000 movements a year, it is obliged under the environmental noise regulations to produce noise action plans, which act as a driver for the management of aircraft noise and for mitigation around airports. Gatwick's current noise plan sets out its ambition for managing noise between 2024 and 2028; I encourage all Members to get involved in that.

For several decades, the Government have set out noise controls, including restrictions on night operations at Gatwick airport. The controls reflect the need to balance the impact on communities with the benefits to the economy. I am pleased to announce that yesterday the Government published their decision to maintain the current restrictions at Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted until 2028. Additionally, airspace modernisation will allow the introduction of new technology, such as performance-based navigation, which will enhance the accuracy of where aircraft fly and provide better opportunities to provide respite for noise-sensitive areas.

One of the main objectives of our airspace modernisation strategy is environmental sustainability. This key principle is applied throughout all modernisation activities and takes into account the interest of all affected stakeholders. The UK has committed to an ambitious target to reach net zero by 2050. We were the first major world economy to enact such a law. We continue to work together with industry to consider the best ways to support the aviation industry to de-carbonise, including through the jet zero taskforce. Airspace modernisation can help us to reach our target by reducing delays and allowing aircraft to fly in more direct routes. That should result in far less fuel burn, and therefore reduce our carbon omissions and potentially the noise impact of flights.

To improve confidence in the delivery of airspace modernisation across the south-east region, my Department and the CAA have launched a consultation on our proposals for a new UK airspace design service. The proposals set out our ambitions to create a single guiding mind responsible for the holistic design of airspace change, to the benefit of all who use our airspace and are affected. I encourage Members to get behind this change. The hon. Member for Horsham is right that there is not a vast wave of expertise in this area in our nation. Our ambition is to bring together the best minds to improve airspace across the whole UK.

John Milne: I recognise that the Minister has not finished, but I am concerned that his points have, so far, been general. I wholly support the overall ambitions to reduce carbon emissions—I have absolutely no problem with that—but there are two issues. First, the consultation is not a genuine one because there is no real choice. Secondly, we are moving away from a route that is

already used and is perfectly reasonable to one with significant resident impacts. I am concerned that the Minister has not addressed those two key issues.

Mike Kane: As I have already stated, there is full public consultation at stage 3, and the hon. Member and his constituents will have the right to fully engage in that. I do encourage people to engage in this issue, because we have to modernise our airspace. It will take some time, a lot of energy and a lot of expertise, but it is the right thing to do by our nation.

To conclude, airspace modernisation is vital to unlocking the benefits of a growing UK aviation sector. Without modernising the airspace, we cannot realise the benefits to passengers, communities, operators and the economy. This must be achieved in a sustainable way that minimises the impact on local communities while balancing the strategic benefits that Gatwick airport can bring to the economy.

I thank all Members—the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), the hon. Members for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) and for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), and my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb)—for participating, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham on securing this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

BBC: Funding

[DAVID MUNDELL *IN THE CHAIR*]

[*Relevant document: e-petition 701068, Abolish the tv licence.*]

2.30 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the future funding of the BBC

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and to debate a subject that I seem to have spent a large part of my parliamentary career discussing, but which has become extremely appropriate to examine once again today. The Minister, who I have spent a lot of time debating over the last few years, last night replied to an Adjournment debate touching on the overall process under which the BBC charter will be renewed, but as she said last night—and she is completely right—the funding of the BBC is a central part of the charter renewal process, and what the BBC does will to some extent be affected by the money available to it and vice versa. I do think it is right that we look at the matter.

I had responsibility less than 10 years ago for drawing up the charter under which the BBC currently operates. That was in 2015-16—only seven or eight years ago—but the changes that have taken place in the broadcasting landscape since are huge and continue to accelerate. At the time of the last charter, streaming did exist, but it was only a couple of years after Netflix had launched in this country, and there were still only one or two other streamers available. Since then, we have seen an explosion, with an enormous number of different streaming platforms that are investing heavily in extremely good content. Most people now enjoy streamed services as well as traditional broadcast, and subscribe, quite often, to several streamers.

Despite the huge range of content that is now available, in my view—and I think the Government take the same view—public service broadcasting is still absolutely necessary, particularly in the core public service content areas of news and current affairs, which are not really provided by the streaming services. I continue to believe that there is a very important role for the BBC in this country's broadcasting landscape, but my concern is that the traditional method by which the BBC is funded—through the licence fee—is going to become steadily harder to sustain.

Even seven or eight years ago, we saw the beginning of the challenges. At that time, at the request of the BBC, we closed the iPlayer loophole, by which people were viewing BBC content on the iPlayer but not paying the licence fee. We said then, and it remains the case now, that if people watch live television in any form and if they use the iPlayer, they are required to have a TV licence. Other drivers have increased revenue for the BBC over the years, like the growth of single-parent households and immigration levels, meaning that more licences have been issued—but that trend has now reversed, despite the closing of the loophole; each year, fewer people are buying a television licence. In the course of the last year, the number of licences held has fallen by 500,000, and that movement is likely to continue.

If we look at the public's viewing behaviour, we find that less and less traditional broadcast television is being watched, particularly by young people. Most 16 to 24-year-olds now do not watch any live broadcasts

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

each week—10 years ago, 80% did—and broadcast channels take up only 57% of all viewing, against TikTok, YouTube and all the other streaming services. People are genuinely saying, “We choose to subscribe and pay for Netflix, Amazon, Discovery, Apple and all the other streamers. We don’t see why, on top of that, we should have to pay for a TV licence when we don’t watch the BBC.”

The TV licence does not just cover the BBC; it covers all live television viewing. Nevertheless, a lot of people can watch on catch-up the programmes that are available on the other public service channels. Genuinely, people are not required under the law to have a TV licence, and more and more are choosing not to have one. That will pose an increasing problem for the BBC.

We have seen complaints from the BBC about the fact that the revenue available to it has been cut in recent years—like every other public service, it has been required to find efficiencies—but the director general has talked about the crisis that has been created by the lack of money and his inability to invest to compete. That situation is not likely to get any better if we continue with the licence fee; if anything, it will become steadily worse.

I remember chairing a Select Committee—I think it was about 15 years ago—that looked at the funding of the BBC and the licence fee. At the time, we concluded that although the licence fee had many drawbacks, it was still probably the best available option. It is a regressive tax, it is criminally enforced and it is the case that among the people convicted of failing to pay, a large proportion are women. Those are all drawbacks of the licence fee, but at that time the alternatives did not seem possible. Certainly, advertising is not likely to be beneficial to the BBC or to the whole commercial television sector; there is not that much advertising revenue to go round, and if there were advertising on the BBC, it would result in a reduction for everybody else.

There is an alternative option. A lot of people have said, “Why can’t the BBC charge a subscription, so people can choose whether or not to pay it?” The reason is simple. At the moment, most people still access the BBC and other traditional broadcasters through digital terrestrial television, or Freeview, and there is no mechanism for conditional access—in other words, the choice to receive a particular channel—with Freeview. At the launch of Freeview, the BBC was very keen that that should be the case, because it was worried about subscription, but it means that while a significant proportion of the population continue to rely on Freeview, we cannot move to subscription. But that will change.

Both the last Government and this Government have said that Freeview will be maintained until 2034; it may well be that we need to maintain it for a bit longer. However, the transition to IPTV or internet protocol television—the provision of television over the internet—will steadily increase, and if people have smart TVs, which allow them to choose whether to subscribe to the streamers, it means they could also have the choice of whether to subscribe to the BBC. I think that that option is likely to become more attractive, although it will only really become viable when we reach the point where almost the entire population have IPTV, but for the reasons I have set out, it is important that we start to talk about it now.

The last Government had future funding of the BBC panel, which this Government have not continued. On the other hand, I know that the Minister has set up a future of TV distribution panel, which does not look vastly different. Anyway, I am glad that the Government continue to look at the issue, which is why I think this is the right time to have this debate.

There are certain things that will never be possible to have on a subscription basis, including BBC Radio—I do not think there is any way in which there can be conditional access on radio—and the World Service. I sit on the Foreign Affairs Committee and we are currently examining the World Service, which is of huge benefit to this country. It could not be provided on a subscription basis, as the people it is aimed at are certainly not in a position to pay. The World Service also makes a very valuable contribution to the reputation of the UK and to our soft power, and the BBC has said that it should be funded by the Foreign Office and not by the licence fee. That argument is quite attractive, although I recognise that it would be a big challenge for the Government to take on. The Minister gave evidence on the subject yesterday and it remains an issue that we will want to debate.

With radio, it would be possible to extend advertising, but, as with any advertising on BBC TV, doing so would damage commercial radio. I am also slightly worried about the extent to which advertising is creeping in at the margin, with the BBC allowing advertising through podcast, which is increasingly the way in which people are accessing audio content.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recognise, as I do, that one big challenge in relation to the BBC is that many of those who are most opposed to its further commercialisation are the other public service broadcasters, who worry about disruption to their own revenue streams, particularly in relation to advertising. That is why it is tricky to come up with an alternative to the licence fee.

Sir John Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is completely right. She and I both had the pleasure of serving as Minister; I was delighted to stand in for her while she was on maternity leave, so we have both looked at the issue for some time. We have to look at the overall television landscape. If we allow advertising, or encourage the BBC to compete, it is likely to have an impact on the commercial sector, which completely depends on advertising revenue. Our traditional advertising-funded PSBs—ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5—are already finding it difficult competing in a world with well-resourced streamers, and this would make it worse.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): One of the weaknesses of the streaming companies is regional and national news coverage and programming. For BBC Scotland, at the moment 99% of the licence fee paid by Scots is invested in Scotland. That is a really important and positive aspect of the current licence fee arrangements that must be protected as we move forward.

Sir John Whittingdale: I have sympathy with the hon. Gentleman. It is the case that the BBC provides more of the core public service content than the other PSBs—the others do, but not to the same extent. National and regional coverage of the type he has described is absolutely a core part of that. I think that needs to continue, and if the licence fee is not able to fund it, there is a case for it

moving across to general taxation. There is a world in which the core PSB content is funded out of taxation, and then people could choose to subscribe to the content that is more entertainment based—a subscription model—but it is too early to say.

These are the kinds of discussions that are fundamental to the next charter. I am delighted that the Government are now beginning to consider that. My purpose today is to flag up the extent to which the existing model cannot be sustained, and to begin having the debate.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Following the recent developments in Syria, I understand that the BBC World Service will offer enhanced services to audiences across Syria on broadcast medium wave and FM. Would the right hon. Member congratulate the World Service on stepping in to respond to an emergency situation with the utmost professionalism? Does that not underline his point as to why it should be funded from the Foreign Office?

Sir John Whittingdale: I agree. Yesterday, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee took evidence from the director general and the deputy director for news, Jonathan Munro, on this subject. He talked about the way the World Service provides its core language services and can also provide additional coverage quickly. Syria is a good example of where it is doing that. That is an extremely important role for the BBC, and one that I do not think could be funded in any way other than through public money. The BBC make a good case as to why the licence fee may no longer be appropriate, which we also need to consider.

There are a large number of Members present in the Chamber, so I do not want to take up any more time. I hope that I have raised one or two questions that we will need to debate thoroughly over the course of the couple of years that lie ahead for the charter renewal.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. I do not intend to set a time limit, but if Members could stick to five or six minutes, everybody should get to speak.

2.44 pm

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am the chair of the BBC all-party parliamentary group, a recipient of hospitality and a former employee of Prospect and Bectu unions, which represent workers at the BBC.

I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this debate on such an important issue, not only for the BBC as an organisation, but for all of us who benefit from its mission to inform, educate and entertain. When we discuss the future funding of the BBC, we must understand the need to safeguard its unique role with a funding model that enables it to continue to be independent and universal and to provide the unique content that its audience expects. With BBC iPlayer having been the fastest-growing streaming service this year and with 95% of UK adults using BBC services every month—whether that is its nine TV channels, its 16 radio stations, its streaming apps or the World Service—we must recognise that the demand for the BBC's

services and content reflects what a vital source of information and entertainment it is for our constituents and for people accessing World Service content around the world.

It is also vital to our democracy. In a landscape of bias, spin, the common approach of “Don't let facts get in the way of a good story” and the rise of unverified content and disinformation masquerading as news on social media, the BBC's championing of impartial and fearless reporting at home and abroad and its operating without pandering to political or commercial interests is becoming more vital, not less. I am sure that colleagues of all political persuasions agree with that.

The financial challenges for the BBC are stark; when we debate future funding, we must recognise that. It has seen a 30% real-terms decrease in funding for UK services in the past decade, exacerbated by previous decisions around the licence fee and, of course, the hyperinflation in the film and TV industries in recent years. It has also taken on additional financial responsibilities in the past decade, including licences for the over-75s on pension credit. Although I know that the BBC welcomes the new Government's funding uplift for the World Service in our recent Budget, two thirds of its funding still comes from the licence fee. I know that the licence fee will be in place until at least 2027-28, but given the challenges that have been outlined, this debate on its future funding is timely.

Many funding models have been proposed, but many alternatives to the licence fee would simply not secure the future of our world-leading public service broadcaster and would threaten its ability to create uniquely British content and tell stories, both fictional and real, from across the UK. An advertising model, for example, would not be right for the BBC: it would introduce commercial interests into programming decisions and would force the BBC to compete with other public service broadcasters and commercial radio and TV over ever-dwindling advertising revenue, as the right hon. Member for Maldon pointed out. I would be deeply concerned by the impact that that would have on the BBC's ability to continue to invest in our world-leading creative industries and talent. It would undoubtedly leave the BBC and the rest of our broadcasting ecosystem worse off.

Similarly, a subscription model would not provide the universal public service broadcasting to which we and the BBC aspire. It would threaten regional programming and investment. It is unsurprising that the Government have committed to a sustainable public funding model for the BBC as part of the upcoming charter review to ensure that we continue to have a BBC that is impartial, universal and accessible, but it is important that we closely examine the licence fee model and consider reforms to ensure that its scope, progression and enforcement are fit for the times we find ourselves in.

We have something very special in the BBC. It has brought the nation together for more than a century for those enormous moments in our shared lives, from sporting triumph to the election drama that those of us in this Chamber all enjoyed this year, and from the latest adaptation of J. K. Rowling's “Cormoran Strike” books to the upcoming “Gavin and Stacey” Christmas special, which I know will be on in my family's house. It provides fearless news coverage in our neighbourhoods, from Westminster and abroad, and it invests in creative talent.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): My area has excellent regional news coverage, including BBC Three Counties Radio and “Look East”. However, back in 2022, a decision was taken that has meant that my regional politics programme is now recorded more than 100 miles away from my constituency. Given that all news is local, would my hon. Friend care to comment on whether that is the right starting point for regional news coverage, or whether we might want to do something more local and perhaps better?

Tom Rutland: I agree that it is a shame that some regional political and news programming is being filmed further away than before. Of course, I am not able to answer directly for those decisions by the BBC, but the 30% funding decrease that I mentioned may explain the reasoning behind them. It is a shame that we find ourselves in this position; it underlines the importance of finding a funding settlement and model that will allow regional programming and truly local programming to be safeguarded as much as possible.

As I was saying, the BBC provides fearless coverage in our neighbourhoods—sometimes a little further away than previously—and in Westminster and abroad. It invests in creative talent and programming across every corner of our great country. That is something worth fighting for in a world of media fragmentation. I hope all colleagues will support my push for a future funding model that ensures that the BBC lasts for another century.

2.50 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this very important debate and for his thoughtful comments. I should make colleagues aware that I am a co-chair of the National Union of Journalists’ parliamentary group.

The BBC has been at the heart of the UK’s national life for over 100 years, and it is at the heart of my constituency of Salford. Its mission to inform, educate and entertain is underpinned by its funding model, which ensures that it is universal, independent and never at the whim of vested business interests or advertisers. It is there for the people of Britain, not for profit. It has a more important function than just entertaining us; it reaches out to every community in the UK and gives them a voice. It is an intrinsic part of political accountability, holding local and national politicians to account. It strives to provide content in the public interest, not just sensational headlines that offer the best clickbait. From educational resources produced by the BBC that are relied on in schools to fact-checking services that cut through misinformation, local radio and local democracy journalism, it is clear that the BBC’s impact on our communities is profound.

Julia Lopez: Does the hon. Lady agree that the BBC’s unique currency is trust, and that one of the challenges in recent years is that people have lost faith in the BBC as an organisation that produces impartial news? One challenge that I saw in the last Parliament was that the BBC was reducing local and regional journalism, even while protecting some very large salaries for its biggest stars. That is one of the reasons why people are losing faith that the BBC is investing in journalism in the way that it should and in the way that people expect from a public service broadcaster.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I very much agree with the hon. Lady about cuts to local journalism, because it is a fundamental part of holding politicians and local democratic organisations to account. It is incredibly worrying to see cuts to local services in print, television and radio; I hope the upcoming charter review will address and recognise that. I will come back to the theme of accountability and rebuilding public trust for those who may have lost an element of it.

It is also important to recognise the BBC’s impact on the rest of the world and how the world views the UK through its World Service provision, most importantly at a time of great turmoil in certain parts of the world. The BBC World Service has a history of responding to emergency situations globally. Most recently, in November, it launched an emergency radio service for Gaza, which remains on air. In May 2023, during the conflict in Sudan, BBC News Arabic began an emergency radio service. In February 2022 the BBC News Ukraine service extended TV bulletins, following the invasion of the country. BBC News has also responded to the events in Syria with special programming across the week.

Despite the crucial public interest role that the BBC plays, as we have heard, it has seen a 30% real-terms decrease in funding for UK public services in the last decade. Parts of the service have been at risk or have been cut completely, which puts the unique role of the BBC in jeopardy. Most recently, we have heard about the cutting of “HARDtalk” and local radio service provision, to name a few examples.

The forthcoming charter review process provides us with the opportunity to put the BBC on a stable and sustainable footing, recognising its vital role in our society and democracy, its significance as a major driver of the UK’s wider creative economy and its strategic value as a global asset. It is important that we discuss the importance of recognising the various available funding options beyond the licence fee. For example, the World Service is just one element of BBC provision that should be recognised on a department level, not just in terms of the licence fee.

There are ways we could improve the BBC too, particularly in how it engages with the public. The NUJ suggests that starting with genuine engagement and consultation with the public about what they value from their BBC will regain their input into its future funding and direction. It further suggests public and staff representation on the BBC board, improving diversity and reflecting the priorities of licence fee payers more fully. It calls for the reversal of initiatives that have diverted licence fee income away from core work, including the costs of free licences for the over-75s, which should be funded directly by the Government. It also calls for greater independence and the safeguarding of the BBC from perceived political interference, including by ensuring that the BBC boards and its chair are chosen by an arm’s length body.

It is also important to ensure that the BBC better reflects the community it serves, both in its content and in its staffing. It could do that by piloting innovative initiatives to improve local news provision in communities that represent news deserts or near news deserts; opening up access to journalism with targeted training programmes to increase opportunity, including apprenticeships for school leavers; and building and protecting the spectrum of news provision across linear and digital platforms,

including through the proper resourcing of local radio news and local radio, ensuring a breadth of diverse content that prioritises quality.

I hope that the Minister will consider those points carefully and will continue to champion the BBC, both in Salford and across the UK. In an era of growing disinformation and political bias in the media sphere, fiercely protecting the values of public service broadcasting and its unique role in the provision of impartial, trustworthy news and journalism is crucial.

2.57 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I commend the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this important debate. It was good to hear his support for public service broadcasting and his recognition that the licence fee is there not just for live television, but for many of the services that hon. Members have mentioned.

I will start by saying why I feel strongly that we need the BBC, and why it delivers such great value. It still does so many things that the proliferation of streaming platforms do not. From the perspective of UK cultural and economic benefit, the BBC provides a critical role in education, not just through children's programming, but through ever-informative and breathtaking nature documentaries from David Attenborough and others. Even in this age of streaming, "Line of Duty" managed to secure 13 million viewers a night; many of us were gripped and looked forward to the next episode. The BBC has brought fantastic foreign-language content to BBC 4, including the iconic "The Killing", which astonished people by hitting 1 million viewers a week as a subtitled programme. Those of us who were alive, albeit somewhat younger, in the 1990s could always look forward to the thrill of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" at 6 pm every Wednesday. For all those reasons, a KPMG report estimates that for every £1 of economic activity generated by the BBC, £2.63 of wider economic value is created.

The BBC is so much more than entertainment. Fact-based and impartial reporting, analysis and investigations are essential, particularly in this age of social media misinformation when we are all trapped in our thought bubbles. We need the forensic interviews on Radio 4's "Today" programme, we desperately need the local political reporting and scrutiny of services such as BBC Oxford and BBC South, and we need the investigative journalism, domestic and international, that can be found across Radio 4. As the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) said, the BBC World Service plays a key role in maintaining access to free and accurate sources of information in many repressive countries around the world or in countries facing humanitarian challenges, such as Syria, which he mentioned.

Of course, we should recognise that the BBC is not perfect. The salaries of top presenters can be very high indeed, and scandals and crises have not always been prevented or well managed. But what other organisation would create and broadcast a documentary that looks critically at its own failings and weaknesses, as "Days That Shook the BBC" with David Dimbleby did?

Value for money from current funding and potential future reforms are important, but 95% of adults still use the BBC at least once a month. The alternative funding models that have been explored to date would not

necessarily create a fairer system without disadvantages, so it is important for the Government to be very clear about our desired outcomes from the BBC and public service broadcasting, and then to work out from that how we fund them. We should consider ways to spread the TV licence cost more equitably, taking people on low incomes into account.

We need the quality, independence and breadth of the BBC now more than ever. It is too important to risk losing through sub-optimal or over-complex funding routes. I am pleased to see that the Government are looking hard at how to sustain the BBC's future.

3 pm

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for bringing this debate to the House. Today is 18 December, so this time next week, millions of people will be gathered around their television to watch Christmas day programming. It is one minute past 3, so—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is the King's speech.

Patrick Hurley: Millions will be watching the King's speech this time next week—on the BBC. People would not subscribe to the BBC on Christmas day to watch the King's speech, but to watch programmes such as "Gavin and Stacey", "EastEnders", or "Doctor Who". If they subscribed for only entertainment purposes, however, they would miss out on the cultural life of the country and on important issues that they should be exposed to and should consume.

A subscription service that unwittingly creates such a taxonomy of programming, and divides content between public sector broadcasting and entertainment, would fall foul of reducing the consumption of important content. The best way to ensure that the BBC continues to provide its services, therefore, is through the continuation and maintenance of the licence fee model, rather than general taxation for public sector broadcasting or subscription services for entertainment.

Julia Lopez: Would the hon. Gentleman accept that, whether or not he is a supporter of the licence fee, fewer people are choosing to pay it, so we have a problem that needs to be dealt with, regardless of one's view on the licence fee and its future?

Patrick Hurley: I thank the hon. Lady for the question. Fewer people are willing to pay it, but there is a way around that. The BBC can make efficiency savings that will help to rebuild trust in it. If its content can be improved or its reach can be extended, that will lead to a regaining of trust, which the hon. Lady mentioned earlier, and to more people supporting the BBC financially through the licence fee.

I want to come on to an issue that the BBC has struggled with in recent years: trust. BBC Verify is a new service to combat the disinformation that we are seeing online. BBC Verify can be improved, both in content and in tone, as I have raised directly with BBC executives. I have also raised the fact that it is not perfect, but it is a good start in combating the disinformation and misinformation that we see online. I hope that more effort can be put into improving Verify's output in the months and years to come.

[Patrick Hurley]

I turn to the importance of the World Service, which many Members have already discussed. I support the Government's recent uplift in funding for the World Service, but I favour returning this funding to the Foreign Office to relieve financial pressures on the BBC's domestic coverage, enable sustainability and stability in the long term, and help to support Britain's soft-power role in an increasingly dangerous world.

The BBC's cultural impact is crucial to supporting the creative economy in the UK. The BBC strives to represent and serve all communities across the UK, and invests over half its funding outside London. The UK creative sector is a continuously developing area. The BBC's £5 billion investment each year supports a unique entertainment output and provides world-class exports for viewers abroad. I want the BBC to be able to invest more in its cultural output so that it can extend its provision in that area. For those reasons, it is incredibly important to maintain the BBC's position at the top of the electronic programme guide, so that public service broadcasting continues and survives in years to come.

Finally, although the Government should monitor the BBC funding situation, the current system of charter renewal, whereby the BBC continually diverts attention and resources to the upcoming charter review, is less effective than it should be at supporting the BBC to deliver as a public service. I therefore ask that the system be changed to allow a permanent charter for the BBC, which the Government and the BBC, in concert, could alter as and when required, rather than after a mandated medium-term period.

I welcome the Government's commitment to putting the BBC on a stable financial footing, and look forward to the Minister's comments.

3.8 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell—my first time serving under a fellow Scottish MP. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this important debate and for his learned contribution. I declare an interest as an office bearer on the BBC all-party parliamentary group and as the husband of a journalist and former BBC employee.

I will not gild the lily of the contributions that so many Members have already made; I will give a personal view. Of course, nothing is free; when we consider the new model, we need to remember that, and my remarks will address that very point. More than most, perhaps, I—along with at least one other person in the room—know the value of the BBC, because I lived, studied and worked for 30 years in a society riven by conflict, division and hatred, at times verging on civil war. It was vital during those times to have faith in an organisation that provided reliable and trustworthy news and unbiased current affairs coverage. For the most part, the BBC fulfilled that function, in both its television and its radio coverage, and for that I pay tribute to its courageous and award-winning broadcast journalism. In an ever more divided society, the need for this role is all the greater.

Throughout my life, I have been a fan of much of the BBC's output, and now, instead of being simply a viewer or listener, I occasionally find myself, as an MP,

in the position of a contributor. I place on record my admiration for the work that it does, often in challenging circumstances and environments. I believe that it continues to be faithful to its commitment to inform, educate and entertain. It continues to enjoy a high level of trust and confidence, not only in these islands but across the world.

Alas, there are also challenges. There are too many to list in one speech, but I want to put down a few markers, as each of them relates to future consideration of the licence fee system and charter renewal. First, especially in Scotland but perhaps further afield, as the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) already referred to, there is a widespread and growing perception that editorial policy is not always fair or impartial. For example, on too many occasions, audience members in political debates are not who they purport to be—that is, ordinary members of the public.

On other occasions, contributors' political perspectives are not properly introduced. Recently, for example, a so-called independent commentator turned out to be a fully paid-up member of a political party. Nor do those failings always result in public remedy or apology. As Elton John famously said,

"Sorry seems to be the hardest word".

That is a problem for programme editors, not necessarily presenters, but it is a vital component in retaining the trust and confidence that I spoke of. It is not good enough to wring hands and say that everyone complains equally. I do not believe that is true.

Secondly, in what is obviously a personal view, I do not think that it is only politicians who should not be double-jobbing; that should extend to the so-called talent within the BBC. Too many times, we see high-profile individuals turning up as hosts on a wide variety of programmes, with their enormous salaries offered as justification for that triple or quadruple job-holding. The BBC should recognise its responsibility to bring forward up and coming journalistic and other qualified talent from a wide range of local broadcasters, whose careers are currently being effectively blocked or blighted as a result.

A final marker relates to the growing number of instances of unacceptable or illegal behaviour—often sexual harassment, or worse, of female colleagues or guests—by BBC employees or agents working on the BBC's behalf through subcontractors. I spoke about that recently on a BBC programme. It is not good enough to divert responsibility to external production companies. The BBC needs to own that and to commit to an urgent internal review of its policies and a renewed training programme, especially for the so-called talent, where the problem often lies and where managers have been reluctant to act. That is a cultural problem that must be addressed at every level. I personally wish to see a commitment to a simple "no training, no screen time" approach.

In conclusion, I look forward to an informed debate on the licence fee system, including a deep dive into potential alternatives to the licence fee, such as opt-out advertising models, as we already see in the marketplace; a pay-per-view system; and certainly a funding model that provides a much more socially just system, in which the vulnerable, the elderly and those in poverty pay much less than the current licence fee. This is a changing world and the BBC must change with it.

3.13 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I, too, would like to speak up for the BBC World Service and the brilliant people who work there.

The World Service describes itself as the world's radio station. That is right: we are lucky to have it and must do whatever we can to support it. It offers 42 language services and is a beacon for democracy around the world. We know the truth when we hear it from the BBC. In a world of endless rolling information and disinformation, it is surely significant that the Arabic service alone saw a 9% audience growth to 35 million a week just last year. There are places in the world, especially where internet connections are restricted and local journalists are fearful, where conventional radio remains crucial. Abuse and state malfunction are called out, and the powerful are held to account. There are 318 million listeners every week.

In 2022, the World Service announced 382 job losses and the complete loss of the Persian radio broadcast, which was so important in its coverage of the protests against the Government in Tehran. In Lebanon, Russian state-backed media are now using the frequency suspended by BBC Arabic. There is news and there is fake news, as we have all learned. While we debate the funding of the BBC, let us therefore remember the World Service, which Kofi Annan described as

"Britain's greatest gift to the world".

Presently, about three quarters of World Service funding comes from the licence fee and about one quarter—about £100 million—comes from the Foreign Office. Previously in this Parliament, I said that amount was about the same as an F-35 jet, and we have 75 or so of those. As I said then, I ask whether some of us might agree that the vital soft power of the World Service is equivalent to at least one of our jets.

3.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for setting the scene so well. I want to make some positive points, and then I will outline what some of my constituents are telling me in relation to bias, because I want to have those comments on the record.

First, as the hon. Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) said, this time next week the King's speech will just be over. The nation will sit and watch that, because it is one of the good things that the BBC does, and it does it well. I am also a fan—my age gives it away—of the two Ronnies and of Morecambe and Wise. What humour—old-fashioned humour, by the way, but the kind that I was brought up with. I could tell some of their stories; I will not, because we would be here all day telling jokes, but their humour is incredible. I also endorse the excellent World Service, and agree that it needs to be upgraded and enhanced.

I wish to shine a light on the elephant in the room. The BBC has long prided itself as a national broadcaster, funded by the public and mandated to serve the public interest, yet my constituents tell me that the BBC is biased. Time and again, we see a pattern of behaviour that alienates a significant portion of that very public. The BBC is no longer viewed as the impartial institution

it once claimed to be. I will give three or four examples just to have them on the record. They have been proven; I am not making them up—I do not do that sort of thing.

The BBC has adopted a tone and an editorial stance that all too often align with a narrow view. Whether or not Members are in favour of Brexit, let us look at it as an example. Many of us in the House and across the country will remember that the BBC approached Brexit not with curiosity or indeed neutrality, as the public rightly deserved, but with scepticism and outright hostility. It was not reporting the news; it was trying to shape the news.

The same bias has extended to issues affecting Northern Ireland. The BBC cannot even name our country correctly, referring to its correspondent as the "Ireland correspondent". The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) will know how absurd and wrong that is, because it is the Northern Ireland correspondent. Those who understand the constitution of Northern Ireland will understand that it is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, yet the BBC cannot get it right. If Welsh reporters can be "Welsh correspondent" and Scottish reporters can be "Scottish correspondent", Northern Ireland deserves no less.

Bias is not merely a matter of perception; it has tangible consequences. Public trust in the BBC has eroded, and I have to say that it is no longer the broadcaster it was once heralded to be. As Government Members will know, my politics lies to the left—a fair bit to the left, I suspect—but that does not take away from where I am. The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) faced a hostile audience on "Question Time" and Dame Andrea Jenkyns, a former Conservative MP, was booed before she had even opened her mouth on "Have I Got News for You". My goodness. That is not organic debate; it is bias in practice.

I will echo something the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East referred to. The BBC selects its audiences, sets the tone and consistently marginalises voices on the right of politics. I am not on the right of politics—I never will be—but I make that point to have it on the record for those who have a different opinion. I respect other people's opinions, by the way, even though I may not agree with them, because that is the person I am. I hope others are the same.

Julia Lopez: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this gets to the nub of the challenge? The BBC has a unique social contract with the public. It has the licence fee because people trust it to produce high-quality, impartial, trusted content. That is precisely the reason we have the BBC. If there is a sense from the public that that trust is being lost, that is a fundamental challenge to the BBC's future. With Russia and China putting ever more money into their own state broadcasters, this represents a much wider challenge than just one for us here in the UK.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. She has highlighted an issue that I wished to highlight too, but she did so better than I could, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I should have welcomed the Minister to her place, by the way. She responded to her first Adjournment debate last night and did extremely well, and I know that she will be exceptionally good when it comes to answering all the questions that we pose today.

[Jim Shannon]

The BBC's funding model must also be examined. The licence fee is compulsory, paid for by households across the United Kingdom regardless of whether they feel the BBC reflects their values or serves their interests. It is not a secret that I am an Ulster Scot. I am very proud of my history and the fact that my ancestors came from the lowlands of Scotland to Northern Ireland. When I look around this room, I look upon the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East as my Gaelic brother, and there are probably others across the Chamber who are similar; if we go back far enough in our history, we will find out. Ulster Scots heritage programmes risk being squeezed out of the BBC's cultural programming. I think that is disgraceful. The BBC should focus on delivering programming that matters to all parts of the United Kingdom. Instead, we see money poured into political agendas and overpaid presenters, while those cherished culturally significant programmes receive less attention.

I have one last one example, Mr Mundell: the BBC's clear bias in its coverage of Israel and Hamas. My goodness—cast your mind back to all that. It is no secret that I am pro-Israel, but I believe in decency and justice for everyone in the middle east. The BBC refuses to describe Hamas as a terrorist organisation. They are murderers, rapists and baby killers. That is who they are—that is the Hamas that we know—yet the BBC could not bring itself to call them what they were: terrorists. That undermines the BBC's credibility as a news source. What message does that send to the victims of terrorism?

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing the debate. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as someone who was supported by the Musicians' Union, and I am the son of a videotape editor for the BBC, so I spent much of my childhood on the cutting room floor of Pebble Mill in the west midlands.

We hear about bias from all political parties and all sides. I heard from my Liberal Democrat colleagues earlier today about their frustration that the leader of the Reform party has appeared on the BBC far more times than any Liberal Democrats have. I heard the concern about trust expressed by the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), a former Minister, but several high-profile leaders of the BBC are former Conservative members or advisers. Many people who worked for the BBC are now prominent Conservatives on my local council.

We are talking about the funding of the BBC. We will all be unhappy with its output at some stage, yet the public still put it higher than most news outlets and other broadcasters. On the issue of funding the organisation, which is still one of the best in the world, does the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) agree that if we put a subscription process in place, not everybody would take it up, which would drive up the subscription fee, and then the BBC would have an even bigger funding problem?

David Mundell (in the Chair): I will regard that as your speech, Mr Bloore.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for that. He is right to put forward a point of view. I did not speak on behalf of the Reform party, because it is not my party. The point I was making is that if someone is derided on TV because they happen to represent a political view, that is wrong.

I mentioned Israel and Hamas. That is a supreme example of where the BBC's bias carried over in such a way that it could not even name what Hamas were: terrorists and murderers. They are the people that hide behind women's skirts and children whenever they carry out their atrocities. I expect the BBC to present the news in the way that it is.

The question is: how do we justify the licence fee? The BBC must uphold its obligation to impartiality, fairness and transparency. Some would say that it has a left-wing bias. A compulsory licence fee cannot be justified if a large section of the public feels misrepresented, ignored or, worse, derided.

We must demand that the BBC prioritises voices and programming that matter to all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—the BBC does not know where Northern Ireland is. That means that Ulster Scots programming must be given the platform it deserves, and that coverage of Northern Ireland must reflect the reality of our place within this great United Kingdom, which I am proud to be a member of—I say that all the time. The BBC has faced calls for its defunding. It can either reclaim its role as a trusted, impartial broadcaster that unites the nation, or it can continue down its current path, alienating viewers and losing its purpose. The public and Parliament have noticed a bias, and the BBC must acknowledge that and act to restore trust.

3.25 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for the opportunity to discuss the future funding of one of our nation's most cherished institutions. The BBC has been at the heart of our national life for more than 100 years. It embodies a mission that is simple yet profoundly important: to inform, educate and entertain. The BBC is not just another broadcaster; it plays a vital role in our cultural life and our national identity. It is universal, independent and unparalleled in its reach and influence, and it remains the most trusted broadcaster in the world.

From BBC Bitesize, which has educated millions of children, to the drama, music and comedy that enrich our lives, the BBC has no equal. Unlike global streaming services, which are motivated by profit and primarily serve international markets, the BBC exists to benefit the UK public. Public service broadcasting ensures that content is produced for everyone, regardless of wealth or geography. It brings us together, whether to watch the coronation, follow the Olympics, enjoy the sounds of Glastonbury or tune in to local radio to hear about issues in our communities.

A Netflix-style subscription model would be divisive and exclusionary. It would force the BBC to focus on content that attracts paying subscribers, sidelining the universal services that make it so valuable. The BBC's services serve all audiences, not just those who can

afford to pay. A subscription model would drive up costs for consumers and reduce the money available for investment in content.

The notion that the BBC's entertainment content should be put behind a paywall is misguided. For many households, including the digitally excluded, that would make BBC services inaccessible. It would also result in the loss of free access to well-loved shows such as "Strictly Come Dancing", "Match of the Day", "The Traitors" and world-renowned drama. The proposal also ignores the reality of subscription-based financial models. Since its launch in the UK in 2012, when it charged £5.99 per month, Netflix's standard plan has increased to £10.99 month, and its premium plan to £17.99—increases of 83% and 200% respectively. Consider the impact on a young person from a low-income household who might discover a passion for science through a BBC documentary, or be inspired to pursue their dreams by a BBC film. Those transformative experiences would be lost if access were restricted to only those who could afford to pay.

An advertising-funded BBC would be equally damaging. It would siphon advertising revenue away from commercial broadcasters, weakening the entire UK media ecosystem. Worse still, it would compromise the BBC's independence by exposing it to commercial pressures. That would push the BBC to prioritise more generic, mass-appeal programming over distinctive, high-quality British productions. It would also undermine the BBC's ability to deliver the rich, global and multicultural programming that has become its hallmark.

The BBC's current funding model guarantees universality and independence. For just over £3 a week, households gain access to a treasure trove of content, including nine TV channels, 39 local radio stations, and online services such as the BBC iPlayer and BBC Sounds, yet the BBC has faced a 30% real-terms funding cut over the past decade, forcing tough decisions and service reductions. We cannot continue with perpetual uncertainty about the status of the BBC. The BBC's current charter ensures the licence fee model until at least 2027, but beyond that we must commit to a funding model that is sustainable, fair and fit for the future.

Part of that future must include stronger support for the BBC World Service. This unparalleled institution is not only a vital source of impartial news for 450 million people globally, but a key pillar of the UK's soft power. Whether it is exposing corruption, raising awareness of public health challenges or championing education and human rights, the BBC World Service not only projects British values but does real good in the world. However, recent funding cuts forced the closure of language services. This is unacceptable. We must restore full funding to the World Service through the Foreign Office budget to allow it to continue its invaluable work.

The BBC is also a driver of the UK's creative economy, contributing nearly £5 billion annually. It commissions more independent productions than any other broadcaster, invests in research and development, and supports apprenticeships and training. At its heart, the BBC's mission is to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output. In a media landscape dominated by billionaires seeking to engineer narratives that align

with their personal interests and agendas, the BBC stands as one of the few institutions committed to impartiality and serving the public.

Tom Rutland: We have heard, not just today but over the years, accusations of political bias. I have friends on the left who accuse the BBC of being biased against them, and family members on the right, with whom I am sure I will have conversations over Christmas, make the same comments. Does the hon. Lady agree that if both sides—and indeed, I am sure, the middle—have complaints about it, perhaps the BBC is getting something right?

Liz Jarvis: I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Does the Minister agree that the BBC's funding model must not be a Trojan horse for those who seek to undermine its editorial independence and pave the way for figures such as Elon Musk, whom we have little opportunity to scrutinise or hold to account? Liberal Democrats are committed to a strong, independent and well-funded BBC that continues to reflect the diversity of our nation and serves all audiences.

Sir John Whittingdale: I do not disagree with a lot of what the hon. Lady has said about the value of the BBC, but the problem is that more and more people are unwilling to pay the licence fee, and that has to be addressed. She wants to see a strongly financed and funded BBC, but she is going to have to come up with an answer to the fact that the revenue is going to go on declining under the present model.

Liz Jarvis: I do not disagree that there needs to be a plan, but at the moment I do not see one on the table. The next charter review is the time to have a serious, evidence-based discussion about funding, but any changes must strengthen, not diminish, the BBC.

Through the BBC we see things about our nation and the world that we might never encounter in our own lives. As Sir David Attenborough has said, the world would be worse off without our stories. It must be taken with great pride that the British public has a direct role in providing the platform needed to nurture and share the genius of so many British individuals in the creative industry. I hope we can continue to protect public ownership of the BBC, to preserve the voices and stories that make us who we are.

3.33 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. Let me start by wishing all Members and you, Mr Mundell, a very merry Christmas. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this valuable debate, which has been a spirited one with some interesting points. I will pose some questions to the Minister in, as it is Christmas, the most constructive way I can.

The BBC plays a fundamental role in the lives of the vast majority of people in the country, and its scope is impossible to underestimate. The National Union of Journalists estimates that 91% of British adults use BBC television, radio or online each week. As a number of Members have pointed out, its global reach is equally

[Saqib Bhatti]

important: 426 million people access the BBC every week via the World Service and its worldwide and global news services.

The BBC's reach and reputation is rightly a source of pride for people in the UK. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon pointed out, as we approach the renewal of the BBC's royal charter in 2027, there is no denying that the Government must recognise some of the challenges that the organisation faces, not least in respect of its sustainability, with decreasing licence fee uptake and decreasing revenues.

The issue of trust has been brought up. The social contract that exists between the licence fee payer and the BBC is fundamental. Unless we ensure that people have faith in the BBC and its role in society, endless questions about its relevance and importance will continue to be a factor in public discourse. Failure to address that will undermine trust in the BBC.

The BBC is one of our great institutions. Since its founding, it has promoted the very best of Britain at home and abroad. It has guided our nation through war, economic and political crises and much more. It needs to be trusted, especially as we see our adversaries like Russia and China bolstering the reach of their own state broadcasters. We also see the concerning impact of AI and misinformation domestically and around the world. We must emphasise the issue of trust. We are clearly seeing a trend in the questioning of the BBC's credibility, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), who was an excellent Minister on these issues, as was my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon.

Recent funding figures are a cause for concern. A 2015 report by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee found that some view the licence fee as "anachronistic" and

"harder and harder to sustain".

Its conclusions are verified by the fact that licence fee income between 2022-23 and 2023-24 went down, and there were fewer licences in force at the end of March 2024 than the end of 2023. That clearly suggests that more people are reluctant to pay the licence fee because they are not believing in the BBC or trusting it. This is a foundational challenge for the Government. This country needs the BBC. The challenge is for the Government and the BBC to make that case. I hope the Minister will recognise that in her response.

We must also recognise that the way that people, especially our younger generations, engage with media has altered dramatically in the past decade. The covid pandemic accelerated some of the trends that have dramatically transformed the media landscape. It led to a surge in online streaming companies, which now dominate the market. As we approach the review of the royal charter, we cannot ignore the radically different media environment that the BBC is operating and competing in compared with that of just 10 years ago. The Government must understand that unless there is genuine reform of the BBC and how it functions, it will continue to be an analogue service in a digital world.

There is no denying that the licence fee model was conceived at a time of linear viewing, when watching programmes at the time of broadcast was commonplace.

The reality is much different now. The BBC competes in a far more crowded market—a market that can be accessed at any time, anywhere. Licence fee payments will not increase if the BBC does not continue to strive to adapt to the rapid changes in online media that we all have to interact with. What discussions is the Minister having with the BBC to ensure that its funding remains sustainable over the next 10 years, in the light of a radically different media landscape? I acknowledge that these are not easy questions; they require leadership and clarity, so I hope the Minister can provide some of that in her remarks.

The issue of local radio has also been brought up, and the Government should seek to engage constructively with the BBC about its future. The BBC has 39 local radio stations that currently reach 5.7 million listeners. Under the terms of the current royal charter, the BBC has an obligation to reflect the diversity of the United Kingdom in both its output and its services and must meet the needs of its regions and communities. As the National Union of Journalists sets out, local radio is a lifeline for often-isolated rural communities and provides an invaluable source of news and education for so many, especially elderly people in our communities. At a time when elderly people are feeling more and more marginalised, it would be wrong to make further cuts to local radio, which provides essential information and entertainment for millions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon made some excellent suggestions in that regard, and I hope the Minister can address his concerns.

I want to turn to Ofcom, because the question of BBC funding raises other issues that have been brought up in a number of different ways when it comes to the BBC's impartiality. As Ofcom is the broadcasting regulator and has the role of challenging broadcasters, especially in an ever more competitive environment, there are clearly questions that the public will want answers to. In the past decade, the BBC has had many new competitors, and I want to raise the issue of GB News. Ofcom recently fined GB News £100,000 for its programme with the former Prime Minister in February this year. Many people believed that was not correct, and I also question it. The Government should question Ofcom's remit, its scope to deny freedom of speech, and whether its fines are proportionate in the circumstances, as we enter an ever more competitive media landscape that is fundamentally different compared with the previous decade.

I wish you a merry Christmas, Mr Mundell, and I thank all Members for their contributions; I hope they have a happy new year.

3.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I echo the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), in wishing a merry Christmas to everyone present, and congratulate the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) on securing this important debate. He and I have had a lot of opportunities to debate the BBC together this week.

Let me start by responding to some of the points that the shadow Minister and others made. First, the right hon. Member for Maldon pointed out that it is a good

time to have this debate. He opened by talking about the importance of public service broadcasting today. We spent many hours debating the Media Act 2024, which is legislation that goes to the heart of these issues and now falls to this Government to implement.

The shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) pointed out how many people access the BBC—over 90% every month—but also the fact that there are lots of important and challenging issues about BBC funding and the charter review.

It has been a good debate, and Members have rightly shared their own experiences and memories of the BBC. My hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) spoke about the shared experience we have as a country, and how the BBC brings us together. A week today we will all be watching the King's speech and, of course, "Gavin and Stacey"—or at least I will be.

Members from all parties, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), spoke about their passion and support for the World Service. The right hon. Member for Maldon serves on the Foreign Affairs Committee, to which I was pleased to give evidence. I am pleased that three Select Committees are taking such an interest in the topic. There are a lot of questions and challenges, but it is important that we put on the record our support for the World Service.

The shadow Minister asked questions about engagement with the BBC; the Secretary of State and I have met with the BBC and will continue to do so. The shadow Minister also asked questions about local radio. It is important to state that the BBC is operationally independent, but when I was in the shadow Minister's place I made my views very clear, as did the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), who was the Minister at the time.

I will speak more broadly about the BBC before addressing some of the wider funding issues. For over 100 years the BBC has been a cherished British asset, making a vital contribution to our national life. It supports our democracy, brings our communities together and helps to shape and define our nation by telling the stories of people in all parts of the UK. The BBC has an almost unique role as a source of trusted news, both in the UK and to millions of people across the globe, as well as being a provider of cutting-edge programming and educational content for the nation's children. It is so often the first to invest in the skills, the physical assets and the creativity to boost the creative industries in all corners of the country.

The media environment has of course changed over the BBC's long history. Even since the start of the current charter period in 2017, when the Government were bringing iPlayer into the scope of the licence fee, the market has significantly evolved—a point that has been discussed. The right hon. Member for Maldon knows all that very well, not least because he served as Secretary of State for DCMS during the previous charter review.

The world is changing and, as the right hon. Member for Maldon outlined in his speech, for the first time half of 16 to 24-year-olds now do not watch broadcast TV on a weekly basis. We are seeing audiences increasingly turn to on-demand content, and more than two thirds of households subscribe to streaming services, compared with about a third at the start of the charter period.

The shadow Minister asked about some of the challenges that go to the heart of this debate. As an institution, the BBC has often needed to adapt, renew and grapple with an ever-increasing pace of change. That is something that the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) spoke about in his contribution.

Next year, the Government will formally launch charter review with the need for adaptation in mind. We intend to use charter review to think through the operation of the BBC and how it thrives for not just the next 10 years, but well into the latter half of this century. We know that any reform to the BBC, particularly when it comes to funding, could have a major impact on the whole sector. We will consider that carefully as part of the charter review. We want to have a national conversation to make sure that the BBC truly represents and delivers for every person in this country, wherever they come from and whatever their background. That will include the opportunity for stakeholders and audiences across the country to respond to the charter review public consultation before the new charter comes into effect in 2028.

Our thinking will also be informed by my Department's wider work. We are undertaking a project on the future of TV distribution to analyse how people receive their television now and through the next decade. That will help us to ensure the continuity of a sustainable TV ecosystem and the best outcome for audiences.

As we address vital questions about the future form of the BBC head on, we must also ensure that there is a sustainable funding model that is fair to those who pay for it. These are undoubtedly complex issues, on which people hold strong opinions, but this Government want to have an open and honest discussion about them in the public's best interests.

We are fully committed to retaining the licence fee for the rest of this charter period, but we cannot ignore the fact that challenges to this funding model in its current form are increasing, as has been highlighted in the debate. The media market is more competitive than ever, with the emergence of streamers and social media platforms operating on a global scale. That has meant less money for the BBC to invest in our creative industries, in talent and skills, and in telling our stories. It has also resulted in cuts to BBC services, which the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) spoke about.

The Secretary of State has announced that we will take forward work on BBC funding as part of the charter review process to bring together the linked issues of what the BBC does, its future role and how it is funded. The Government are keeping an open mind about the future of the licence fee.

The right hon. Member for Maldon referred to his chairing of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. More recently, the Committee's 2021 report on the future of public service broadcasting found that there are a range of options for funding the BBC, but none are perfect.

Julia Lopez: The Secretary of State has talked about her support for mutualisation, but it has never been clear to me what that actually means. Could the Minister give us more details?

Stephanie Peacock: I will happily ask the Secretary of State to write to the hon. Lady. However, in talking about mutualisation, which the Secretary of State made

[Stephanie Peacock]

some comments about some years ago, I think it is about having a greater role for the public in BBC accountability and the public feeling more ownership of it. But we will happily write to the hon. Lady with more detail, as I do not want to speak on the Secretary of State's behalf.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response; she is always very positive and very enthusiastic. In last night's Adjournment debate on the charter review, she referred to complaints and how they will be handled by Ofcom or other organisations. However, the people who come to me with the examples of bias that I referred to are some of those who do not have a BBC licence and will not buy one. If the BBC has a better system, where people who have complaints about bias, whatever they may be, have their complaints handled in a good, honest and transparent way, that might draw back some people who have decided not to renew their licence. Will she assure us that that will happen?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course, we spoke about this issue in the debate last night. There is the complaints procedure through BBC First, and complaints can be escalated to the executive complaints unit and then to Ofcom. But I appreciate that some people have simply decided not to buy a TV licence, and we want to explore the issue of trust and confidence in the BBC as part of the charter renewal process and the review. There will be a public consultation, in which his and my constituents, and the constituents of Members across the House, can take part.

We are not in the business of reform for reform's sake. We will think in the broadest sense about the options for the BBC's funding and structure, and nothing is off the table, as the Secretary of State said in evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee last week. It is clear that there are limits to the amount of money that the BBC can raise from commercial sources, particularly given its obligations as a public service broadcaster. We firmly believe that the unique obligations placed on the BBC demand continued and sustainable public funding in support of its vital work.

In the meantime, we must ensure that the BBC is properly and fairly supported for the remainder of this charter. That is why we have announced that we are increasing the annual cost of a TV licence from April 2025 by £5, in line with consumer prices index inflation, which is less than half as much as last year's increase. For the BBC, that will provide additional and proportionate funding that will allow it to continue to deliver world-class educational and engaging programming. We always take decisions on funding to provide certainty and stability for the BBC while ensuring that those decisions deliver the best outcomes for licence fee payers.

The Government have already noted the ongoing concerns about the impact of TV licensing enforcement action on vulnerable households. I am acutely aware of the financial difficulties faced by some households, and we are committed to supporting them to spread the cost of a TV licence. We recently announced an expansion of

the simple payment plan to all unlicensed households facing financial hardship to help more people pay in flexible instalments, rather than them having to find a greater amount of money up front. We will also look at enforcement issues as part of the longer-term funding work we take forward at charter review.

The provision of trustworthy local and national news is vital for democracy and to hold elected representatives to account, especially at a time when misinformation and disinformation are spreading at rapid speeds. Local journalism, in particular, also helps to foster community in areas like mine in Barnsley. By reporting on stories that matter to local people, the BBC helps people to feel connected to the place they call home. In the past few days alone in my area, the BBC has reported on a new sculpture that will be placed on a roundabout in Goldthorpe, a local Christmas tree that had to be taken down due to dangers related to wind and vandalism, and a new specialist care home being built in Barnsley. Those kinds of varied local stories matter to local people, and they enrich their understanding of the issues affecting their neighbourhoods. I know Members from across the House will have similar stories to share.

Ultimately, the BBC has a huge role to play in telling our country's story, creating great jobs and opportunities and driving growth in the creative economy. We are determined to get the forthcoming charter review right to future-proof the BBC and to ensure that we can all continue to enjoy and benefit from it for decades to come. The right hon. Member for Maldon has made an important contribution, not just today, but through his years of public service, and I thank him for that.

3.51 pm

Sir John Whittingdale: I begin by thanking all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. A number of criticisms of the BBC have been expressed, and I have my own criticisms; nevertheless, everybody recognises the value that the BBC brings to the UK and our society, and the importance of ensuring that it continues to play that important role. But there is a problem: the current model is looking harder and harder to sustain. I therefore suspect that we will continue to debate this issue over the coming weeks and years during the charter renewal process. I look forward to continuing my discussion with the Minister and others. I thank everybody for their contributions and join the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), the Minister and all others in wishing all Members a very happy Christmas.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I am surprised that nobody has mentioned BBC Parliament, on which this debate will appear. I understand that it is available over Christmas, when it shows highlights from parliamentary proceedings—of which I am sure this debate will be part.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future funding of the BBC.

3.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Immigration and Nationality Statistics

4 pm

David Mundell (in the Chair): I will call Nick Timothy to move the motion and, later, the Minister to respond. I think it has been agreed that a number of other Members will make short contributions to the debate.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered immigration and nationality statistics.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Mundell—happy Christmas to you, the Clerks and other House staff.

I want to make clear my overall view of the rate and nature of immigration to Britain in recent years. To be frank, it has been a disgrace. Every Prime Minister since Tony Blair has promised control, only to oversee record numbers of people coming here. Immigration is the biggest broken promise in British politics, and probably the biggest single reason that British politics is so broken. This could not be more important, because mass immigration undermines our economy, capital stock, and cultural coherence and identity. It quite literally changes the country we are.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I think the issue that the hon. Gentleman and I agree on, and probably most Members in this Chamber will agree on, is that there are two categories: those who are fleeing their countries on human rights grounds and because of the persecution of their religious beliefs, who should go through the system, and economic migrants—those who are young and healthy, and who jump on the boat at Calais and come across. Those are ones we need to stop. Does he agree?

Nick Timothy: I certainly agree that most people crossing the channel are not really seeking refuge, because they are coming from a safe country: France. They are seeking their economic betterment, which may be legitimate from their perspective, but is not necessarily in our interests as a country.

I must be honest: my party played its part in this policy failure. I say “policy failure” because, at times—certainly when I worked in the Home Office and, I think, when my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) was in the Home Office—there was a genuine attempt to get the numbers down. Indeed, back in those years, the numbers fell, but ultimately we failed, thanks to free movement rules, a loss of wider political support for our work across Government, and a failure to reform the higher and further education system, public services and the wider economy, so as to get off the addiction to more and more migration.

Brexit should have changed all that. It was a clear vote not only to reclaim our sovereignty, but to reduce and control immigration, but the points-based system that followed, with its hugely liberal rules, was always bound to increase the numbers dramatically. For that, my party will need to show sincere contrition and, if we are ever to win again, demonstrate to the public that we truly get it and have a plan to cut immigration drastically.

To inform the policy choices we face and help us to understand what we must do with the millions of newcomers who have started new lives here in the past

25 years or so, we also need much better data. Low-paid immigrants bring costs that are not adequately considered by Government impact assessments. They need housing, drive on roads, use transport, have health needs, take school places, claim benefits and eventually receive the state pension, which was recently valued by an actuary at £250,000 per person. Most immigrants and their dependants will, over their lifetimes, be net recipients of public funds.

However, the British state does not even try to calculate the net fiscal costs and benefits of different profiles of migrant. We get fragments of information from, say, the census, or prison statistics. We know that 72% of Somalis here, for example, live in social housing, compared with 16% of the population overall. We know that one in 50 Albanians here are in prison, and that nationalities such as Iraqis, Jamaicans and Somalis are disproportionately likely to be criminals. We know from now-discontinued income tax data that some nationalities, such as Bangladeshis, receive more in child benefit and tax credits than they pay in income tax and national insurance. That does not even include the costs of education, housing, healthcare, pensions, and other effects on infrastructure and services.

Some European countries have started to do the necessary work. In Denmark, for example, official figures show that Danes and Europeans are net contributors, but migrants and their descendants from the middle east, north Africa, Pakistan and Turkey are net recipients throughout their whole lives, including when they are working.

I have asked various Ministers in oral and written questions whether the Government will commission work to establish the true cost of immigration broken down by profile of migrant. The answer that comes back more often than not is that that has not been done before. However, that is not a reason not to do it now. My first question to the Minister is: if it is not to be done, why not? Can she give us a justification?

I have asked similar questions on specific aspects of policy. The Department for Work and Pensions told me in a letter that

“we are investigating the feasibility of developing and publishing statistics on the immigration status of non-UK/Irish”

nationals, or “customers”, as it bizarrely calls foreign benefits claimants. My second question is: what discussions has the Minister had with counterparts in the DWP about that? When will that work be completed? Will the data be broken down by nationality, visa route and type of benefit?

We know bits of information on social housing from the census, as I said, but that is not good enough. Only yesterday, a grotesque online video was published by Westminster city council promoting social housing in Arabic, Bengali, Spanish and French, which, given the rules around no recourse to public funds, I found somewhat surprising. My third question is: what discussions has the Minister had with counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about that? Can we get annual data on social housing occupation by nationality, visa and asylum status?

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that some excellent work on the issue of data and immigration has been done by our hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and

[Julia Lopez]

Wigston (Neil O'Brien), who has been a cheerleader for getting the kind of information that would help us inform public policy? As he is talking about social housing, does he share my concerns that the Labour Government seem to be moving away from some of the provisions we put in place to prioritise British people for housing?

Nick Timothy: I endorse that entirely and pay tribute to our hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) for the excellent work he has done. He was the first Member of this House to talk about what he calls the "data desert" when it comes to immigration.

On criminal justice policy, the Justice Secretary very recently refused to answer in the Chamber when I asked if the Government would publish the nationality, visa and asylum status of all imprisoned offenders. My fourth question is: why did she refuse to do that? Why can the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice not come together to publish that data?

There are many other areas of policy, but I want to turn to the Home Office in particular. The Home Secretary told the House of Commons in July that the Rwanda policy had cost the taxpayer £700 million by the time Labour had come to power and that by ending the retrospective element of the duty to remove in the Illegal Migration Act 2023, she would save the public £7 billion over 10 years. Those numbers were clearly preposterous, and Home Office officials got in touch with me to express their concern about the things she said on the Floor of the House. The National Audit Office had said in March that the Rwanda scheme's total cost was only £290 million, which included a £50 million payment made between its study and the general election. To be fair, the NAO costs did not include some things, such as the cost of detaining migrants. However, those costs would have had to have been met without the Rwanda scheme anyway, and it is difficult to understand what might justify a £410 million difference between what the NAO said and what the Home Secretary said on the Floor of the House of Commons.

In a letter to the shadow Home Secretary copied to me, the Home Office permanent secretary gave a breakdown—if it can be called a breakdown—of the costs behind the £700 million claim that ludicrously lumped together £278 million under the title "Other fixed costs" with very little description of what that means. My fifth question is: can the Minister tell us specifically what those costs are? Will she hand over all the relevant data to the Office for Statistics Regulation? Can she commit to placing in the Library a detailed set of accounts to justify that number?

In a separate letter to me, the permanent secretary justified the discrepancy by claiming that the NAO report had not included some "expected" Home Office costs. That makes no sense because "expected" implies costs that had not been incurred in March when the NAO report was published, but the Home Office now says that those costs were incurred between 2022-23 and June in 2024-25. In his letter to me, Sir Matthew said:

"Further detail is contained within the impact assessment that accompanied the retrospection statutory instrument that was laid before Parliament."

But again, the impact assessment models costs in the future, not the past, so I have a sixth question. When the Home Secretary said that the £700 million had already been spent in July, why was her permanent secretary talking about prospective costs in August? Why did he refer to an impact assessment based on future costs, not costs already incurred?

On my seventh question, when the immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), debated this issue with me in Westminster Hall in September, she promised to write to me to explain those discrepancies. Why did she not do so? Can the Minister tell us why the Home Secretary still has not replied to my letter of 21 September, despite written answers on 22 October and 25 November promising to do so as soon as possible?

Finally, I have asked Ministers in the Home Office and the Foreign Office about the secretive deal to bring Sri Lankan asylum seekers from Diego Garcia to Britain, even though the Government are under no obligation to do so. Home Office officials are worried that among those migrants are criminals and even child abusers. The Home Office said:

"Migrants with criminal convictions, charges, or subject to ongoing investigations were not in scope for that relocation."

However, in a written answer to me, the immigration Minister refused to say whether the Government had sought or obtained the necessary information from the Sri Lankan Government. On 14 November, the Foreign Office Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), answered my question, saying that the Government

"does not have any information about Sri Lankan migrants' criminality that pre-dates their arrival on British Indian Ocean Territory."

On 9 December, the immigration Minister answered another of my questions and said:

"The local UK police force in the area where the migrants have been located have been informed of their arrival in the UK."

That does not sound very reassuring, and there are clear discrepancies between what the Home Office and Foreign Office have said. The fact that the police have had to be notified about the arrival of those migrants would be very alarming to people who live in those areas, if the public actually knew where those migrants are.

For my eighth and final question, can the Minister confirm that the Government have no idea about the criminal records of those migrants dating to their time in Sri Lanka? What on earth are the Government doing importing migrants, for whom we have no legal responsibility, into this country in such secrecy when there are concerns about them inside the Home Office, and without undertaking every conceivable security check?

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. This debate is for a fixed 30-minute period. I will call each of the three Members who have asked to speak, but I will apply a time limit of three minutes to their contributions. I call Richard Tice.

4.12 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) on securing this debate. It seems to me that there is a dearth of information, or a sort of

conspiracy of silence. It seems quite simple; we have been told for decades that immigration is great for this nation, and therefore it seems quite obvious that we should say, “Fine, prove it.” Why do we not suggest proving it nation by nation, so that we know who is genuinely contributing and adding value, or who is maybe costing us money? We can then work out how we improve growth and ensure that smart immigration works for this country.

A Government who believe in transparency and high-quality data, which we have heard to be the case on numerous occasions, should welcome the opportunity and the suggestion that we need to know, nation by nation, who is coming here, how much they are contributing, and how much they are costing. In the unfortunate example where they commit crimes, we need to know—nation by nation—who is costing us by way of criminals and why they are not immediately removed. With that quality of data, we can make judgments and decisions about smart immigration to the benefit of all, and to the confidence of all our constituents.

4.14 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) on securing this debate. As I understand it, when he was in the Home Office, the Conservative Government had a target of 100,000 net migration a year. Clearly, the Conservative Government spectacularly failed in that undertaking, so it is fascinating to me that they are keen to draw attention to this issue, when it is one of their poorest legacies.

Nick Timothy: I am entertained by the idea that special advisers are so important that they might be able to control outcomes such as this. If the hon. Member thinks that is the case, he might ask the Minister to invite one of the Home Office’s special advisers to take part in parliamentary debates.

Chris Murray: Well, thanks for that.

Turning to the issues the hon. Gentleman raised, on data collection, the ONS has significantly improved the immigration data we have in the last couple of years, particularly since the pandemic, by shifting away from the international passenger survey to things like Home Office and DWP administrative data. Is he aware of the Migration Advisory Committee report that came out yesterday that talks about the fiscal contributions and net impact of those coming through the skilled worker visa? It shows a net positive impact.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of other fixed costs for Rwanda, but the Home Office documentation is pretty clear on what that means. It means the things like digital and IT, legal costs and staff costs required to operationalise the Rwanda scheme. This information is all in the public domain, so I am perplexed as to why we are having a debate on it: I think it reflects the fact that the Conservatives have absolutely failed to understand why they got immigration policy so wrong when they were in government and why they failed to address the immigration challenges we have in the UK. The debate focuses not on the impact on communities or the economy, just the numbers overall. For years, the Conservatives

focused on a net migration target that they spectacularly failed to meet again and again, and never tried to look at the impact of migration on communities.

It is so obvious that migrants are a vast range of different people. Different migrants will have different impacts in the different communities where they settle. There is a huge difference between adding some EU workers to parts of England that have never seen any immigration and having new immigration in big cities that have long histories and structures of absorbing immigration. We need to understand that our communities experience impacts differently.

We also need to think about the churn of immigration. There are two types of immigrants. Some will come, stay here, settle, learn English and get jobs, and, yes, over time they will turn into—just like any other British person—someone who uses public services sometimes but contributes to the tax base at other times. We have a model where we have high levels of churn in the immigration system. People will come and work for a couple of years, leave after they have learned English and got to know how the system works here and be replaced by new immigrants from overseas. It is not just about the number of net migrants in the country but the churn and lack of integration that we see.

Think about Madeleine Albright and her family who fled the Nazis. They first came to Britain and then went to the US as refugees. Madeleine Albright said that in Britain people said, “You are welcome here. How long until you leave?” Whereas in America they said, “You are welcome here. How long until you become a citizen?” We have no discussion about the trajectory we want to see migrants travel: integrating into our communities and contributing. We are stuck in a discussion about numbers and overall statistics that leaves the public utterly cold. I have run out of time, but it is fascinating to see that the Conservatives have not learned any lessons from the last 15 years of their migration mistakes.

4.18 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell.

There is a concerted campaign within Government to hide vital statistics from the British people regarding the impact of uncontrolled mass immigration—legal and illegal. Let me be abundantly clear: it is a cover-up. Whether it is crimes committed by illegal migrants or a nationality breakdown of those claiming benefits, the British people deserve to know the ugly truth. If there is nothing to hide, show us the data. Information is being concealed from the public on crime, welfare claims, tax contributions, size of illegal population, public service usage and so much more. Either the Home Office is deliberately hiding the numbers or the data is genuinely not collected. Both options are equally terrifying. It is either pure incompetence or shocking dishonesty. Sadly, I believe it is the latter. My message to the Home Office is clear: show us the data, and we can make up our own minds. The ongoing cover-up is simply not acceptable. When will we get total transparency?

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call the Minister to conclude the debate. In these 30-minute debates, there is no opportunity for the Member in charge to respond; the Minister’s contribution will conclude the debate.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I also thank my colleagues from across the House who have contributed.

There has been an important focus today on statistics, which I welcome because this Government believe in making good use of facts and evidence when delivering policy. Various points have been raised, and I want to come back to all of them, but, if I do miss any, I hope that Members will allow me to respond to some of their points in writing. I also recognise that the Minister for Border Security and Asylum, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), is unable to be here today.

Before I address Members' points, I want to make a few remarks reflecting on the immigration system that the Government inherited. The hon. Member for West Suffolk alluded to the situation that we found, and it is worth reflecting on what the latest official figures show because they shocked us all. Under the previous Government, net migration grew almost five times higher in four years—and is still four times higher—than it was before the pandemic, driven heavily by an increase in overseas recruitment. The Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have both been extremely clear that net migration needs to come down. We are, therefore, continuing with visa controls, which we supported when they were introduced by the previous Government. However, we are also clear that much more needs to be done to restore order and credibility to the system. That is why—

Julia Lopez: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I will make some remarks; I know the hon. Lady has already contributed.

That is why we are pursuing a new approach to end the overreliance on international recruitment by ensuring that the immigration, skills and training systems are properly aligned in a way they have not previously been. Further details of our plans to reduce net migration will be set out in the forthcoming White Paper. I am sure the hon. Member for West Suffolk will want to contribute and bring his own experience in government, which I do respect. I am sure he will also want to engage on how we build the solutions and the architecture that we need for a new part of how Government works, working across the Home Office, skills and our future needs, as well as on how we ensure that we are supporting migrants into work, which is also part of the role of the DWP.

Let me turn to some of the issues raised in the debate. It is worth saying that the issue of dangerous small boat crossings has been a phenomenon of the last five or six years. There has been an increase from 300 people coming in 2018 to an average of over 36,000 a year in the last three years—a 120-fold increase. We cannot deny that, in a few short years, an entire criminal smuggler industry has been built around boat crossings, and that has also been allowed to take hold across the UK border. The cost of the asylum system also increased by more than five times to £5.4 billion between 2019-20 and last year. Returns of those with no right to be here are 30% lower than they were in 2010, and asylum-related returns

were down by 20% compared with 14 years ago. That was the legacy we inherited from the previous Government, and former Ministers themselves have admitted it was shameful.

On the calls for more data, the Home Office and the Office for National Statistics publish a very wide range of statistical information on a regular basis. Our country's statisticians, and those working in my Department and other Departments, are in fact world leaders in the production of statistics and analysis on the topic of migration. I am sure that the hon. Member for West Suffolk will know that the UK publishes, I believe, more statistics on migration than any other country. The content and presentation of official statistics is kept under review and that regular oversight allows us to balance the production of regular statistics with the need to develop new statistics and statistical products for future release. We remain committed to the issues of transparency and ensuring that public and parliamentary debates are informed by robust and accurate statistics, and to keeping statistics under review.

The hon. Member for West Suffolk raised a few comments on some of his correspondence and it would be helpful to refer to some of that. I assure him that the Home Office has received his letter of 1 September and is due to respond in due course. The breakdown of £700 million in costs, which the hon. Member inquired about, has been published on gov.uk and sets out the cost of the Rwanda partnership and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which were inseparable. The purpose of the IMA was to prevent individuals arriving in the UK from remaining here, and Rwanda was intended to be a vehicle for enabling that. To try and separate them is deliberately misrepresenting the true cost of what was clearly a failed policy.

Nick Timothy: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman can come back in a moment.

The proposal to send asylum applicants to Rwanda was impractical, costly and would not have worked to reduce irregular migration. We believe in dealing with these issues with common sense in the work we have been undertaking: making sure we have a new Border Security Command and Border Security Commander, working upstream, building new partnerships with other countries and doing that in order to also disrupt the supply chains of criminal gangs, who the hon. Member for West Suffolk knows are undermining our border security and putting lives at risk. We will continue to spend taxpayer money on real solutions such as breaking the business models of those criminal gangs. In fact, when we made it clear that the Rwanda partnership would come to an end, we saw, for example, the repurposing of two flights provisionally booked for Rwanda, which were used to return a number of individuals to their home countries instead.

Nick Timothy: I thank the Minister for giving way and I appreciate that she has been given a hospital pass by the immigration Minister, who really ought to be the person here, but last time she was, she did not give a very good account of herself, and has been avoiding writing letters or giving any of the numbers that the Opposition have been asking for.

The statement—which was obviously pre-prepared, and I understand how these things work—does not address any of the questions that I raised in my speech. It is not true that we are world leaders in the collection of statistics that relate to immigration. Anyway, the questions related not to overall levels of net migration from particular countries and so on, but to things such as the nationality and immigration status of criminals and imprisoned criminals, or people living in social housing or in receipt of benefits. We do not have any information on that, and if we are compared to some European countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands, a study from which shows that the average asylum migrant costs something like £400,000 net over their lifetimes, we are nowhere. Can the Minister give us a quick answer on that?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I said, we do keep our statistics under review. He will also know that a lot of research on the cost and benefit of migration has been done by the Migration Advisory Committee, and its annual report, published this week, is another example of the work it is doing, with its capacity expanding to help us address some of the challenges of bringing net migration down alongside having a more coherent policy for how we do that across Government. Indeed, the recent estimate of the average contribution of skilled workers is also demonstrated in the report.

I will make this point before I finish: the hon. Member for West Suffolk will know that the Ministry of Justice does publish data on foreign national offenders in the UK in its official statistics. He will also know that we have seen a 21% increase in foreign criminals being removed from the UK, compared to the same period last year. That sends a clear message to foreign criminals that if they break the law, they will not be allowed to stay in the UK.

I recognise the importance of the debate and the issues that have been raised today. I thank the hon. Member for raising them and we will respond to him in due course.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Creative Arts Education

4.30 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I beg to move,
That this House has considered creative arts education.

It is a pleasure to open this debate about the importance of creative arts education. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, both as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on performing arts education and training and as trustee of Chichester Festival Theatre.

Throughout December, my diary, like those of all Members across the House, is jam-packed with wonderful occasions that feature a celebration of the arts—be they carol concerts in local churches, school plays or pantomimes. I have loved the live music on my high street at the Chichester Christmas market. I had a fantastic time as the guest judge at the Priory Park pantomime, and once the House rises I will be off to enjoy the Chichester Festival Youth Theatre's production of "Cinderella"—a professional production on the main stage—with my family. I had the privilege of performing on that stage as a member of that very same youth theatre: an experience that I still treasure as an adult, and one that encouraged me to continue my education in the creative arts.

After studying drama at GCSE and A-level, I went on to the University of Chichester and obtained a degree in performing arts. Before this giddy world of politics ensnared me, I had the privilege of teaching the next generation performing arts at various organisations and in schools. I am living proof that a creative education can lead anywhere, including to this place.

The arts and cultural sector contributes well over £8 billion to the UK economy each year. It puts £2.5 billion directly into the Treasury through taxation, and the creative industries as a whole generated £125 billion in 2022. They account for almost 6% of the UK economy, create 2.5 million jobs and have a huge impact on the tourism economy, with one in 10 tourists to the UK visiting a theatre. Theatres sell 34 million tickets a year across the UK.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech, and I commend her for her work in this area. Does she agree that many wonderful venues could be developed across towns and cities in this country? In my area, Reading Gaol has incredible potential. It has been derelict for some time, although it was bought recently. We are trying to see what arts provision can be offered there. Is there not enormous scope for developing more theatre and art space across the country, which can provide incredible value to local communities?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank the hon. Member and commend him on his work in trying to get Reading Gaol opened as an arts space.

A project in Selsey in my constituency is trying to restore a beautiful old pavilion, which used to hold many events but was then left to go to rack and ruin. The Selsey Pavilion Trust is working tirelessly to try and get that venue up and running so that the Selsey community can once again enjoy arts in their own town.

As a country, we have a duty to ensure that the next generation of employees is suitably equipped to join a sector that can drive the growth and innovation that the

[Jess Brown-Fuller]

UK needs now more than ever. We must ensure that a career in the arts continues to be seen by our young people as a viable and valuable choice well into the future.

I remember having that debate with my mum, in an Italian restaurant at the age of 18, after I had been accepted to go to university to study business. I confessed that I was following that path so that I could get a proper job, and that I did not believe that she could possibly support me in following my real desire: to study theatre. Luckily, she did, and it paid off—I turned down that place at university, and a year later went to the University of Chichester to study theatre. My degree not only taught me the craft of performing arts, but developed valuable personal and employment skills, such as collaborative working, demonstrating initiative and problem solving.

To be clear, the creative arts are a broad field that includes many artistic disciplines. Although my background is performing arts and drama, when I talk about a lack of creative arts in our education system, I refer not just to drama, but to music, dance, visual arts, creative writing, textiles, and the design and technology subjects.

In this debate, I want to focus on the structure of the English baccalaureate, and the failure to include arts subjects in it. This is putting arts education in the UK in an urgent state of crisis, and will have a wider impact on the creative sector if not addressed by this Government. The English baccalaureate requires children to take up GCSEs in several subjects, none of which is in the arts. Since its introduction in 2010, arts subjects have seen a drastic decline in the number of students taking them further in their education: a 29% decrease in drama, a 24% decrease in music, and a 65% reduction in the six design and technology subjects. Compare that with geography, which has seen increase of 42%; history, which has seen an increase of 33%; and the single sciences, which are up by 38%.

The issue is very apparent in my constituency. Chichester College is investing in a state-of-the-art science, technology, engineering and maths building, which is due to open shortly—I applaud its work in getting that building up and running—while cancelling its drama A-level for new students this coming year, because of a lack of take-up. That has upset many students in the Chichester constituency.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I come from Falmouth, which has a world-leading arts university. The idea of STEAM—science, technology, engineering, arts and maths—adds the creativity of the arts, and unlocks some of the creativity in science and tech. That is where we get breakthroughs. Does the hon. Member agree?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I am glad that the hon. Member is the first person in the room to raise STEAM. Adding arts to the STEM subjects is such an important and viable way of opening up the curriculum.

When I visit private schools in my constituency, their arts departments are flourishing. An article in *The Times* in November found that nearly half of all film and television directors nominated for British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards were educated at

independent schools, and one in six was educated at Oxford or Cambridge. That highlights the stark class inequalities in access to the creative industries, which will worsen if the trend of de-prioritising arts education in state schools and colleges continues.

I will not ask hon. Members to take my word for it. Earlier this week, I spoke to Hugh Bonneville—yes, I am willing to name-drop my friend—who wrote in his book “Playing Under the Piano” about a school he visited in 2019: a newly built academy that taught around 2,000 students. It was an impressive school, but it had no music provision, no choir, no band, and no studio space for drama or dance. The students who were working on scenes from “Romeo and Juliet” had pushed the bookshelves to one side in a corner of the library to create a rehearsal space. As Hugh wrote:

“How on earth is the next generation of those who drive the multi-billion pound entertainment and creative industries to be discovered, or even to take part?”

The current structure of the English baccalaureate is opposed by teachers, education experts, trade unions, artists and the creative sector. Perhaps more importantly, a survey by the Cultural Learning Alliance concluded that one of the advantages of arts-based studies is stronger educational attainment generally, and there are well-acknowledged connections between participation in the performing arts and stronger self-motivation, as well as improved physical and mental wellbeing and the development of inner resilience.

Any organisation or charity currently working to support young people can describe the acute mental health crisis that our young people face. One example is the Young People’s Shop, a charity operating in Chichester that, alongside its counselling service, runs arts-based group sessions, recognising the link between mental health and creative expression. The Liberal Democrats have long called for a mental health professional in every school and I applaud that. Given the connection I have laid out, I strongly advocate working closely with creative arts provision in schools as an outlet for expression and stress relief.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the role that outside organisations play in giving our young people a creative education. Some of my happiest memories are of evenings spent at my local amateur dramatic society rehearsing for the upcoming panto, and Thursday evenings throughout the year with my friends at Chichester Festival Youth Theatre.

I pay tribute to organisations such as Chichester Festival Theatre, which has one of the most ambitious youth theatres in the country. It acknowledged that its youth theatre was not reaching as well as it could the communities that would benefit from access, so it created seven satellite youth theatres across West Sussex to ensure that each of those communities has access to top-quality education, classes for students with additional needs, and theatre-based courses for school refusers and those out of mainstream education. CFT even launched a technical youth theatre for young people more interested in the workings of the backstage than the front stage.

I recognise how lucky we in Chichester are to have a theatre, such as CFT, that puts learning and participation at the core of everything it does, but I want every child in this country to have the opportunity afforded to my constituents.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Wales is very proud of its reputation for producing great musicians, actors and actresses—I will not try to name them all lest I forget people. My hon. Friend talked of the difficulties faced by people entering the profession and the worrying fact that the numbers might be dropping off. How does she think our state would be best placed to encourage people to go into the profession? Would that be through investing in buildings and education, or something else?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank my hon. Friend. I think it is both; it is about making spaces that are accessible to communities so they can explore the creative industries, but the Government can also do something. Government money could be used more wisely in consolidating those funding pots so that they are utilised to best effect by focusing on specialist world-class providers, delivering both in communities and via our education system.

I finish by reflecting that since the general election the Government have made all the right noises to suggest that a stronger emphasis may be put on creative education. Will the Minister, when she responds, commit to a reform of the English baccalaureate and set out a timeline for our schools to reintegrate arts education into the core curriculum? Will any further work be done on the integration of in-school and out-of-school provision of arts education, such as additional funding for music hubs to include dance and drama?

Finally, I thank the Council for Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre for its work in this area. I encourage the Minister, in her spare time over the Christmas recess—in between enjoying carol concerts and pantomimes—to please read its manifesto for performing arts education.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. If Members are creative and stick to just over three minutes, I think we will get everybody in.

4.43 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing the debate. I must declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on art, craft and design in education.

When the sunsets in your town are named after the painter who made them famous, when some of the most loved comedians of the 20th century lived and partied there, when classic books were written or set there, when music hall celebrities made their home there, when one of the most loved Victorian authors lived there and whole weekends are dedicated to celebrating his books, and when actors, musicians and creatives of all kinds flock there, you know that art and creativity are sewn into the fabric of the place that you call home. Everywhere someone turns in Thanet, they bump into an enormously rich heritage of art and creativity. Thanks to the energy, drive and vision of many individuals in our community, art and creativity are part of our present, too. From the Turner gallery to Ramsgate Music Hall, from Screaming

Alley to the Pie Factory, and with award-winning artists such as Lindsey Mendick and our very own globally famous Tracey Emin, our home is the home of many artists. Back in the 1870s, we even had Vincent van Gogh, who taught at a school in Ramsgate.

Margate is obviously known as the proud home of the Turner Contemporary art gallery, which is a symbol of the creative sector's potential to help regenerate coastal communities like mine. There is a long and proud British tradition of talking about the importance of the creative industries, but if we do not also champion creative education, we sentence that extraordinary history to a slow death. Creative education has suffered hugely since the introduction of the English baccalaureate and progress 8, with a dramatic reduction in the number of students taking arts-related subjects. The statistics that the hon. Member for Chichester referred to strike fear into the heart of those of us who know the importance of art and creativity to the wellbeing and advancement of not only our industries, but our young people. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for art, craft and design in education, alongside the chairs of many other APPGs that represent creative subjects, I am campaigning for the Department to scrap the EBacc and progress 8, as part of the curriculum review, so that we once again encourage all children to take up the arts.

It is important to note that private schools know the value of arts education, which is why they spend so much time, money and effort on encouraging it. We now have a situation in which 40% of people working in the film, TV and music industries were educated at private schools—I remind Members that 7% of the population were educated at private schools—but that is entirely unsurprising, because private schools understand and value the benefits of creative education. Talent is spread equally across all children, but opportunity most certainly is not. With the EBacc and progress 8, the previous Government created a situation of arts education becoming the domain of those who can afford it. If those children deserve an arts education, so do the 93% of kids in state schools. We risk missing out on so much untapped talent across the country. We do not know who the next Tracey Emin or Bob and Roberta Smith is, and if we restrict arts education, I fear that we never will know. Creativity is fundamental to the human condition. We should expand education, not restrict it.

Before I finish, I want to point out the importance of the creative sector to not only our economy, but learning for people with special educational needs. The crisis in our education sector for those young people is particularly significant, because creative education is a way of their accessing learning and helps them to live their fullest lives. I pay tribute to Sammy's Foundation, which was set up by Patricia Alban, one of my constituents, after her son, Sammy, tragically died. It teaches heritage craft skills to neurodivergent young people to help them to realise their potential and become master artisans. The reality is that young people such as Sammy who are consistently failed by mainstream education could find their passion and career in creative education, and fill a huge skills gap in the craft and heritage workforce. The new Government have taken positive steps by outlining the vast potential of the creative sector, but if they want to unlock the real potential of the industry, they need to enable creative education to thrive, not wither.

4.48 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this timely debate and for her excellent speech, much of which I agreed with. I declare an interest as chair of the APPG on music education. I will therefore focus on the provision of music education across the country.

Since 2010, there has been a steady decline in the provision of music in our schools. According to data from the Independent Society of Musicians, music as a subject has experienced a 30% decline in GCSE entries and a 43% drop in A-level entries since 2010. There has also been a sharp decline in the number of music teachers, which means that in some schools, music is taught by people who are not qualified as music teachers. That is of deep concern.

We heard from the hon. Member for Chichester about the economic benefits of creative subjects, but there is also a personal benefit to students. Building confidence, teaching discipline and teamwork, improved health and wellbeing and even academic achievement are some of the benefits of a music education. However, music provision across the country is patchy, although there are examples of excellence in two schools that I recently visited. In the Aldgate school, less than two miles from here, all children in years 4 to 6 learn stringed instruments—I had the pleasure of seeing them perform at their Christmas concert. Similarly, children in years 4 to 6 at Welbourne primary school in Haringey learn the strings. The leadership of those schools has decided to do that, but those schools are the exceptions rather than the rule. The restructuring of music hubs, which are meant to oversee local music provision, involved a lack of oversight, so the quality of music education is inevitably patchy. We need an urgent review of the hubs to ensure that there is a high standard—as is the case in Haringey, from the Haringey music service—across the board.

Before the Government came to office, they made a pledge about the need to teach creative subjects in schools. The APPG for music education has fed into that review, as I am sure did many Members here today. What we hope for is a return to creative subjects being taught in schools and given the priority that they deserve. They should be taught by people who are suitably qualified to do so. Music and creative subjects are far too important to be demoted, as has been the case over the last 14 years. We want them to rise up the agenda and to be taught as positively as possible. If anyone has not seen Ken Robinson's TED talk, I strongly encourage them to watch it because he makes the right points about how creativity is necessary to give us all the skills we need in our society.

I hope that the Minister will indicate when the review will report back and when, hopefully, creativity will be taught in our schools. Any other help that she can provide to make that happen will be greatly appreciated.

4.52 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for bringing forward this essential debate.

I am a GP in Stroud and I have been championing arts in healthcare for over 30 years because creativity makes you better, and there is now a lot of evidence that that is the case. The Gloucestershire integrated care board—the health authority—under Ellen Rule, is investing £600,000 in creative and social prescriptions, which is incredibly exciting. I am helping to run a campaign to try to make music instrument tuition available in every primary school in the country. I co-chair the APPG for opera, which shares that aim, and the APPG for creative health. I also learned the flute at school. Recently I was asked to join the Stroud Red Band, which was one of the most fun things I did as part of my campaign to become an MP, so I thank those involved.

There are serious problems. As we have heard, there are a lot of issues due to the 30% fall in uptake of music GCSE at school. Playing music has a massive impact on children's mental health. If we are trying to prevent mental health problems, teaching children music is one of the most effective things we can do, and it can also be used to treat mental health difficulties. Our Tory friends might be interested to know that it actually helps with academic maths as well, which is really important. As many hon. Members have said, there are massive inequalities in provision. The Government are now putting £79 million into music hubs and spending £5.8 million through the music opportunity pilot for people with special educational needs.

I shall finish by showcasing a number of local organisations. Strike a Light, which brings drama and music to young people, is really inspirational. The Music Works in Gloucester is also truly inspirational, particularly for children from deprived backgrounds. We have the Prema arts centre in my village of Uley. Gordon Scott, the director, has been teaching the piano to countless children over the past 20 to 30 years. Let us campaign to get music teaching in every primary school.

4.54 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this debate and for her outstanding speech. The creative arts is a topic that touches the hearts of all our communities, whatever our constituency, and has a direct impact on the economy and our identity across all our nations and regions.

The Government estimate that creative industries generate £126 billion in gross value added to the economy and employ some 2.5 million people, yet sometimes people argue that there is an either/or when it comes to education and that the performing arts, and the arts in general, are not an economic contributor. In my own area, Kent county council reported that the number of creative jobs has increased by 24% in Kent over the last five years, with 35% of them in the new sectors of IT, software and computer services. None of that happens in isolation. As the hon. Member for Chichester identified, it links back to education in schools. Every actor, film maker and games designer has a foundation in our education system, yet in recent years we have seen a worrying decline in creative arts education.

A recent report published by the University of Warwick indicated that between 2009 and 2023, UK funding for the arts decreased, alongside a 47% slump in GCSE

entries in arts subjects. It is absolutely right that the EBacc needs to be looked at alongside the curriculum review to indicate that there is not just a fixation on STEM subjects. As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for video games and esports, I can say that investment in games technologies and art is about not only the past, but the future, and significant revenue and numbers of jobs can be secured in those sectors. It is an economic necessity that we look at the full breadth of STEAM skills that a 21st-century economy needs.

Medway in my area has a great legacy of theatre, music and production. I myself was a chorister at Rochester cathedral. We celebrate the breadth of diversity in our area, but we are being let down through our education system. I have a number of questions for the Minister. Will art be a key focus of the curriculum review so that all our children can fully access such subjects? Will she report back on some of the changing industries of the future, specifically around gaming, games technologies and e-sports, which represent a significant growth opportunity for our economy and were recognised in the investment programme recently announced by the Government? How can we encourage colleges and schools to look at those sectors of the future and invest in them?

The Local Government Association report says that for every £1 spent on arts and culture, £4 is returned to the local economy. How can we change the narrative that arts are not just a by-product of a successful economy? They are an essential part of our economy.

I will finish by saying that creative education is not just a luxury; it is an absolute necessity. It enriches lives, builds communities and drives our local and national economies. My area of Medway is a shining example of how creativity can transform places, generate prosperity and inspire generations, but we need to go further and faster for the future of all our citizens.

4.58 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for organising the debate. I am sure we can all agree that creative arts play a unique and invaluable role in enhancing the wellbeing and education of our young people. The evidence is clear: participation in creative activities and the study of artistic subjects significantly improves students' mental health, resilience and overall academic achievement.

A report by the Cultural Learning Alliance reveals that students engaged in the arts are three times more likely than others to win an academic award, and five times more likely to be recognised for good attendance, and research from the University of Manchester finds that young people who take part in arts activities are 20% more likely to report higher levels of life satisfaction. Yet, for too long, access to creative education in subjects such as art and design, dance, drama and music has been unequal, with some students receiving little or no exposure. That has allowed creative education to become a privilege largely reserved for those from affluent backgrounds whose families can afford access to cultural and artistic experiences.

Evidence shows that under the last Government, there was an overall decline of 42% in the number of arts GCSE entries. Many schools no longer offer arts subjects at all at GCSE level, and we now have 14% fewer arts teachers than in 2010. That is a damning indictment

of the previous Government's attitude and approach to creative arts education and the wider cultural sector. If we are serious about giving every child the best chance of success, we must ensure that creative arts education is accessible to all, regardless of background or circumstances. I was delighted that the Government committed £79 million to a national network of music hubs, which will give children and young people the opportunity to learn to sing or play an instrument. The investment has the potential to transform lives, providing a pathway for creative expression and personal growth.

I also welcome the piloting of the new music opportunities initiative, with £5.8 million to support students with special educational needs and disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is essential to ensure that creative opportunities are inclusive and fair.

As a proud Halesowen MP, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the exemplary work of Halesowen college. It is a forward-thinking educational institution that offers a large number of vocational creative arts courses, including acting, dance, fashion, graphic design, media make-up and music. With state-of-the-art facilities, the college provides young people and adults in Halesowen the chance to explore and develop their creative talents. Exciting and creative educational opportunities are available within our community.

As we look ahead, we must continue to champion creative arts education as a vital part of our children's development, wellbeing and future success. It is only by nurturing their creative potential that the next generation will thrive.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call Jayne Kirkham. I am saving Mr Shannon for the finale.

5.1 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for obtaining this important debate on a topic I am passionate about.

Cornwall, where I come from, is rich in the creative arts. I have spoken previously about the world-class Falmouth University, which grew out of a 100-year-old art school, with a strategic focus on creativity and technology. I welcome the inclusion of the creative industry in the UK's eight growth sectors in the recent industrial strategy. It is brilliant that it has been recognised as an economic driver.

Creative education has so many impacts. I will name a few, even though I should not need to, because each one should be enough on its own. The skills development, critical thinking and problem-solving skills gained from an arts education help to focus on future industries such as tech and digital media, driving economic growth. Creativity and entrepreneurial skills go hand in hand. Cornwall is teeming with small and medium-sized enterprises and one-man bands, which stimulate the independent sector and the growth of the area. That is well worth it in an area such as Cornwall that struggles with deprivation.

Ms Billington: On my hon. Friend's point about helping to grow the local economy, can we stop the suggestion that art is anything other than a serious subject?

[Ms Billington]

We have had far too much of the idea that it is soft, easy and does not add to wider education and understanding. It is not just an economic driver but fundamental to the human condition.

Jayne Kirkham: You are right that it is an important subject in its sheer scope, alongside the sciences, maths and everything else. It does more than enrich our lives; it is a fundamental part of our lives.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I am “you” and she is the hon. Lady.

Jayne Kirkham: I apologise. Creative arts are obviously a regional growth driver. We are lucky in Truro and Falmouth because those creative hubs can revitalise our region and bring in the visitors we need so much. The growth of the Hall for Cornwall, for example, has spread tentacles across the rest of the county, bringing in children and people who want to get involved in the creative arts but do not often have the opportunity.

Many students learn games design at the Launchpad at Falmouth University. They can then start up their own businesses, with the help to do so. We have the Poly, the Princess Pavilion and brilliant grassroots venues, such as the Cornish Bank, the Old Bakery studios and the Chintz, where some of the musicians who are learning in our town go to practise their art. We are also building premises for a community radio station in the park with our shared prosperity funding, which shows just how important the arts are to Falmouth. People come to us for the arts.

We have an alternative SEND provider called Player Ready Truro, which works with neurodivergent children; they blossom when they can do the things they love with tuition. It prepares them to go back into school and it builds their confidence. Would the Minister consider looking again at progress 8, because it does not contain an arts subject? We should definitely consider that. We must review the national curriculum so that the arts are in the prominent place that they should be.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Last, but definitely not least, I call Jim Shannon. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 5.10 pm.

5.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I first say this, Mr Mundell: you have done the long yards this afternoon—three debates. I do not know whether that gets you overtime or what, but well done.

I commend the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) on setting the scene so well. This is her first Westminster Hall debate and, on the basis of this example, I think it will be the first of many, so I wish her well.

The creative arts across the United Kingdom are something to be proud of. We have a fantastic range of arts and lots of enthusiastic people who make them what they are. I always love to take part in these debates to showcase the talent of Northern Ireland and, more importantly, my constituency of Strangford.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) referred to playing the flute—how we love to play the flute in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, playing the flute is like riding a bike, by the way: nearly everybody learns to play. There might be a reason for that, of course.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Give us a demo.

Jim Shannon: I have not brought my flute. I could whistle a tune, but I will not.

I always like to talk about something we have done in Northern Ireland. In late 2022—I know the Minister will be pleased to hear this, as an example of what can be done—the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the Education Authority and the Urban Villages initiative announced funding for the continuation of the creative schools programme in 11 secondary schools, which was fantastic news for the education system across Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) referred to the importance of the arts. The arts are a vocation and many people need to recognise that. There are so many young people out there who see themselves going into the arts, film or the creative industries, so funding for our local schools through the Urban Villages initiative is good news. I have spoken before in Westminster Hall and the Chamber of the amazing talent that Northern Ireland has to offer, specifically in the film industry. We have made leaps and bounds in the film sector over the years.

I will give another example. I noticed recently in my constituency and neighbouring constituencies that controlled or commissioned graffiti is becoming massively popular within the creative arts industry. In Newtownards, which I represent, an Ulster Farmers' Union building has historically always been subject to criminal graffiti, but now it has been transformed through the creative arts, and it looks fantastic. I have also seen many streets, alleys and walls completely changed by graffiti, and the work that goes into that should be respected and admired. Northern Ireland probably has a lot more graffiti than most, but we realised what could be done creatively with graffiti. At last, that is an indication of where we can go.

The creative schools programme initially launched as a pilot scheme in 2017 and so far 1,000 young boys and girls—men and women—have benefited from it. That is a fantastic number of people destined for stardom and progress. The programme places a focus on improving educational outcomes for children across a wide range of artistic sectors. It is not the Minister's responsibility, but it is crucial that we continue to fund it in Northern Ireland, so that we truly give young people the opportunity to showcase the amazing talent that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has to offer.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call Munira Wilson, the Liberal Democrat spokesman, for five minutes.

5.9 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) on securing this important

debate, and I have enjoyed learning a lot about her illustrious background. I cannot claim to be anywhere near as accomplished as she is, but I used to love doing amateur dramatics at school and university, so I can see a Lib Dem drama club emerging at some point soon. Anyway, I will now move on to the serious part of the speech.

The Beatles, Damien Hirst, Amy Winehouse, Anthony Hopkins, Judi Dench and Vivienne Westwood are just a few examples of the brilliant artists who our country has produced over the past century. Our creative industries are renowned throughout the world and, as we have already heard, they contribute enormously to our economy, employing more than 2.3 million people every year.

It is vital that we preserve and grow our arts, which starts with promoting creative education in our schools. As we have already heard, the benefits of creative education are numerous, from developing a lifelong passion to helping children and young people with their mental health and equipping them with important life skills.

Sadly, however, creative education has not been treated with the priority it deserves and teaching in schools has suffered as a result. There are now 15,000 fewer full and part-time teachers of arts subjects in schools than in 2010. With fewer specialised teaching staff and increasingly constrained budgets, we have seen a drop in the number of children taking arts subjects, with enrolment at GCSE level falling by almost a half and at A-level by a third between 2010 and 2023. That means too many children are missing out on the opportunity to broaden their horizons and learn new skills.

At the heart of this issue is the fact that the arts have wrongly been labelled as unimportant and trivial. As a result, in the context of overstretched budgets and limited resources, arts subjects are the first to be cut back, with schools increasingly focusing on their core curriculum offer and extracurricular activities in the arts having to be scaled back.

The Liberal Democrats believe that our children's education should be rounded and varied. Too often, Conservatives think that creative education is the sacrifice we must make for strong academic standards, but it should not be an either/or situation—it is always both/and. There is plenty of evidence to indicate that there is a link between participation in the arts and higher attainment. I hope that the Government's ongoing curriculum review and the upcoming reform of Ofsted inspections ensures that all students can access a broad curriculum, including art, music and drama subjects, alongside a strong focus on high academic standards in other subjects.

As the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) pointed out, the growing lack of arts provision in our schools, colleges and universities has widened inequalities between disadvantaged students and their peers. It is often only more privileged families who can afford private tuition, extra classes outside school or an independent education, because, as we have heard, the facilities of independent schools are often second to none in terms of the creative arts, thus disadvantaging children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

That has a direct impact on who goes on to work in the creative industries, with data showing that there are four times as many individuals from middle-class backgrounds in creative occupations as there are from

working-class backgrounds. The arts should not be accessible only to the most privileged. If we want to harness the full talent of our children and young people to ensure that we continue to make the creative industries a powerhouse for our economy, we need to widen opportunities to the arts at every level.

It is not only schools that have seen the take-up of arts subjects plummet but further and higher education institutions. According to the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, over the past decade there has been a 57% drop in the uptake of creative courses in further and higher education. As we have heard, the exclusion of arts subjects from the English baccalaureate and cuts to funding for creative arts subjects at university by the previous Conservative Government have fuelled this decline.

That is why the Liberal Democrats would like to see arts subjects being included in the English baccalaureate to boost access to the arts. We also need to stop talking down and defunding creative arts degrees and vocational courses, and to drive up high-quality apprenticeships in this area.

Let us be proud of our world-leading institutions. Earlier this year, I visited Wimbledon College of Arts with my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), and I saw the amazing work that its students do in costume and set design, puppetry and performance. The college is part of the University of the Arts London, which is second in the world for art and design; we should celebrate that. In my own backyard, I went to the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in Twickenham last week, where the students put on the most incredible show. I know that many of them will go on to be talented performers in their own right.

The creative arts enable all of us to lead a fulfilling life, and they are also one of our country's finest and most recognisable exports. Let us give our children and young people the opportunity to flourish fully, and let us develop a pipeline of talent into our arts sector to ensure that children and young people get the widest opportunity possible at school, college, university and beyond.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister to speak; you have five minutes.

5.14 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) on securing this debate, which, as well as being hugely informative and important, has been a pleasure to listen to. It has given us the exciting prospect of the Liberal Democrat drama club, which—given the exciting predilection of their leader, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), for doing his own stunts—holds all kinds of potential. The idea of a flautist-off between the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Stroud (Dr Opher) is another exciting prospect.

We have heard thoughtful and important speeches from the hon. Members for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), for East Thanet (Ms Billington), for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), and for Strangford. It has been an interesting debate.

[Neil O'Brien]

This will be the last education debate of 2024—barring any surprises from the Minister tomorrow—so I want to thank all the hard-working teachers for their efforts over the year. When I meet teachers, as I have been over the last couple of days, I often find that they are quite tired at this time of year. For primary school teachers, the creative activity around the nativity is the thing that finally finishes them off and leaves them ready for Christmas. I end the year in the spirit of good will, and particularly thank our hard-working teachers.

In order to facilitate an answer that the Minister may wish to get from her officials, I will start by asking about a very specific thing: the music and dance scheme. On 21 November, the Secretary of State wrote to the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), to say that the Government were going to extend transitional support for that scheme: "From 1 January 2025, for families with relevant income below £45,000, my Department will ensure their total fee contributions will remain unchanged for the rest of the academic year." In a sense, that is a pause or a stay of execution. When will the Minister make a decision on the future of that really good arts scheme, so that there can be certainty beyond the end of the academic year? Will she continue to hold down fees for those who benefit from it for the next year? Will she also commit to maintain a related project, the Choir Schools' Association scholarship scheme? I enter those specific things into the debate at this point so that the Minister has a chance to respond.

Let me now turn to the wider debate. We have talked about some of the things the last Government did, such as music hubs, which I think are widely welcomed, but—without wishing to move away from the spirit of good will and Christmas towards being the dog in the manger—of course the issue is always time. Our hard-working teachers are already working flat out. In theory and principle, I love the idea advanced by the Liberal Democrat Front Bench that it should not be an either/or, but unfortunately there are only a certain number of hours in the school day.

Now, if the Minister gets a wonderfully huge sum of money from the Treasury and manages to expand the school day so that we can do all those additional things, that is wonderful—I will be the first to welcome that—but our teachers and schools face some inescapable trade-offs. As the Minister will know by now, every week there are on average four calls from different groups for something new to be put on to the national curriculum or to get more time in our schools, but they cannot all have more time.

My only caveat to what Members have said today is the idea that there are creative and non-creative subjects. Some spoke about STEAM, which is a better concept, because the sciences and all those other things are creative subjects too. After a fall from 83% to 70% of pupils getting double or triple science between 2006 and 2011, it is a good thing that those subjects have rebounded to 98%. We have to be honest about what the trade-offs are. If we want to do more of one thing, we have to be clear and honest with people about what we are going to do less of—unless there is some sudden money gusher.

Ms Billington: I am interested in the idea that there is a limited amount of time in the state school curriculum, but there does not seem to be a limited amount of time for creative education in private schools. If it is important for private schools, then it is important for state educated children, so why can we not find the time for it?

Neil O'Brien: With respect, I am all ears, and it will be for the Government to say where they will find the time for those things. In principle, I have no objection, but I do not believe that the hon. Lady thinks that there is an unlimited amount of time in the school day, or that our teachers can all do endlessly more work. Of course that is not the case—no one believes that; there are choices here.

If I can return to the spirit of good will and Christmas, I want to commend something good that the Government have published: the evidence pack published alongside the curriculum and assessment review. It is a good piece of work that brings some nuance to the debate that is not always there. It shows that, although the numbers doing GCSE are somewhat down for some art subjects, the numbers doing other types of qualifications are going up at the same time. A lot of the bigger changes are nothing to do with art subjects whatsoever. We see less time spent on ICT in schools and more time spent on English, maths and science. I commend to hon. Members that very good piece of work by the Government; I strongly endorse the nuance that it brings. We all want to see more of these wonderful things happening in our schools, but I also beg that everyone is honest about the trade-offs involved.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Minister, I would be grateful if you left a few moments at the end so that Jess Brown-Fuller can respond to the debate.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I will endeavour to do so, Mr Mundell. I am pleased to be speaking in this debate, which, as has already been said, is probably the last education debate this year—what a lovely subject for the final one. I extend my congratulations to the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) on securing it. It was excellent to hear so much about her performing arts background—from teaching to advocating here; she obviously still enjoys it.

I am sure many of us are enjoying creativity during this festive season—maybe hon. Members have been to a pantomime or two, although I am not encouraging anyone to do one here. I look forward to seeing "Sleeping Beauty" in my constituency, and I am sure that many Members who have spoken about the theatres, creative arts and creative places in their areas are enjoying visiting them and partaking in the activity as well. It was excellent and lovely to hear about the many things that colleagues have mentioned, although of course we also heard about the many challenges and the changes that are needed. Hon. Members said that we need to go further, and I know that they will hold the Government to account on our mission statements and reforms.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) for her contribution, particularly about Sammy's Foundation, and about the need to ensure that the creative arts are there for people with SEND and those who are neurodiverse.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for speaking about music hubs and the need to review provision for arts and creativity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) talked about the need to campaign. I very much agree that creativity and the arts help with children's emotional health and wellbeing—I will be speaking about that later—but it was also lovely to hear that it helps with maths. Why wouldn't we want to hear that? It is absolutely brilliant.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) for talking about not only the worrying decline in the arts but the need to inspire generations to come.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for raising concerns about declining GCSE uptake, and for talking about hubs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) talked about the missions and growth, as well as SMEs.

It was lovely to hear the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) speak about many things, including how the art of graffiti can make real and positive changes.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) spoke about many relevant things, as she often does, including the need to ensure that the curriculum is rounded, varied and broad—I could not agree more. I am sure that we are all advocating for more fun in our children's studies and the encouragement of their creative abilities. Learning can be fun, and we hope that it is in our schools.

I am pleased with the many contributions that have been made, and I will endeavour to respond to them in the time I have, but I encourage Members to make contact with me if they feel they have not been answered. The Government recognise the immense value of creative subjects for every child and young person, extending far beyond career aspirations in the creative industries. Creative subjects support a child's ability to express themselves, help their confidence and support their emotional wellbeing, and there are benefits in many other areas.

Creative subjects, like the arts, music, drama and many others, are significant elements of the rounded and enriching education that the Government want every child to receive. That is why creative subjects are part of the national curriculum for all maintained schools from the age of five to 14—and beyond for drama. Academies, too, are expected to teach these subjects as part of their statutory requirement to foster pupils' cultural development. Indeed, many schools currently teach creative subjects as part of the curriculum and do so with great success, which enables children and young people to engage with subjects like music beyond the school day. The Government's goal is to ensure that no child is deprived of the enriching experience that creative education provides. We aim to ensure a consistent approach across all schools.

The Government's mission is to break down the barriers to opportunities that hold back many of our young people. We know that this will take time, but we

are committed to taking the right steps to make it a reality. A crucial step in realising our vision is to ensure that our national curriculum strikes the right balance. It must embody ambition, excellence, relevance, flexibility and inclusivity. That is why in July we launched an independent curriculum and assessment review for ages five to 18, chaired by Professor Becky Francis CBE.

The review will seek to deliver a broader curriculum, with improved access to music, art, sports, drama and vocational subjects. It will look closely at the key challenges to attainment for young people and the barriers that hold children back from the opportunities that they should be able to access. This is an important process, and the recommendations put forward by Professor Becky Francis and her expert-led panel will be published in 2025. Many Members have mentioned that crucial review.

We recognise that although potential is widespread, opportunities are not. That disparity has held many young people back from fulfilling their true potential. To ensure that music education is fully inclusive, including for those with special educational needs and disabilities in both mainstream and special schools, music hubs are required to have an inclusion lead and to develop an inclusion strategy. Furthermore, the Government will launch a new national music education network. This initiative will help families, children and schools access broader opportunities and support.

Neil O'Brien: Will the Minister give way?

Janet Daby: I really do not have time, I am afraid.

Through the opportunity mission, we will work to break the link between young people's background and their future success. Our focus is on supporting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and we will continue to take steps to ensure that opportunity is not restricted by a young person's location or background.

Our goal is to help families continue to support their children in accessing specialist music and dance courses, so we have made changes to the music and dance scheme for this transitional academic year. From January 2025, we will ensure that families with below average incomes receive additional support to prevent any increases in parental contributions due to the VAT change. This adjustment will benefit around half the families with a music and dance scheme bursary for their child.

I would like to give the hon. Member for Chichester some time to respond, so I will end on that note. I thank all Members for their contributions, and I wish everyone a very merry Christmas.

5.29 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank hon. Members, the shadow Minister and the Minister for talking about the importance of creative arts education and how it will foster the next generation of well-rounded and emotionally intelligent young people, who can thrive.

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 18 December 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Free Trade Agreement with the Gulf Co-operation Council: Negotiations Update

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): Growth is the No. 1 mission of this Government. Central to growing our economy and ensuring working people in every community feel the benefits of that growth, is an expansion of free trade agreements with strategic partners.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade announced the Government's intention to deliver the UK's FTA negotiations programme in July. Negotiations with the Gulf Co-operation Council resumed on 24 September. Since then, the UK has held ongoing virtual and in-person negotiations. This included a GCC delegation visiting London during the week of 21 October and a UK delegation visiting Riyadh during the week of 11 November.

To progress negotiations, I had productive discussions with counterparts in Saudi Arabia while attending the 2024 future investment initiative in Riyadh. This was ahead of the Secretary of State for Business and Trade's visit to Qatar later in the week to attend the GCC Trade Ministers' meeting on 31 October. This event provided a good opportunity to discuss key issues with Ministers from all member states and the shared ambition to move negotiations forward at pace.

Talks throughout the autumn have continued to be constructive, with good momentum from the GCC, which has enabled further treaty text to be agreed. The focus from both sides is on achieving a modern and commercially meaningful agreement.

A mutually beneficial FTA between the UK and the GCC will deliver economic growth, higher wages and new investment. A deal will deliver targeted growth that could increase bilateral trade by 16%, potentially adding an extra £8.6 billion a year to trade between the UK and GCC countries in the long run. This £8.6 billion is on top of the £57.4 billion worth of trade that we already have.

The negotiation is progressing at pace and good progress is being made in the following areas:

Services, investment and digital

Detailed technical discussions have been held across these areas, narrowing down outstanding issues in the text and setting out expectations for market access schedules. Constructive discussions have been had around mobility to better support the movement of business persons between the UK and the GCC. Investment remains a key area of interest for both sides, recognising the levels of inward and outward investment between the UK and GCC countries. A digital chapter, alongside provisions relating to innovation, reflect the shared ambition for a future facing deal, that can respond to the changes that technology will continue to bring to the global economy.

Goods

The aim of negotiators' discussions on goods market access is achieving commercially meaningful outcomes. This is an important area for both sides, and we continue to press for further progress on key UK interests and look forward to building on these discussions in the coming weeks. We also made good progress in technical discussions on rules of origin and trade remedies and are working constructively with the GCC to narrow down outstanding issues in the text.

Other areas of note

Negotiators continued to have constructive discussions on areas of sustainable trade, including environment and labour, as well as making further progress through negotiations on disputes and transparency.

I value the important role that Parliament plays in the scrutiny of the Government's ambitious trade agenda. We will continue to ensure that Parliament is appropriately updated while also ensuring we protect our negotiating position.

[HCWS333]

DEFENCE

Afghan Resettlement

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):

Last month, people came together all over the United Kingdom, to honour all the members of our armed forces who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our security and freedoms. In this significant year of remembrance anniversaries, the Remembrance Sunday service at the Cenotaph was also notable for an historic first. This year was the first time our veterans of the Afghanistan campaign marched past the Cenotaph together as a distinct unit; a solemn acknowledgement of the sacrifice and bravery of their colleagues during the operation, and in the rebuilding process which followed. Tragically, 454 of their colleagues did not have the option of joining them. I pay tribute to the commitment and courage of all those who served our country in Afghanistan.

Alongside British personnel, many Afghans also worked with commitment and courage to support the UK mission in Afghanistan. This includes members of Afghan specialist units, commonly known as the Triples, who fought valiantly alongside UK personnel, with some giving their lives and others suffering life-changing injuries. As set out by the Government in October, key issues have been identified and resolved through the Triples review, with eligible former Triples and their families being invited to relocate to the UK. We are expecting an overturn rate of approximately 25% on a cohort of applications that were previously considered ineligible.

This Government are fully committed to delivering on the pledge made by Parliament to those in Afghanistan who are eligible to relocate and resettle, and we continue to welcome eligible Afghans and their families to the UK through our Afghan resettlement schemes. We would like to express our gratitude to the Government of Pakistan for their co-operation as we have done this.

Whilst we recognise that resettlement is a complicated endeavour, we believe there is room for improvement in how we deliver for eligible Afghans and the communities in which they are being resettled, and ensure value for money for the taxpayer. At present, arrivals through different schemes are subject to differing and complex

funding and support offers. This is why we are fixing the foundations of a complicated system and drawing together a single pipeline for Afghan resettlement, to deliver greater efficiency and better outcomes across Government.

By reforming our internal organisation across Government, we will bring to bear the collective expertise within the Home Office, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence and ensure the best possible outcomes at each stage of the resettlement journey. It is only by empowering the Departments to play to their strengths that we will ensure optimal services and value for money are provided overall.

The best resettlement delivers successful integration and supports arrivals to rebuild their lives in their new home. That is why, from the spring, we will be limiting the time that arrivals spend in transitional accommodation to nine months. Transitional accommodation—provided by the Ministry of Defence—will continue to be a mixture of serviced accommodation, and hotels, alongside reduced use of the defence estate. It is a vital part of our support offer to Afghan arrivals, allowing them to orient themselves and set themselves up for success for their new lives in the UK.

All Afghan arrivals will be supported to source their own settled accommodation through the find-your-own accommodation (FYO) pathway. In recognition of the pressures on housing supply and the unique challenges facing this cohort, the Government commit to continuing to fund and support a pipeline of settled housing to support around half these arrivals, who are the hardest to house. This will be through additional capital funding, community sponsorship and some service family accommodation. This will ensure that there is a pipeline of settled accommodation to support delivery of the Afghan resettlement programme.

Local authority and devolved Government colleagues are essential to make this vision a reality. Building on ongoing engagement, we will be meeting with representatives of local government and strategic migration partnerships early in the new year to embark on a specific process of co-design and delivery of immediate programme developments. It is their experience of resettlement and their continued calls for simplification which have informed this programme, and we look forward to working closely with them in its development.

We want to thank local authorities and communities for their continued support of this endeavour, which has been instrumental to both the successful operation of our transitional accommodation sites and for supporting moves into settled accommodation. In order for them to continue to deliver this vital work, we will continue to robustly test planning assumptions.

Over the past 12 months, we have welcomed around 90 eligible families each month and we expect this pace to continue. This cannot, however, be an endless process and ultimately, the Government intend to reach a position where the UK Afghan resettlement schemes can be closed. We will update the House on this accordingly.

We are grateful for the cross-Government commitment and approach to delivery on this important programme and will provide further updates in the new year. We will continue to work to deliver on our commitment to resettle those eligible Afghans who have supported the UK, and to whom we owe a debt of gratitude.

[HCWS335]

Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2024

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):

I have today laid before Parliament the 13th armed forces annual covenant report. The 2024 report covers October 2023 to September 2024, and showcases the work that has been achieved throughout the UK in support of our armed forces community.

Thank you to all my colleagues for their Department's contributions and continued support to strengthen the armed forces covenant.

[HCWS338]

EDUCATION

Dedicated Schools Grant Allocations 2025-26

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):

Today the Department for Education has published local authorities' allocations through the dedicated schools grant (DSG) for schools, high needs and early years for 2025-26.

Overall, core schools funding is increasing by £2.3 billion in 2025-26 compared to 2024-25. This means that overall core school funding will total almost £63.9 billion next year, including a £1 billion increase in high needs funding for the costs of complex SEND. The publications today confirm the funding increases that each local authority will see in 2025-26.

The DSG allocations to local authorities consist of four blocks: a schools block, a high needs block, an early years block, and a central school services block. The DSG allocations are calculated from the latest pupil numbers, and therefore update the provisional national funding formulae allocations that were recently published.

Nationally, mainstream school funding in the DSG is increasing by 2.15% per pupil in 2025-26, compared to 2024-25, bringing total funding through this block of the DSG to £48.7 billion. This includes funding to ensure that the 2024 pay awards are fully funded at a national level in 2025-26, and further increases in the schools national funding formula on top of this.

High needs funding will increase to £11.9 billion in 2025-26, a 9% cash increase compared to this year. The vast majority of this will be allocated to local authorities through the high needs block of DSG. Every local authority will receive an increase in funding of at least 7% per head, of their population aged 2 to 18, with some local authorities seeing increases of up to 10%.

Alongside their DSG allocations, local authorities will also receive a separate core schools budget grant in 2025-26 to pass on to special schools and alternative provision to continue helping with the costs of teachers' pay and pension increases, and other staff pay increases, from 2024. This grant consolidates the separate grants for pay and pensions that are allocated for these settings in 2024-25. Further detail on the grant for 2025-26 is published at the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/core-schools-budget-grant-csbg-2025-to-2026-for-special-schools-and-alternative-provision>

Indicative allocations for the 2025-26 early years entitlements, totalling more than £8 billion, have been published. On top of over £8 billion through the core

funding rates, we are providing an additional £75 million grant for 2025-26 to support the sector in this pivotal year to grow the places and the workforce needed to deliver the final phase of expanded childcare entitlements from September 2025.

The dedicated schools grant allocations are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dedicated-schools-grant-dsg-2025-to-2026>

Pupil premium rates will be announced shortly in the new year.

[HCWS337]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK Sanctions Regime

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): Today I am updating the House on how this Government have delivered a step change in the use of our sanctions regimes to tackle malign activity and protect the UK's national security interests domestically and internationally.

Sanctions are a powerful foreign and security policy tool, and this Government are committed to maximising their impact. Since the election, we have ramped up our collaboration with partners, particularly the US and the EU, to co-ordinate our action and to tackle circumvention.

UK sanctions are targeted, proportionate and robust, within a fair and transparent framework. Our approach has been repeatedly endorsed by the courts.

New sanctions to deter and disrupt malign actors

We have taken ambitious action to deploy new UK sanctions in innovative ways to deliver maximum impact. Since July, we have:

- led the way in targeting Russia's shadow fleet—the UK has targeted more ships than any other actor and has successfully encouraged partners to support our efforts;

- delivered the largest single package of Russia sanctions, designed to disrupt Russia's military industrial complex, since May 2023;

- used our sanctions to deter and disrupt Iran's military support to Russia;

- called out the perpetrators of the Russian state's forcible deportation of Ukrainian children;

- clamped down on Russian cyber-criminals who have targeted UK schools and hospitals;

- launched a cross-Government review of sanctions enforcement;

- legislated to strengthen our sanctions enforcement powers, with the formal launch of the new Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation.

Russia sanctions

We have taken clear action to bear down on Russia's sources of revenue, including energy revenues.

In July, the Prime Minister led a call to action at the European Political Community summit to tackle Russia's shadow fleet. This has been endorsed by over 40 countries and by the EU. Russia has invested at least \$10 billion

into its shadow fleet and sanctions have plunged it into crisis. Since July, this Government have targeted 69 new oil tankers, nine liquefied natural gas carriers and six vessels involved in the transport of military goods. Many UK-sanctioned vessels have been left idling or at anchor, unable to continue their trade in Russian oil and depriving Russia of funds to wage its illegal war.

In November, we launched the largest package of sanctions against Russia in 18 months, disrupting the supply of western-sanctioned goods to the Russian military-industrial complex. This included individuals and entities in third countries. We are also targeting private military security companies, and, in November, the UK was the first G7 country to sanction Russian-backed mercenary group, Africa Corps.

The impact of our sanctions is clear. Sanctions have deprived Russia of over \$400 billion since February 2022, reducing Putin's war chest and forcing him to turn to North Korea and Iran for supplies.

Sanctions are putting grit in Russian military supply chains, increasing costs and delays and reducing equipment quality. The Russian defence sector has seen the cost of components rise by 30% and sanctions have prevented Russia from expanding military supplies to the battlefield.

On the financial side, 70% of Russian importers and 30% of Russian exporters now have to rely on specialised agents to settle payments with foreign partners, increasing the effective price of imports to Russia by 6% to 30%.

The Russian Government have also had to undertake the first major tax hike in over 20 years. Interest rates are at 21%, there is runaway inflation, and the rouble has plummeted. Russia's future energy ambitions are in tatters, and we are seeing increasingly vocal disagreements between Russian officials and industrialists.

Tackling corruption and illicit finance

Last month, we launched a campaign against illicit finance, raising our ambition and backing words with action. We sanctioned kleptocrats who have stashed stolen wealth in Britain and those who aid and abet them. Figures like Dmitry and Lada Firtash who have extracted hundreds of millions of pounds from Ukraine, or Isabel dos Santos who systematically abused her positions at Angolan state-run companies. On 9 December we took aim at the illicit gold trade, targeting five gold smugglers in co-ordination with the US, including three UK nationals. This Government will continue to use our sanctions powers to make the UK a more hostile environment for corrupt actors and to develop our sanctions regimes to address changing threats.

Iran

Sanctions are also important to confronting the threat posed by Iran, including its support for Russia. In September, we introduced new sanctions to disrupt Iran's unmanned aerial vehicle and missile industries in response to Iran's transfer of ballistic missiles to Russia for use against Ukraine. In October, following further Iranian attacks on Israel, we sanctioned senior Iranian military figures and organisations, including the Iranian Space Agency for their role in destabilising the middle east. This was followed in November by sanctions on Iran's national airline, Iran Air, and its state-owned national shipping carrier, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, in line with the commitments outlined

by the E3 in September. These sanctions will further restrict Iran's direct scheduled commercial air services to and from the UK.

Cyber-sanctions

Our sanctions also directly support UK security. On 1 October, in co-ordination with international partners, we designated 16 individuals associated with Russia-based ransomware group Evil Corp, which has links to the Russian state and has sought to compromise UK health, Government and public sector institutions. This sends a clear message that the UK is prepared to stand up to cyber-threats.

Upholding human rights and promoting democracy

This Government have also taken sanctions action to uphold human rights. Following an unprecedented rise in settler violence in the west bank, we designated three settler outposts and four organisations that have supported, incited and promoted violence against Palestinian communities in the west bank.

We have also used sanctions to promote democracy. In September 2024, following Russia's veto of the renewal of the UN sanctions regime on Mali, we legislated to enable the UK to sanction persons who obstruct Mali's return to constitutional, civilian rule or who undermine the rule of law in Mali.

On 29 October, along with the EU and Canada, we also announced sanctions to increase pressure on the military regime in Myanmar and its associates. These sanctions target entities supplying aviation fuel and equipment to the Myanmar military and signal our clear opposition to the coup with the aim of undermining the regime's credibility.

The UK strongly supports the use of UN sanctions to promote international peace and given the global signal they send and their reach across all 193 UN member states. On 8 November, the UN Security Council sanctioned two individuals involved in ethnically motivated atrocities in Sudan. This is part of wider efforts to apply pressure on conflict parties to stop fighting, allow humanitarian access and bring about a political transition as called for by the people of Sudan.

Co-ordination across the sanctions coalition

We co-ordinate with like-minded partners to disrupt, deter and respond to shared threats. We have repeatedly emphasised, alongside our G7 partners, that Russia must pay for the damage it has caused to Ukraine. On 22 October, the Chancellor announced that the UK will provide £2.26 billion in further support to Ukraine, as part of the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loans to Ukraine scheme. This is earmarked for military spending, further bolstering Ukraine's ability to defend itself against Russia's illegal war. The UK's contribution will be repaid using the extraordinary profits generated on immobilised Russian sovereign assets held primarily in the EU.

Tackling Russia's efforts to circumvent our sanctions remains a key strategic UK objective and a shared G7 commitment. Together with our G7 partners, particularly the US and EU, we continue to co-ordinate to tackle circumvention risks across priority countries in central Asia, the middle east, and the Caucasus. I have personally underscored the importance of tackling sanctions circumvention in my recent meetings with the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and

Kazakhstan. Diplomatic outreach at all levels has led to all these priority countries introducing Russia-facing controls on common high priority goods and a reduction in supply to Russia.

One-off engagement however is not enough. My officials, together with their EU and US counterparts, including during joint visits, are engaging with countries of concern and have secured commitments to control the re-export of the most sensitive goods, though we need to keep up the pressure. To underpin our commitment to tackling circumvention, the UK Government have deployed regional sanctions co-ordinators throughout our priority regions to provide leadership and expertise in our global network and to co-ordinate action across like-minded international partners in-country. We have complemented this with capacity-building programmes and technical assistance. The Prime Minister's announcement last week highlights that approach in relation to the Republic of Cyprus as it establishes its new national sanctions implementation unit.

We are also playing a leading role in regional fora. The UK leadership in tackling the shadow fleet has seen our inclusion in the Nordic-Baltic forum alongside Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Sweden. This forum is confronting the risks posed by the shadow fleet, especially in the environmentally sensitive waters of the Baltic sea and the North sea and is exploring new possibilities for common measures against the shadow fleet within the framework of international law.

Strengthening sanctions enforcement across Government

This Government continue to work with industry to maximise compliance with our sanctions, but we are clear that failures to comply should be met with the full force of the law. Punishments include seizures at the UK border and, for the most serious breaches, large fines or criminal prosecution.

A range of Departments have responsibility for the enforcement of UK sanctions, including the Home Office, Department for Business and Trade, Department for Transport and HM Treasury. In October, we introduced new sanctions enforcement powers for the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Transport, including the power to impose civil monetary penalties for breaches of the UK's aircraft, shipping and certain trade sanctions. These powers also introduced new reporting requirements for suspected breaches and give us the option to name and shame sanctions offenders. These powers underpinned the launch of the new Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation.

The creation of OTSI will strengthen the implementation and enforcement of the UK's trade sanctions. OTSI will work in partnership with HMRC in enforcing trade sanctions and its focus will include the movement of goods and services across third country borders to Russia or other sanctioned destinations. These third country powers are an important expansion of our toolkit in tackling sanctions evasion and circumvention.

We are committed to doing what is necessary to clamp down on sanctions offenders and the introduction of additional capacity and powers is starting to pay off. We are seeing this in the increase in reporting of suspected breaches, which we expect will result in further fines and referrals for prosecution.

Since February 2022, HMRC has issued six compound settlements against UK companies that have breached the Russia sanctions regulations for a total of £1,363,129, including one in August 2023 for £1 million and the latest in August 2024 for just over £58,000. On 27 September 2024, the Financial Conduct Authority fined Starling Bank Ltd £28,959,426 for financial crime failings related to its financial sanctions controls and screening. In September 2024, following a proactive investigation, the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation issued a monetary penalty of £15,000 to Integral Concierge Services for breaches of financial sanctions imposed on Russia in response to its illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022. ICSL did not challenge the penalty and paid in full. I want to see many more enforcement actions in the coming months to maximise the deterrent effect of our sanctions and hold people and institutions accountable.

I plan to go further to strengthen the UK's sanctions system, and I have launched a cross-Government review of sanctions enforcement with the support of Ministers from HM Treasury, the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Transport and the Home Office. In parallel, I have been speaking to the leaders of the overseas territories, including at the recent Joint Ministerial Council, where we agreed on the importance of strengthening sanctions implementation and enforcement across the entire British family. We are matching our commitment with action, including providing direct support to enhance sanctions enforcement capability in our overseas territories.

I will use the review to consider where we can go further and deeper to improve our sanctions system. I want us to look at how we can make our sanctions easier to comply with, how we can build our cross-Government capabilities to combat sanctions circumvention and how we can expand and improve our sanctions toolkit. I look forward to substantially enhancing enforcement efforts and reporting the outcomes to Parliament.

[HCWS334]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022: Unexplained Wealth Order Report 2023 to 2024

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today, the unexplained wealth order report for the period 2023 to 2024, has been laid before Parliament. The unexplained wealth order report details the number of unexplained wealth orders made by the High Court in England and Wales during that period, and the number of applications made to that Court by enforcement authorities for such an order.

During this reporting period, two unexplained wealth orders were applied for. One was obtained and the other did not receive a judicial decision during the reporting period. One of the UWOs applied for in the 2022 to 2023 reporting period was also obtained in this reporting period.

Enforcement agencies remain committed to using the unexplained wealth order power where they see it is the best tool available to them. Not all cases merit an unexplained wealth order, and often the range of civil and criminal powers available to them to investigate,

search for, and seize assets, better suit the circumstances of a given case. Large amounts of assets are being recovered. In the financial year 2023 to 2024, £62.9 million was recovered through civil recovery order receipts, the highest amount recovered in the last six years.

Enforcement agencies continue to review whether cases are suitable for a UWO.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office, and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS340]

Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Appointed Person Report 2023 to 2024

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today, the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 appointed person report covering England and Wales for the period 2023 to 2024, has been laid before Parliament. The appointed person is independent of Government and scrutinises the circumstances and manner in which search and seizure powers conferred by the Act are exercised without prior judicial approval and where nothing is seized for more than 48 hours.

I am pleased that we are now able to publish the appointed person's latest report. The report details that search and seizure powers were used in these circumstances on five occasions.

The appointed person has confirmed in the report that he is satisfied that the criteria required for justifying the searches without prior judicial approval were met and that the powers of search were exercised appropriately. The appointed person has made no new recommendations for the period. This would indicate that the powers are being used reasonably and appropriately in accordance with the Act. We will continue to monitor the way that the powers have been used closely.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office, and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS341]

Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Costs Protection Report

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today, the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 costs protection report covering England and Wales, has been laid before Parliament. The report is a statutory requirement under section 215 of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023. The Government are required to review whether costs protection should be introduced for enforcement agencies in civil recovery proceedings under part 5 of POCA and publish a report by the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which the Act was passed.

I am pleased that we are now able to publish the report. The report outlines the engagement exercise that took place to seek consultees views and the options considered for introducing potential changes. The report concludes that the Government see merit in introducing costs protection based on the consultation responses and are making progress to determine whether amendments to legislation should be made.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office, and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS339]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Tackling Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: 2025-26 Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):

We are facing a homelessness crisis across the country, with unprecedented levels of homelessness and a sharp increase in rough sleeping. There are a record 123,100 households living in temporary accommodation, including 159,380 children. The number of people sleeping rough on our streets is rising with almost 4,000 people sleeping rough on a single night in 2023. This did not happen overnight; it is the result of 14 years of neglect. This is the legacy this Government have inherited, and I am determined to address these failures head on, but it will take time to put right and get us back on track to ending homelessness and for good.

We are already tackling the root causes of homelessness. This Government will deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation, and with the Renters Rights' Bill we will abolish section 21 "no fault" evictions, preventing private renters being exploited and discriminated against, and empowering people to challenge unreasonable rent increases.

We are also taking action to support councils to deliver homelessness and rough sleeping services. In the autumn Budget, we announced that funding for homelessness services is increasing next year by £233 million compared to this year, 2024-25. This brings the total spend on homelessness and rough sleeping to nearly £1 billion in 2025-26, a record level of funding.

Today I am setting out how we will use that funding to deliver three important changes as the first steps in our long-term plan to tackle homelessness.

First, we must increase our focus on prevention and stopping households from becoming homeless in the first place. The current system is not working, and local authorities have been unable to invest in preventative interventions. This results in more households entering temporary accommodation, at great cost to the individuals and the council.

I am therefore providing an uplift of £192.9 million to the homelessness prevention grant, bringing total funding for 2025-26 to £633.2 million, the largest investment in this grant since it began. This will be allocated to all local authorities in England based on homelessness pressures. We will require at least 49% of this grant to be spent on activities to prevent and relieve homelessness, including associated staff costs, to help ensure this increase in funding is used to prevent families and single people from reaching crisis point.

Secondly, we must address the growing use of bed-and-breakfast (B&B) and nightly-let accommodation for homeless families. The number of families living in these types of emergency accommodation has nearly doubled in three years, with 4 in 10 homeless families living in B&B or nightly-let accommodation. Not only do these forms of accommodation provide limited stability for families and often lack basic facilities such as proper cooking facilities, they are also among the most expensive for councils. We must address this and ensure that

where homelessness cannot be prevented, temporary accommodation provides safe, decent housing with as much stability for children as possible. I want to see the use of emergency accommodation for homeless families reduce and to eliminate the use of B&Bs for families other than in genuine emergencies.

As a first step to addressing this, my Department will work with 20 local authorities facing the most acute pressures for B&B use for temporary accommodation through a new programme of emergency accommodation reduction pilots, backed by £5 million to test innovative approaches and kick-start new initiatives. My Department's team of homelessness experts will work in partnership with pilot local authorities to identify solutions which work for their local circumstances and share the learning across the country.

Thirdly, we must streamline funding structures, reduce bureaucracy and support councils to do what they do best: deliver services to meet the needs of their local communities. Our rough sleeping and single homelessness programmes, including our new streamlined rough sleeping prevention and recovery grant, will provide up to £280.75 million in funding in 2025-26, allocated to local authorities and their delivery partners across the country to help support them to continue vital services for some of the most vulnerable people in society. Our sector support grants will continue to support the skills and capacity of our valued voluntary sector partners. Our investment in prevention will stop people from rough sleeping in the first place, meaning local authorities will be able to target their rough sleeping resources at those who need help the most.

In addition, 15 local area partnerships across England will continue to be supported through the changing futures programme. We are providing £10 million in 2025-26 to improve support and outcomes for people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

This is only the first step to meeting our commitment to getting the country back on track to ending homelessness. We will continue to work across government to deliver the long-term solutions we need to get us back on track to ending all forms of homelessness, including developing a long-term homelessness strategy, which we will publish next year following the multi-year spending review.

[HCWS336]

Local Government Finance Settlement

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):

Our fiscal inheritance means that there will be tough choices to get us back on the path to recovery. Fixing the foundations of local government will be a long process following the 14 years of decline and instability overseen by the previous Government. But our programme of reorganisation and reform will lead to more efficient structures; will mean funding is sent to where it is needed the most; investment focusses on crisis prevention, rather than an expensive crisis response; and councils once again have the certainty and flexibility they need to focus on their priorities. Together, we will fix the foundations for everyone.

We are under no illusion about the scale of this task. The demand for, and cost of, services has increased significantly. The persistent failure of the previous Government to do the right thing, underlined by their

decision to drop the long-overdue fair funding review, compounded by spiralling inflation and a failure to grow our economy, has left councils of all stripes in crisis. Our fiscal inheritance means that there is no easy route to solving this.

This 2025-26 local government finance settlement and our programme of reform for the future mark the first steps towards stabilising and rebuilding the financial sustainability of local government. We will take a more efficient approach to Government grant funding, including a one-off recovery grant to get councils back on their feet. And, in 2026-27, when we move to the first multi-year settlement for local government in a decade, we will ensure that grant funding goes to where it is needed the most: delivering better services by investing in prevention, and improving value for taxpayers' money. Our consultation on local authority funding reform sets us on this path to recovery.

More secure finances must go hand in hand with higher standards and stronger financial decision making, both of which are impeded by the broken local audit system that we have inherited in England. Today we launched a strategy to streamline and simplify the local audit system through the establishment of a new and proportionate local audit office—combining the functions of the existing system—and ensuring that the core underpinnings are fit for purpose. We will embed transparency, restore our public financial early warning system, and ensure that every council is equipped to deliver the best value for council tax payers and business ratepayers. We will strengthen the local government standards system to support councils to deliver the high standards that they strive for. We welcome views on proposals to better support local government to uphold the highest standards of conduct and sanction misconduct whenever and wherever it occurs as part of our standards consultation. These steps are a crucial part of our plans for a stronger local government, as set out in the “English Devolution White Paper” this week.

Together, these reforms will begin to stabilise local government finances and ensure that all councils are fit, legal and decent, so they can better deliver for their residents. We will build on the significant steps we are already taking, laying the groundwork for children's social care reform and increasing funding for homelessness and SEND services next year. We are giving councils more say over how they run local bus services, guaranteeing the future of vital reforms to our waste and recycling system, filling potholes, and bringing planning fees up to cost recovery. The hard work has already begun, and today we set out our detailed funding proposals for 2025-26 and our plan for the years ahead.

Provisional local government finance settlement 2025-26

The autumn Budget announced over £4 billion in additional funding for local government services, of which £1.3 billion would go through the 2025-26 local government finance settlement. We recognise the challenges that local authorities are facing as demand increases for critical services. Today we are announcing over £700 million of additional grant, which increases the total additional grant funding that will be made available to local councils in England through the settlement to over £2 billion. The over £700 million increase in funding announced today includes a £200 million increase to the social care grant, taking the grant's total increase from 2024-25 to

£880 million. It also includes £515 million of further funding, which will be made available at the final settlement to support councils with the increase in employer national insurance contributions.

The provisional settlement for 2025-26 therefore makes available £69 billion for local government, which is a 6% cash-terms increase and a 3.5% real-terms increase in councils' core spending power on 2024-25. The final settlement will increase further, to incorporate the £515 million of funding announced for national insurance contributions.

Grant decisions for 2025-26

The proposals we announced on 28 November—a new £600 million recovery grant, a new children's social care prevention grant, additional funding for social care, and repurposing the existing rural services delivery grant and the services grant—lay the foundations for fundamental reform by allocating new funding through improved formulas in 2025-26 and investing in priority services.

Social care

We will make available up to £3.7 billion extra funding for social care authorities through the settlement next year. In total, local government will receive over £10 billion in grant funding for social care, including: £1.05 billion in the market sustainability and improvement fund; £2.6 billion via the local authority better care grant; and £5.9 billion via the social care grant.

We can also today confirm that the new children's social care prevention grant will be uplifted at the final settlement to £263 million. Taken together with the new children and families grant, the Government are doubling settlement investment in preventative services within children's social care, to over half a billion in 2025-26, laying the groundwork for fundamental reform of children's social care next year.

National insurance contributions (NICs)

In recognition of the decision to increase employer NICs, we can today confirm that the Government will provide £515 million to English local councils, including mayoral combined authorities and fire and rescue authorities, allocated based on an assessment of each council's share of relevant net service expenditure. We have published a methodology note today to explain how this funding will be distributed across local authorities. Individual allocations will be published at the final settlement early next year.

Council tax

It is for local authorities to decide at what level they set their council tax. However, the Government are committed to keeping taxes on working people as low as possible. This settlement maintains the previous Government's policy—as set out in the March 2024 Office for Budget Responsibility forecast—of setting a 5% council tax referendum principle, made up of a 3% core principle and the 2% principle for the adult social care precept. Voters will have the final say over excessive increases above this threshold.

The Government are committed to improving the presentation and transparency of council tax bills and will therefore require local authorities to adjust the presentation of the adult social care precept on council tax bills from 2025-26. This will simplify bills and provide clarity on council tax levels set by the local authorities. The Government will publish a consultation

in 2025 to consider other options to improve transparency of council tax billing and support taxpayers to manage their household finances with a default option to pay over 12 months, as with most other household bills.

Requests for exceptional financial support

The Government have a framework to support councils in financial difficulty. This will be a collaborative and supportive process, and we have already confirmed that we will not replicate previous conditions that made borrowing more expensive. Similar to the approach taken by the previous Government, we will consider requests for bespoke referendum principles from councils seeking exceptional financial support. But this Government will put taxpayers and the impact on working people at the forefront of our decisions. Any requests from councils will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and the Government expect any additional increases to be agreed only in exceptional circumstances, not as a punishment where councils have failed. We will look carefully at councils' specific circumstances—for example, their existing levels of council tax relative to the average and the strength of plans to protect vulnerable people. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government continues to offer any council a discussion, in confidence, about its ability to manage its budget.

Levy account

Every authority in England will receive a share of the accumulated surplus currently held in the business rates levy account. We can confirm that £100 million will be returned to the sector on a one-off basis, distributed in line with relevant legislation. Individual allocations of this funding will be published at the final settlement early next year.

Fixing the foundations: consultation on local authority funding reform

From 2026-27, the Government will fundamentally improve the way we fund councils, based on a new assessment of need and resources. These reforms will build on the framework set out in the previous Government's abandoned review of relative needs and resources (originally, the fair funding review).

We will reset the business rates retention system, as was intended when the previous Government established the system. We will move gradually towards an updated system and will invite views on possible transitional arrangements to determine how local authorities reach their new funding allocations. Some local authorities work collaboratively with mayoral combined authorities in their area to ensure that extra business rates income is directed to local growth priorities across the wider region. In recognition of this, and as part of the Government's reform of funding for local government, we will consider how the business rates retention system could better and more consistently support strategic authorities to drive growth. The Government will also reduce the number of funding pots to give councils more flexibility to focus on priority outcomes agreed with Government.

Today's consultation is on objectives and principles. The consultation will give councils, sector organisations and the public the opportunity to contribute to the Government's proposals. We will consider all representations to develop our understanding of the drivers of need, including the impact of rurality. This reform is about

spending taxpayers' money as efficiently as possible, but it is also about the impact it will have on real people's lives and local authorities' ability to deliver for their citizens.

Conclusion

The consultation on the provisional local government finance settlement 2025-26 will be open for four weeks, closing on 15 January 2025. The consultation on local authority funding reform will be open for eight weeks, closing 12 February 2025. We welcome views from the sector and beyond on each of these consultations.

This written ministerial statement covers England only.
[HCWS342]

JUSTICE

Youth Justice Board Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I am pleased to announce the review of the Youth Justice Board. This review is being conducted as part of the public bodies review programme, which aims to ensure that public bodies are operating effectively, and that their functions remain useful and necessary.

An efficient and effective youth justice system is essential for preventing crime and keeping communities safe. In line with our safer streets mission, it is vital that we have robust systems in place to stop young people being drawn into crime. Equally, we must support children who do find themselves in contact with the youth justice system to ensure they do not enter a cycle of crime which continues into adulthood.

The youth justice system is a complex one, requiring collaboration between many Departments, agencies and public and voluntary services. While there is much to celebrate, including a significant reduction in the number of children in custody in the last decade, it is right that we regularly review how our structures, system and agencies operate to ensure they are as effective and efficient as possible.

The YJB was set up to play a critical role in delivering positive outcomes for children in contact with the criminal justice system, and to provide oversight, assurance and technical expertise around the operation of the youth justice system. However, much time has passed since the last Cabinet Office review of the YJB in 2013. Since then, the youth justice landscape, and YJB itself, have changed significantly.

With that in mind, this review is an opportunity to consider whether the YJB's statutory functions remain useful and necessary, where these functions should sit, and whether the YJB's current delivery model remains appropriate. This review will also be key to assessing how the YJB and Department should work together to deliver ministerial priorities and deliver value for money.

This review will ensure that our current arrangements actively support the essential work undertaken by youth justice services and support the effective delivery of the Department's priorities for youth justice and reducing reoffending.

I have appointed Steve Crocker, former president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services, to lead on the review. He is independent from the Ministry

of Justice and will provide objective analysis of the YJB and the Department. Steve Crocker will also lead a period of stakeholder engagement across England and Wales.

I will make a further announcement on completion of the review in spring 2025. Following this, I will set out the Government's response.

[HCWS332]

TRANSPORT

Practical Driving Test Waiting Times

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I am pleased to announce today that this Government are taking decisive steps to address long waiting times for car practical driving tests.

A driving licence is a passport to employment, opportunities and better living standards for hundreds of thousands of people each year.

Across the country, waiting times for a car practical driving test are at 13 weeks in Wales, over 15 weeks in Scotland, and nearly 21 weeks in England. These figures highlight a system under strain.

The proportion of 17 to 20-year-olds with a full driving licence dropped from 35% in 2019 to 29% in 2023. This matters, because one in six jobs require a driving licence. The top occupations for young drivers include roles critical to our public services and economic growth: healthcare workers, construction trades and transport workers.

Learner drivers should be able to take a test when they are ready to pass. Yet thousands have had to wait many months for a test, with some being exploited by businesses taking advantage of long waiting times or having to travel hundreds of miles in the process.

Between April 2023 and March 2024, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency provided over 2 million car driving tests, and it has over half a million driving tests booked in the next 24 weeks.

In response to increased demand, the DVSA created an extra 145,000 test slots between October 2023 and March 2024 by redeploying eligible managers and administrative staff to conduct tests. The DVSA has also reviewed its recruitment process and increased its effort to recruit and train driving examiners. But the case for further action is undeniable.

So today, I am setting out the robust plan I have asked the DVSA to deliver to tackle this issue head-on, while it helps to keep Britain moving safely and sustainably.

First, we will recruit and train 450 driving examiners. This will aim to significantly increase the workforce and ensure that examiners are available in high-demand areas, reducing waiting times for learners across the country.

Secondly, we will increase the notice period for changing or cancelling a test without losing the fee from three to 10 working days. This will minimise last-minute disruptions and ensure that cancelled slots can be reallocated to those ready to take their test.

Thirdly, we will review and improve the rules around booking tests, including measures to ban the resale of driving test appointments. This will ensure fairer access to test slots and stop the profiteering that disadvantages learners.

Fourthly, we will strengthen terms and conditions for driver training businesses managing test bookings. This will improve the efficiency of the booking system, making it harder for those looking to exploit learner drivers to secure test dates.

Fifthly, we will consult on introducing longer waiting times to rebook a test for candidates who fail by making multiple serious or dangerous faults, abuse driving examiners or fail to attend their test, and we will consider a penalty fee for those who fail to attend. This will discourage bad behaviour and ensure that examiners' time is respected.

Sixthly, we will explore allowing learner drivers to book tests further in advance than the current 24-week limit. This will give learners more certainty in planning their preparation and reduce the stress of finding available slots.

Finally, we will expand the successful "Ready to Pass?" campaign to help learners throughout the whole process of learning to drive. This will increase the likelihood of learners passing their test the first time, reducing overall demand on the system.

These measures are practical, targeted, and designed to address the issues facing the driving test system. But I have to be clear: there is no quick fix to the current situation. It will take time for us to tackle the root causes of this issue, fix the broken system this Government inherited and to build a robust system for the future.

I am also pleased to announce today the publication of the DVSA's 2024 to 2025 business plan.

This plan sets out the main business priorities the agency will deliver, including measures on the delivery of the car practical driving test that underpin the measures I have just announced, as well as the key performance indicators by which the DVSA's performance will be assessed.

This plan allows service users and members of the public to understand the DVSA's plans for delivering its services and managing its finances.

The business plan will be available electronically on gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS343]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 18 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	302	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—continued	
Engagements	302	Future Earnings: Impact of Socioeconomic Disadvantage	293
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	293	Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls	296
Banning Conversion Practices	297	Topical Questions	301
Discrimination Against Ethnic Minorities	299		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 18 December 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	35WS	HOME DEPARTMENT—continued	
Free Trade Agreement with the Gulf		Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Costs Protection Report	44WS
Co-operation Council: Negotiations Update	35WS	Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Appointed Person Report 2023 to 2024	44WS
DEFENCE	36WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	45WS
Afghan Resettlement	36WS	Local Government Finance Settlement	46WS
Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2024	38WS	Tackling Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: 2025-26 Funding	45WS
EDUCATION	38WS	JUSTICE	50WS
Dedicated Schools Grant Allocations 2025-26	38WS	Youth Justice Board Review	50WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	39WS	TRANSPORT	51WS
UK Sanctions Regime	39WS	Practical Driving Test Waiting Times	51WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	43WS		
Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022: Unexplained Wealth Order Report 2023 to 2024	43WS		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 25 December 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 18 December 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 293] [see index inside back page]

Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

British Indian Ocean Territory: Sovereignty [Col. 313]

Answer to urgent question—(Stephen Doughty)

Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement [Col. 324]

Statement—(Jim McMahon)

Winter Preparedness [Col. 344]

Statement—(Karin Smyth)

Copyright and Artificial Intelligence [Col. 360]

Statement—(Chris Bryant)

Post Office Redress and Funding [Col. 373]

Statement—(Gareth Thomas)

Public Procurement (British Goods and Services) [Col. 384]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Office of the Whistleblower [Col. 386]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Gareth Snell)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill [Lords] [Col. 389]

Considered in Committee; not amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill [Col. 392]

Considered in Committee; not amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [Lords] [Col. 408]

As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Internet Service Providers and Suicide-related Content [Col. 421]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Employment Rights: Terminal Illness [Col. 111WH]
Gatwick Airspace Modernisation Review [Col. 132WH]
BBC: Funding [Col. 140WH]
Immigration and Nationality Statistics [Col. 163WH]
Creative Arts Education [Col. 172WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 35WS]
