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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 2 September 2024

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

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 Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent
 Baroness Twycross §
 Baroness Blake of Leeds

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

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

SECOND YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 753

SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 2 September 2024

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Birmingham City Council: Public Services

1. **Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of her Department's statutory intervention at Birmingham City Council on the adequacy of public services provided by that council. [R] [900270]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): It is a privilege to be appointed as Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State, and to answer questions from hon. Members on the important issues I now have responsibility for at such a challenging time for our communities.

Councils across the country, including those under best value intervention, are feeling the strain after a decade of financial mismanagement by the previous Administration. I am determined to work constructively

with both the council and the commissioners to reset our relationship with Birmingham and support its recovery to ensure that local public services are fit for purpose.

Laurence Turner: I recognise that the Secretary of State has inherited a very difficult situation. Under the Conservatives, Birmingham lost 40p in the pound and 60% of local authority jobs were lost—some of the sharpest cuts in the country. Our city is now facing cuts of more than 50% to some public service budgets, but new information has come to light and it is clear that part of the basis for the original intervention under her Conservative predecessor was wrong. Can—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is meant to be a question; you cannot make a speech. I think you need an Adjournment debate to finish this one off.

Angela Rayner: First, let me welcome my hon. Friend to his place. He is right to highlight the cuts that Birmingham faced under the Tories. Unlike previous Ministers, we have no interest in using Birmingham and its people as a political football. We cannot avoid the need to make difficult decisions, but I want to work with the council leadership, as well as the commissioners, and of course I am open to any representations they want to make.

High Streets Regeneration

2. **Naushabah Khan** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to help regenerate high streets. [900271]

5. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to help regenerate high streets. [900274]

12. **Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to help regenerate high streets. [900281]

14. **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to help regenerate high streets. [900283]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): We are committed to supporting the businesses and communities that make our high streets flourish. We are funding new partnership models with high street accelerators, implementing high street rental auctions, and introducing a strong new right to buy for community assets to empower local communities to rejuvenate our high streets and address the blight of vacant premises.

Naushabah Khan: High streets up and down the country are the backbone of our communities, but over the years have been facing decline. For example, Gillingham High Street in my constituency, where only yesterday we launched our Love Gillingham campaign and initiative, faces numerous challenges. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss some of those challenges, as well as the possibility of a compulsory register of properties on high streets, so that councils can easily engage with owners to find new uses for them when they fall vacant?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I totally agree on the important role that healthy and vibrant high streets play for communities. Initiatives such as Love Gillingham are vital in bringing local people together to create high streets that work for them. Ensuring that local authorities and the communities they serve have the tools they need to support the high street is a priority. With regards to ownership, HM Land Registry is searchable for a variety of information, but I welcome the chance to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that, and perhaps Love Gillingham as well.

Patrick Hurley: The regeneration and refurbishment of town centres such as mine is being structurally disincentivised by the tax regime, which gives preferential treatment to new builds on out-of-town retail parks, instead of renovating our much-loved historic high streets. Southport's town centre is beautiful, but has definitely seen better days. Just this weekend, our much-loved independent bookshop, Broadhurst, was closed down after over 100 years of trading. Given the dire economic circumstances we inherited from the former Government, what can the Minister do to incentivise the private sector to invest in our town centres and high streets, bringing life back to them?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that question. With your forbearance, Mr Speaker, may I say, before I answer, that I and my ministerial colleagues know my hon. Friend's community has been through a dreadful last few weeks and that our support is with them? I know he will come forward with other ways in which we can help. We went through something similar in Nottingham and I know how dreadful it is for the community. We are here to help.

On the tax regime, we are committed to a fairer business rate system. In our manifesto, we pledged to level the playing field between the high street and online giants, as well as to incentivise investment, tackle empty properties and support entrepreneurship. Listening to business and communities, we will continue to consider how we can go further to support high streets, while new powers such as rental auctions and the right to buy community assets empower those communities to address decline.

Lauren Edwards: The Government are rightly focused on bringing empty properties back into use as part of our commitment to regenerate high streets, but encouraging footfall by supporting local communities to hold events in our town centres is another way we can bring life back to our high streets and support local businesses. That is certainly the approach I took when I was the cabinet member on Medway Council in charge of economic regeneration, using the UK shared prosperity fund. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss learnings from that experience and what an improved new fund could look like under this Government?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind invitation: I am keen to understand more about the Medway experience. I know that the UK shared prosperity fund has been used very effectively throughout the country, and that there is a great deal of interest in its future. Decisions on funding beyond March 2025 are a matter for the Budget, but in the meantime I am keen to talk to my hon. Friend about her experience and the lessons that have been learnt.

Lee Pitcher: My constituency is full of great high streets. Bawtry was buzzing when I visited it yesterday for the car show, and I have also recently visited Parkin Butchers and Tyto Law Solicitors in Crowle. These people take huge pride in the services and products that they offer, but just down the road shop premises are vacant and, in some instances, have been vacant for months, if not years. How do the Government intend to stop the buying up of such outlets and deal with the lack of any obvious urgency, or indeed potential, in respect of their ever being reopened?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that question. We have all been through a major political event or two this year. As is customary, we have been knocking on doors, and we know how frustrated people all over the country feel about the vacancies on their local high streets which are bringing down their areas. We have to rebalance this. High street rental auctions, which I have already mentioned, will give councils powers to require landlords to bring vacant commercial properties back into use for their original purpose so that we no longer see all those boarded-up units described by my hon. Friend, with people just sitting on them without providing any social purpose.

Mr Speaker: I call Mel Stride. Sorry; he is not here.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Our high streets are undoubtedly changing. Conservative-led Walsall Council is working hard to secure positive change in areas such as Brownhills and the regeneration of Ravenscourt, and we have a new civic square. What additional resources will the Minister make available to councils? The regeneration of our high streets, both residential and commercial, is an excellent way of helping to protect green-belt land by also regenerating important town centres.

Alex Norris: The right hon. Lady is exactly right. The future of the high street is not about returning to how things were. There must be a place for leisure, a place, of course, for retail and a place for residential properties, and councils of all political persuasions throughout the country are trying to find that perfect alchemy. We have

inherited an extremely difficult funding situation, but we are working our way through it, and future funding decisions will be made in the Budget on 30 October.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am not sure that Mel would be all that flattered, actually!

Banking facilities are important to our high street traders. Bedale, among other towns, has no banks, and does not even have a working ATM. Given that banks have saved about £3 billion a year by closing branches, what is the Minister doing with his counterpart in the Treasury to ensure that we have proper banking facilities in towns such as Bedale?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman knows whereof he speaks. This is another question that we are addressing up and down the country. We know that banking facilities bring people into towns and villages, and give rise to a virtuous circle. We have committed ourselves to providing 350 new banking hubs and, as the hon. Gentleman suggested, we are working with Treasury colleagues on their delivery.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The outdated business rates system has left some market towns, such as Wincanton in my constituency, with empty premises on the high streets, damaging communities' sense of pride and preventing councils from benefiting on the back of flourishing town centres. Will the Minister work with his Treasury colleagues to boost small businesses and regenerate high streets by reforming damaging business rates?

Alex Norris: That is a commitment that we made at the previous election, and we intend to deliver on it.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her recent reappointment, and also on her dancing skills.

The stronger towns fund has been extremely successful in Hereford, and the question has arisen as to whether any of the funds that may be within that scheme and have not been used elsewhere could be redeployed. May I invite the Secretary of State and her team to consider whether that might be possible and, potentially, put in a bid? That would pour important new life into a scheme that is already going incredibly well.

Alex Norris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We want to see greater flexibility, and we want to see more integrated, single-settlement funding pots so that local communities have that flexibility. We are dealing with a transition from the previous model that we inherited, and it will take time to re-engineer from one to the other. Initial spending decisions will be a matter for 30 October but, in principle, I understand exactly what he is saying and the value that communities would take from that.

Islamophobia

3. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle Islamophobia. [900272]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): Islamophobia is a scourge on our society that must be rooted out, and I

thank my hon. Friend for his work on this issue. Much of last month's violent disorder was Islamophobic, and the targeting of Muslims shows that we need to go further and faster in tackling this vile hatred, which was fuelled by fake news. We have now provided greater security and rapid support for Muslim communities, and our Faith Minister in the other place, Lord Khan, is actively considering further steps to crack down on anti-Muslim hatred, monitor Islamophobia and engage the community effectively.

Afzal Khan: My right hon. Friend will know the fear and distress that the civil disorder this summer caused to many of my constituents and to Muslim communities across the country who were targeted by violent extremists. I am sure that she will join me in making it clear that the vast majority of people in our country—of all faiths and backgrounds—wish only to live together peacefully and utterly reject those who stir up division. What engagement have Ministers undertaken with Muslim communities since those events, and what are they doing to give reassurance for the future?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to underline that the vast majority of people in this country—of all faiths and backgrounds—want only to live together peacefully, and my Department is at the heart of the Government's work to restore order and unity in all our communities following the appalling disturbances. While we continue to make sure that criminals are brought to swift justice, the vital work to strengthen the bond between the Government and communities, including our Muslim communities and those of many other faiths and backgrounds, is central to this Government's mission to bring the whole country together.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Could the Secretary of State please explain to me and the House what the Government's definition of Islamophobia actually is?

Angela Rayner: I say to the hon. Member that a new definition must be given careful consideration so that it comprehensively reflects multiple perspectives and considers the potential implications for different communities. We are actively considering our approach to Islamophobia, including definitions, and we will provide further updates in due course.

Community Cohesion

4. **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help promote community cohesion. [900273]

7. **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help promote community cohesion. [900276]

11. **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help promote community cohesion. [900280]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): Last month's appalling violence exposed deep-rooted weaknesses in our society. Division and decline, combined with rising Islamophobia

and racism, contributed to the vile scenes of hatred. I am determined that we should now support the recovery of towns and cities affected, and investment in community cohesion. That has started with a comprehensive support offer for Southport, and I can confirm that I will now lead cross-Government efforts on this issue. I will update the House on our plans in due course.

Alex Baker: Whatever our beliefs, faith leaders and faith groups can play an important role in bringing us all together. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in commending the many faith leaders I have met across Aldershot and Farnborough who are working to promote tolerance and understanding across our community? Can she outline what her Department is doing to encourage those community leaders, whose work reminds us that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I was proud to serve alongside my good friend Jo Cox in this House, and her words about our common humanity and what unites us ring as true as ever. I have met many local communities, businesses and other groups affected by the acts of deplorable violence that we have seen across the country in recent weeks, including in places such as Stoke-on-Trent and Rotherham. I heard powerful stories from those who experienced appalling violence, but I also heard about how those communities came together to defend their streets and were united against hatred and thuggery. I know that my hon. Friend has been a leader in her own community, and we Ministers will support her and her constituents in the spirit that she has set out.

Noah Law: Our community cohesion in Cornwall is being undermined by the housing crisis, with many locals priced out or even facing homelessness. This matter requires urgent attention, and I am therefore pleased that this Government have placed building new homes at the top of our legislative agenda. Can the Deputy Prime Minister ensure that we are building the right kinds of homes in Cornwall—namely, social homes?

Angela Rayner: Absolutely, and my hon. Friend is right. We are strengthening housing targets and acting to ensure that local plans are ambitious enough to support this Government's commitment to 1.5 million homes in this Parliament, including social homes. Under our new proposals, assessed housing need across Cornwall would increase by around 65%, demonstrating our commitment to approving the supply of new homes that his constituents desperately need.

Jacob Collier: Following the horrific Islamophobic attacks experienced by Muslim communities around the country, the Princess Street mosque in Burton-upon-Trent opened its doors to the wider community so that everyone could learn more about Islam and see their place of worship. This was a way to challenge misinformation and promote mutual understanding. Does the Deputy Prime Minister welcome this as an example of how communities can help bring people together?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely welcome it, and I commend the actions such as those taken by the Burton-upon-Trent mosque. I agree with my hon. Friend that building

understanding among those from different backgrounds is vital to fostering strong communities. This Government are committed to working with communities around the UK to build a culture of cohesion, trust and mutual respect and we will outline further actions in due course.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): Could I ask the Secretary of State whether she agrees, given the commitment to build 1.5 million new homes, that community cohesion comes from a planning system where community infrastructure is front-loaded in development, rather than people having to live 10 years on a new build estate without anywhere to come together to celebrate as a community?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree that it is important that infrastructure is built around our 1.5 million homes target. That is why we set out the proposals in the consultation on the national planning policy framework to ensure that people see the homes they desperately need, the right homes that they need and the vital infrastructure around that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for her answers. Sometimes it is easy to dwell upon the negativity, but there are positives as well. There were positives in my constituency when two people decided to burn down the mosque, because they were caught by the police and they will hopefully be imprisoned, and because the community came together, which is the issue I want to put over. Across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there are many people who want to live together. All the people in the Baptist church that I go to in Newtownards were praying for those people in that church, and that is the Ards and the Strangford that I know. Sometimes we need to put over the good things as well.

Angela Rayner: It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Member, and he is absolutely right. When I was visiting those communities, I saw them coming together. I saw the way in which they worked well and the way in which everybody looked out for each other. It reminded me of why I am in this place and why I do what I do for the great British people and what they do.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In Westmorland, we have a story that has underpinned cohesion for decades. That is the true story of the Windermere children. In August 1945, almost half the children who survived the Nazi death camps were rehabilitated on the banks of Windermere at Troutbeck Bridge. I wonder if the Deputy Prime Minister would agree to meet me, because a group of us, including members of the '45 Aid Society and the local school, the Lakes school, want to build a lasting memorial at Troutbeck Bridge, on the site where the children were housed, while rebuilding the school that was built on that site. Will she carry on the cross-party work that we had before the election, and meet me and others from that community to help make that a reality?

Angela Rayner: I congratulate the hon. Member on his work in this area. Either myself or one of my Ministers will be happy to meet him.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Kemi Badenoch.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Can the right hon. Lady give me her assessment of the Khan review into social cohesion?

Angela Rayner: The Khan review into social cohesion is one element of what we need to do to get back to addressing the issues of community cohesion, as opposed to the divisiveness of the way in which the previous Government looked at community cohesion. What I would like to see, instead of the language and tone we have seen from Members on the right hon. Member's Benches, is the tone that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) took around how we can bring communities together and work together to ensure that people can respect people's differences and celebrate what makes us British, and that is that we all have different places.

Mrs Badenoch: The right hon. Lady has not read the Khan review, as she would not have given that answer if she had.

The review talks about the 2021 incident at Batley grammar school, where a teacher was failed by local police and the local council and had to go into hiding. Given the fears about the rise in Islamist sectarianism in communities such as West Yorkshire, what are the right hon. Lady's plans, especially as she has not read the review, to ensure that such incidents do not happen again?

Angela Rayner: I have read the review. Maybe the right hon. Lady was busy launching her leadership campaign earlier today.

The point I am making is that under the previous Administration there was not an element of community cohesion but constant division and stoking of division. I tried to bring our education system together when I was shadow Education Secretary. Across education, across my Department and across our Government I would like to see how we can celebrate our differences and bring communities together. If the right hon. Lady is successful in her bid to become Leader of the Opposition, I hope she will work with us on that endeavour.

New Build Homes: Construction Standards

6. **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help improve standards of construction in new build homes. [900275]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): The Building Safety Act 2022 requires building safety and building standards to be kept under review. Building regulations can then be updated, as needed. Building regulations apply to building works, including when a building is designed, constructed or subjected to a major redesign, and they are supported by approved documents.

Ben Goldsborough: Residents in both Hethersett and Loddon have fallen victim to new homes being built to poor standards, shattering their dreams of home ownership from day one. Does my hon. Friend agree that on our ambition to deliver 1.5 million new homes, they must be 1.5 million decently built new homes?

Rushanara Ali: As my hon. Friend says, this Government are committed to delivering 1.5 million quality homes over this Parliament to ensure that people have access to high-quality housing. New build homebuyers must feel confident that their new home is safe, and this Government are committed to improving redress for homebuyers when things go wrong. We are considering the recommendations in the Competition and Markets Authority's recent market study on house building, and will publish our response in due course.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The hon. Lady will be well aware of the recent fires in east London and the fact that many high-rise buildings in this country are still not deemed safe because developers are refusing to do what they should. What action will she take to force developers to make buildings safe for residents?

Rushanara Ali: I know the hon. Gentleman did a great deal of work on this agenda in the last Parliament. This week, more than seven years after the Grenfell tragedy, the community will receive the public inquiry's final report, and I hope its findings will help to provide the truth that the bereaved and survivors deserve. The Dagenham fire, to which the hon. Gentleman refers, must have had a traumatic impact on those people, as well as on the affected residents.

Today we have published a written ministerial statement setting out our actions in relation to the outstanding phase 1 recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry, and further work is under way to ensure that we can accelerate the work to make buildings safe. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on this agenda.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Hundreds of my constituents live in leasehold properties with problems. I should declare for the register that I live in a leasehold property, although my developer funded the full cost of cladding removal. There is still a very long wait for those who are not yet in the queue, and one brake on delivery is the lack of skilled people in the construction industry. What work is my hon. Friend doing with other Departments to make sure that we develop the skills we need? Seven years after Grenfell, we still see some buildings where work has not started, so we do need to put our foot on the accelerator.

Rushanara Ali: This is a very important area and we are absolutely committed to increasing the skills and competence within the sector. The industry has actively responded to Dame Judith Hackitt's challenge, but there remains significant work to be done to upskill industry members and prepare for the new regime. The Department and the Building Safety Regulator will support industry as they identify skills and capacity gaps, provide relevant training and set up accredited competence schemes. I look forward to working with colleagues who will all have an interest in speeding up remediation work and improving capacity in the sector.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Given the Government's ambitious house building plans, the energy crisis and the climate crisis, will the Minister bring forward legislation in the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill to ensure all new houses have solar panels on their roofs as standard, so they can generate

their own power, and net zero building standards are brought forward as soon as possible, so that homes are well insulated, warm and cheap to heat?

Rushanara Ali: The Government have set out very ambitious plans on home building and on green issues. The future home building programme will address those issues; we look forward to working with colleagues on the issue.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The last Government consulted at very great length about bringing accessibility standards for all new homes up to M4(2) level. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee recommended that be done immediately, but the response we got was that more consultation was needed. Will the Minister assure us that the issue will now be dealt with as a matter of urgency, so that all new homes are more accessible for people with disabilities? It is a really important issue that seems to have been forgotten about.

Rushanara Ali: Today, in our written ministerial statement, we have set out a number of proposals. The points my hon. Friend makes about accessibility are extremely important. We will do further work, building on the statement published today. I look forward to working with him to address the issue.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): People in North Norfolk desperately want new homes for local people to be built. They know those homes need to be good-quality and support active lifestyles, but currently local councils lack the tougher powers they need to make those demands. Will the Minister tell me what she plans to do to give planners, such as those at North Norfolk district council, greater powers to demand more from developers?

Rushanara Ali: The national planning framework will set out further how we intend to provide key support to local authorities and to work closely with local authorities to ensure the issue is addressed.

Leasehold Reform

8. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [900277]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government are committed to finally bringing the feudal leasehold system to an end. To do so, we will implement the provisions of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, enact the remaining Law Commission recommendations relating to enfranchisement and the right to manage, take steps to make commonhold the default tenure for new flats, and tackle unaffordable and unregulated ground rent charges. As set out in the King's Speech, draft legislation will be published in due course.

Dr Gardner: Many of my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South have contacted me in the past few weeks, including those from Blythe Bridge, telling me how the archaic fleecehold system has left them at the mercy of poor management agents. They have been tricked into purchasing

homes that are not covered by right to manage in the same way as flats, with service charges more than doubling, and the developers and managing agents reneging on promises to upkeep and, in some cases, even build the necessary infrastructure on their development. Does the Government have plans to hold those managing agents and developers to account, perhaps with legal requirements of provision or a licensing scheme?

Matthew Pennycook: The distinct set of problems faced by residential freeholders that my hon. Friend describes are well known and understood. As we set out in our manifesto, the Government are committed to bringing the injustice of fleecehold private housing estates and unfair maintenance costs to an end. We intend to consult publicly on the best way to achieve that. In the interim, we will move to implement the new protections against unfair charges that were contained in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Minister for expressing the wish of many of us to see this awful system disposed of. Will he draw his colleagues' attention to the fact that people like me, living in a leasehold block, have the experience of winning a first tier tribunal hearing against a freeholder, but still awaiting the refunding of the sums of money that were wrongly taken from us in the first place? The freeholder simply ignores everything and carries on as if nothing had happened.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He draws attention to one of the many failings of the feudal leasehold system, which is precisely why we finally intend to end it by the end of this Parliament.

Social Housing Supply

9. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of social housing. [900278]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Government are committed to delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation. In the 59 days that we have been in office we have already proposed changes to the national planning policy framework to support that objective and confirmed a range of new flexibilities to help councils and housing associations make a greater contribution to affordable housing supply.

Chris Vince: In their dying days, the previous Government consulted on changes to the way that social housing is allocated. Those proposals were described by the chief executive of Shelter as "unnecessary, unenforceable and unjust". The chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Housing warned that they would force many people into homelessness. Can my hon. Friend confirm that this Government will not be taking forward those damaging proposals?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is correct. The Government have today published a formal response to that consultation, setting out precisely why we will not

be taking those proposals forward. It is important that we allocate social housing fairly and efficiently. The proposals put forward by the previous Government were deeply flawed. As respondents to the consultation made clear, they would not only fail to improve how social housing is allocated, but cost taxpayers a fortune, swell the number of people in expensive temporary accommodation and increase the risk of harm to the public. The only way to meet the demand for genuinely affordable social rented homes is to build more of them, which is precisely what we intend to do.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Obviously, social housing is important, and we want to see it in the right places across the country. I cannot understand why this Government are now proposing to reduce the number of new homes in London by 17,000 a year and in areas all around London—including counties such as Essex—by 18,000 a year. Surely one of the most important things that we need to do is increase that supply of social housing, particularly in London.

Matthew Pennycook: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the changes to the national planning policy framework rather than to social housing specifically. We have made those changes proposed to the standard method. They will give London a realistic, but achievable, new target. *[Interruption.]* Let me explain why. The way that the previous Government applied the urban uplift unfairly to London gave it an unrealistic, fantastical target that it could not meet. We will ensure that we are pushing the mayor on a realistic, but achievable one.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): We share the ambition of seeing a big increase in the supply of housing, and of social housing in particular. Given that there are around 1.4 million new homes with planning consent already granted in this country, what process led the Government to prioritising the removal of green-belt protections rather than building the homes for which our councils have already given consent?

Matthew Pennycook: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that we are doing both. We are making changes to the national planning policy framework to encourage the release of the right kind of lower-quality grey belt land within the green belt, and we are taking action to ensure that those sites across the country that have received consent but which are stalled or are not being built at the pace required, are moved along with additional support from the centre.

David Simmonds: The previous Government made new measures available to local authorities to encourage borrowing against the housing revenue account to enable the creation of new council housing. What measures do the Government have in mind to increase the take-up of this approach by our local authorities?

Matthew Pennycook: We are committed to working with councils, including with the signatories of the recent report on securing the future of council housing, to address the many challenges they are facing, including in connection with the housing revenue account headroom as many of them are feeling lots of pressure on that

front. As a first step, we have given councils more flexibility to increase the delivery of council homes using right-to-buy receipts, and allocated an additional £450 million to councils to secure homes for families at risk of homelessness. We will set out plans at the next fiscal event to give councils and housing associations the rent stability they need to borrow and invest in new and existing homes.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Recent freedom of information requests by the Liberal Democrats found that four out of five councils that responded had someone on their social housing waiting list for more than a decade, and this shocking statistic comes all while the stocks of social housing have been reducing. Will the Minister consider reforming the land conservation Act, so that local councils can buy land at current value rather than hope value and get on with delivering the social housing that we so desperately need?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Lady for drawing attention to the appalling record of the previous Government on affordable housing, in particular social rented housing. Over the past 10 years, the number of social rented homes owned by registered providers fell by over 205,000. We have to take action to better protect our stock and build new social rented homes, but she is absolutely right that further reform is needed of compulsory purchase orders, how they are drawn and the powers available to councils. We first need to enact the changes that were introduced by the previous Government through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, but we intend to go further, and will consult on that in due course.

Council Funding

10. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of council funding. [900279]

15. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of council funding. [900284]

16. **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): What steps she is taking with local authorities to help ensure that they have adequate resources to fund local services. [900285]

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): I know at first hand how hard councils work to deliver essential public services, and we want to thank councillors, council officials and council workers for the hard work that they do all year round. The Government are under no illusions about the challenges facing local authorities. It is our priority to reset the relationship between local and central Government, and to end the politics that has seen Westminster hoard far too much power, holding back our towns, cities and villages from realising their full potential. We will provide more stability for councils through multi-year funding settlements, ending the competitive bidding process and reforming the broken audit system. Future local authority funding decisions

are of course a matter for the spending review and the local government finance settlement, in which we are fully engaged.

Alison Bennett: Can the Minister explain how the English devolution Bill will reduce local authority budget shortfalls, ensuring that essential council services for the public are protected?

Jim McMahon: The English devolution Bill is a landmark piece of legislation that will finally address the imbalance of power between this place and communities up and down the country, but it is not in itself the answer. We know that the financial foundations on which it rests are local authorities, which are struggling. That is why we are committed to multi-year funding settlements and fair funding.

Clive Jones: I understand that there will be a major review of local government funding next year. I represent Wokingham, whose council is the lowest-funded unitary authority per head in the country. Will the review look at the actual needs and costs faced by local authorities, as opposed to the current methodology of allocating funding, which is based on historical data and is disproportionately skewed by simplistic measures of deprivation?

Jim McMahon: Any fair funding formula of course has to address the range of challenges that local authorities face, whether that is their local tax base, and how much they can realistically generate from their local communities and businesses, or the cost of service delivery and the demand within a local community. We will ensure that the fair funding formula, of which multi-year settlements are a part, is done with that rigour.

Natasha Irons: There can be no way of fixing the foundations of this country without fixing the foundations of local government, so I am pleased to hear that this council—sorry, this Government—are looking to reset the relationship with local councils; as a local councillor, I am stuck in the habit. Will the Minister please outline what specific support will be given to councils that have had to issue section 114 notices, to ensure that they can deliver on this Government's aims throughout the country?

Jim McMahon: Local councils are central to delivering on this Government's missions, and to changing this country for the better, but we know that many of them are on a cliff edge financially, and many of them will be fearful for their budget going forward. We will work in partnership with my hon. Friend. The Department's door is always open to local authorities that need to have conversations.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): Council funding in Birmingham is inadequate because of a set of sadistic directions based on speculative estimates of equal pay liabilities. No one believes those estimates, not even the lead commissioner, so will the Minister revisit those directions quickly and meet with Birmingham MPs to help us to get them right?

Jim McMahon: First, we need to reset the relationship between the Westminster Government and local authorities. I have seen far too many examples where the Secretary

of State and Ministers have, at this Dispatch Box, hung individual councils out to dry. That is not a relationship of equals at all. I thank the leadership of Birmingham for taking the tough decisions and actions that are needed. This Government will work in partnership with them in a constructive way, as equals, going forward.

Requirement for New Housing to be Beautiful

13. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): For what reason the proposed revised national planning policy framework removes the requirement for new housing to be beautiful. [900282]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): Beauty is always part of the proposals. The hon. Member, if he had read our proposals in the NPPF, would know that we have not removed all references to beauty; we have simply changed additional references made by the Conservatives that the Royal Institute of British Architects said could lead to development being turned down.

Blake Stephenson: In Mid Bedfordshire we have a mix of historic towns and villages, as well as newer developments such as Wixams. We take more than our fair share of development, and my constituents want to see beautiful homes with the right services that are sympathetic to the traditional character of our communities. Does the Secretary of State agree that people want to see beautiful homes throughout England? In that case, will she reinsert beauty as a house building objective in the revised framework?

Angela Rayner: If the hon. Member had read our proposals regarding the inconsistencies, he would know that the Government are not proposing to remove all references to beauty from the NPPF. I reiterate that the changes we are making relate to additional references to beauty inserted by the previous Government in December 2023. These are subjective in nature, difficult to define and may lead to inconsistencies in decision making.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): On the subject of the NPPF, I am grateful for the letter that the right hon. Lady sent to me on Saturday. I enjoyed reading it, especially her attempts to explain why she reduced Sadiq Khan's London targets and, even more, where she highlights that he has consistently under-delivered. If other local leaders miss their new housing targets, will she reduce their targets too?

Angela Rayner: I find that astonishing, when the previous Government missed their targets every single year. As the Housing Minister has already set out, our methodology is about realistic expectations that people can meet. We will not shy away from the decisions that need to be made to make sure that we build the homes that people need. That is why we were elected, and that is what the right hon. Member needs to realise.

Topical Questions

T1. [900295] **Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): I pay tribute to all those involved in supporting residents in Dagenham after the appalling fire last week—a sobering reminder of the importance of making buildings safe ahead of the Grenfell inquiry report this week. My thoughts are with the bereaved families, the survivors and the community of Grenfell affected during this very difficult week. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Building Safety said, we have published an update to the House on work to address building safety issues, which we will continue to take swift action to resolve.

Ayoub Khan: Birmingham's Labour-run council is on the verge of selling off some 700 residential units at a loss to the taxpayer of about £300 million. Will the Secretary of State intervene to allow the council to retain those properties for public ownership and for use by some of the 25,000 desperate families on the waiting list?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Member will know that Birmingham city council will not be making decisions over asset sales lightly. I know that it is working with commissioners to ensure that its financing decisions deliver value for money and that it can avoid fire sales, and I will work constructively with the council and commissioners as that work continues.

T2. [900296] **Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): Levy funding for internal drainage boards is an increasing concern for many councils. In my constituency, King's Lynn and West Norfolk borough council now contributes the equivalent of 43% of its council tax income to fund IDB levies. Will the Secretary of State update Members on any progress determining a more sustainable funding solution for those levies and whether the one-off grant scheme to support councils might be repeated?

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): In the final 2024-25 local government finance settlement, a £3 million grant was announced to assist local authorities experiencing significant pressures on their internal drainage board levy. I am publishing today the allocations of funding for 15 local authorities, and I can confirm that King's Lynn and West Norfolk will receive an allocation of £254,000 from the levy. We are also working closely with our colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to explore options going forward for future allocations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): It has been reported that the Secretary of State is being lobbied to increase council tax and remove discounts such as the single occupancy discount. Will she take this opportunity to reassure the House that the Government have no plans to increase council tax, as they assured us before the election?

Angela Rayner: Yes.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): My constituent Tracy was recently issued with a section 21 notice to quit and, at the same time, a section 13 rent increase that she cannot afford. She fears being made homeless with her children, so she got in touch with Newcastle city council for a council property, but the wait is 27 weeks on average and often much longer. When will good tenants be protected from unfair evictions and extortionate rent increases?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I am deeply saddened to hear of the plight of Tracy and her children. Our renters' rights Bill will protect tenants from arbitrary eviction and empower them to challenge unreasonable within-tenancy rent rises. I can assure my hon. Friend that Tracy and others facing similar insecurity will not have long to wait for that Bill's introduction.

Mr Speaker: I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Residents in rural areas such as my constituency are seeing drastic cuts to local services despite their council tax having gone up this year. That is because councils are struggling to balance budgets. When the fair funding review takes place, will the Secretary of State commit to considering the cost of delivering services in vast rural areas, which is in excess of the same cost in urban areas?

Jim McMahon: We will absolutely ensure that the true cost of public service delivery is accounted for in different parts of the country and in different local authorities—that will be part of it. However, I say gently that although the Conservatives were the architects of austerity, the Liberal Democrats were definitely there sharpening the pencil.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): The Government have my full support in making housing more affordable for my constituents and those across the UK, and creating more social rented housing will be important in that. Will the Minister update the House on the Government's plans to protect existing council stock by reviewing the increased right to buy discounts introduced in 2012?

Matthew Pennycook: The Government have started to review the increased right to buy discounts introduced in 2012, as we promised to do in our manifesto. We will lay secondary legislation in the autumn and consult on wider reforms. We recognise the importance of right to buy as a route to home ownership for tenants, but we must, as my hon. Friend makes clear, protect our existing stock and boost the supply of new social rented homes.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Managing the need to build new homes and to protect our valuable green spaces will always be a tricky balancing act. Will the Government put in the national planning policy framework anything that will protect the concept of the green belt in areas such as Esher and Walton, and will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss it?

Matthew Pennycook: The Government have made it clear in that very consultation that we do not intend to change the general purpose or extent of the green belt. We are committed to making changes to ensure that we are releasing the right parts of the green belt to meet housing need. The hon. Lady is more than welcome to submit her own views as part of that consultation.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Among the many people who are concerned about the safety of buildings—understandably, given recent events—are those who work or live in residential social care homes. Does today's announcement include higher safety standards, including sprinkler systems in such homes?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we should ensure that the most vulnerable in society are protected. That is why the Government have today announced an amendment to the statutory fire safety guidance to make provision for sprinkler systems in all new care homes.

Mr Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Over 10,000 people, many of whom are in really desperate conditions, are on the housing waiting list in Taunton and Wellington and in Somerset as a whole. Will the Secretary of State allow councils to borrow at low interest rates to build the council houses that we need across the country, and support councils such as Somerset council, which is pioneering the first council houses for a generation in some parts of the county?

Matthew Pennycook: As I made clear in response to a previous question, we understand very much the pressure that local authorities are under and the pressure on their housing revenue accounts. We are reviewing our position and will make further announcements in due course.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Blackpool's Waterloo Road and Bond Street were once thriving local tourist hotspots that underpinned our local economy all year round. When the Deputy Prime Minister last visited Blackpool with me, she saw for herself the awful visible decline of those areas. Will she and her Department work with me and local businesses to ensure their successful regeneration?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. It was great to visit Blackpool during the general election campaign, and I visited Blackpool on many occasions during my childhood as well. My Department is working in partnership with Blackpool to unlock significant investment. I have seen that more needs to be done to unleash Blackpool's great potential, and I will work with my hon. Friend on the ongoing regeneration of Blackpool to deliver better-quality housing and a stronger local economy. And you never know, we might visit the nightlife as well.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on Labour-controlled Leicester city council to review its proposals in its own local plan to site 400 houses, seven Traveller

pitches and a waste-processing centre on the edge of Glenfield village in my constituency, which are causing considerable concern to my residents?

Matthew Pennycook: We are not going to interfere in the discretion of local councils to make such decisions. What we are emphasising, as part of the NPPF consultation, is the importance of having a local plan in place. We have inherited a disastrous situation where only 31% of local authorities across the country have an up-to-date plan in place, and we need to do more to drive universal coverage. Local plans are the best way that local communities can shape development in their areas.

T9. [900304] **Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): Worthing West is 90% developed, and I am often contacted by residents who support new developments—particularly social rents and for first-time buyers—but are concerned that we must also value our increasingly urban green spaces. What steps are being taken to balance urban green space provision with our need for housing, to ensure all our communities are able to thrive and stay healthy?

Matthew Pennycook: The Government are committed to ensuring that development protects and provides—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to the Father of the House that that is not really the done thing? He should know that better than anybody.

Matthew Pennycook: As I was saying, the Government are committed to ensuring that development both protects and provides for green space. I am more than happy to discuss the particular challenges that my hon. Friend faces in her part of the country.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): As the Deputy Prime Minister should be aware, people in Romford are very angry that Mayor Khan is forcing us to build high-rise blocks. Does she agree that the London borough of Havering, despite being part of Greater London, is Essex, and that we should remain a town and country borough?

Angela Rayner: As a Mancunian, I do not think I am in any place to tell Londoners what is in Essex and what is not.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): My constituency has been held back by 14 years of Conservative cuts to the county council and to borough and district councils, so I hope that the new Government's devolution agenda will help rebuild and improve our local public services. Can the Secretary of State provide an update on the consultation with Hertfordshire county council and our 10 borough and district authorities?

Mr Speaker: Who wants it?

Jim McMahon: We are well under way in reviewing the consultations that are currently taking place and all the devolution agreements that were not tabled before the election. I am very happy to meet with my hon. Friend outside of this Chamber to discuss the matter further.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Will the Minister please confirm that where a rural community has taken the time and effort to produce a neighbourhood plan, that plan will be respected for its lifespan, notwithstanding new housing targets for the local planning authority?

Matthew Pennycook: The Government do not intend to require local planning authorities to amend neighbourhood plans in the future. Communities will continue to be able to choose whether they review or update their neighbourhood plan.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Could the Minister expand on his earlier answer relating to devolution, and perhaps provide a timeframe for some of the discussions that are taking place with local authorities about devolution plans that did not go ahead before the last general election? My constituents are very keen to move ahead with improvements to transport, education and inward investment.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and for her work on the agenda to further devolution in her region. We recognise that in some parts of the country, including Hull and East Yorkshire and Greater Lincolnshire, local authorities worked up proposals for the previous Government that were not tabled before the election. We are currently working through those proposals at pace to make sure areas have clarity about where they are up to, and we look forward to reporting on that as soon as possible and meeting with local MPs as part of that process.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): When the Secretary of State looks at the rules around local authority compulsory purchase orders, and at removing hope value for house building purposes, will she look at having the same rules for playing fields that local authorities want to keep as playing fields and not build on? That would allow sites such as Udney park playing field in my constituency, which has lain derelict for a decade under private ownership, to be brought into community use again.

Matthew Pennycook: It sounds as if the hon. Lady has a response for the NPPF consultation that is in development. I welcome her views on playing fields. On CPOs, there is a discretionary power to disapply section 17 of the Land Compensation Act 1961 in relation to hope value. We need to ensure that that is brought into force; then we will take further steps to reform CPOs, as outlined in our manifesto.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): The last Government made local councils compete for pots of money. Bingley pool in my constituency was due to receive a levelling-up award. Those funds are vital for the regeneration of our towns. Can my hon. Friend update the House on the review of those awards, and on the timescale for informing communities such as mine, who have been let down by the Conservatives' unfunded promises, of the results?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I share my hon. Friend's anger that promises that did not have a strong financial backing were made to

communities—promises that the Government are having to work their way through. As I said, we want to move away from the broken competitive model, but we know that promises have been made, and we are working on them. Hon. Members will hear further answers from us before the Budget on 30 October.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The national planning policy framework clearly militates against building on agricultural land. Notwithstanding the Minister's desire not to interfere in local democracy, will he write to the leader of Thanet district council to remind him that agricultural land is the stuff that we grow food on, and cannot be for housing if we are to remain sustainable?

Matthew Pennycook: We are maintaining the existing strong protection for the best and most versatile agricultural land that is most important for food production. The line that we are removing from the NPPF was added in December 2023, and does not provide clear and meaningful guidance to authorities about what they should do, in addition to having that strong protection in place.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): On Wednesday, the phase 2 report of the Grenfell inquiry will be published, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in remembering the 72 residents who lost their lives in an entirely preventable tragedy over seven years ago. Four recommendations for central Government are still outstanding from the phase 1 report, including personalised emergency evacuation plans for disabled people. Will the Secretary of State update us on the progress in implementing the phase 1 recommendations in full?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this week will be very difficult for the community around Grenfell, including the survivors and those who lost loved ones. He is also right to say that there are outstanding measures from phase 1. The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), made a written ministerial statement today that will hopefully show where the Government intend to go, but there is a lot that needs to be done. On Wednesday, the whole House will have a moment of reflection, and we will think of those at Grenfell in the coming weeks.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her dancing skills, her appointment and her outstanding answer to the question from the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), on council tax, which I will pursue. Can she assure the House and guarantee that she will not remove the single person discount, which is so important to pensioners who are already losing out because of the absence of the winter fuel allowance? That would put gladness into the heart of elderly people across the country who live on small incomes.

Angela Rayner: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments on my dance moves; that opinion is subjective, like beauty, of course. On a serious note, I find it astonishing that Conservative Members, after running down the economy in the way that they did,

and after the Chancellor has had to come to the House and talk about the billion-pound black hole, are now trying to claim that this Government are about raising taxes. This Government are about making sure that working people are better off, and we intend to do that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that winter fuel payments will no longer be there for older people who are not entitled to pension credit, what steps has the Secretary of State taken to extend the household support fund, so that local authorities can provide emergency grants, as well as warm spaces?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about people on pension credit and, in particular, about the household support fund. It is incredibly important, first, that the many people who are entitled to those benefits but are not claiming them do so, and secondly, that the household support fund and the work that we can do to support people is well known. We work with local authorities, which administer the fund, to make sure that the money is given to the people who need it the most. We inherited very difficult circumstances because of the previous Conservative Government. The Chancellor has set out how we can expand the fund to help people who desperately need it.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Devonport dockyard in Plymouth has a strong future proudly refitting the Royal Navy's submarines. However, for that to happen, the city needs, among other things, more housing. The location for this housing is there, in the city centre, but it will require a national effort to deliver it. Will the Minister meet a cross-party delegation from Plymouth to take forward these vital plans?

Matthew Pennycook: I am well aware of the case that the hon. Lady cites and of that city centre location, and I am more than happy to meet that delegation.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I know from my time as chair of the Local Government Association that all council leaders, regardless of political persuasion, need more money for local government, but that there is also a commitment from the sector to reforming the sector. Will the Minister confirm his willingness to work with council leaders, regardless of political persuasion, to reform the system, and also to take a look at population under-counting, which is costing my council millions of pounds each year?

Jim McMahon: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he did in local government, and as chair of the LGA, to make sure that the sector spoke with one voice and worked in collaboration with Government to try to get a better outcome for local councils. This Government will continue in that spirit.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): The Minister for Local Government may be aware that Liberal Democrat-controlled Eastleigh borough council is subject to a best

value notice, due to its unsustainable £700 million of debt. More audits have been undertaken that show that more borrowing is taking place, so will he meet me to discuss this risk to my constituents and their taxpayers' money?

Jim McMahon: I am very happy to have a meeting, probably next week, on that issue.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): As the housing crisis worsened under the last Government, houses in multiple occupation became more prevalent in a number of communities, including in Filton, Stoke Park and Stoke Gifford. Naturally, with more people living in more homes than were envisaged when the local infrastructure was planned, there is an impact on public services and the character of communities, and routes such as permitted development are regularly being used to start extensions and conversions. Will the Minister meet me, as the Government shape much-needed changes to the planning framework and regulations, to discuss how HMOs might be included in an appropriate way?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I am more than happy to meet her to discuss those issues.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Devolution is a positive thing, and we welcome it. Gloucestershire, which has my constituency of Cheltenham within it, has coterminous boundaries for the county council, a police force, a fire service, an economic development function and a health service, but there is fear that, in a devolution deal, it may be grouped with other areas to the north, or perhaps made part of an existing devolution deal to the south. Can the Secretary of State or another Minister confirm that that will not be the case?

Jim McMahon: Within the first couple of days of this Government, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to local authority leaders, inviting them for discussions on devolution agreements. One of the founding principles is, of course, geography that makes sense—and having coterminous boundaries for public services and the rest does make sense. Without going into the specifics of individual conversations that are taking place, I advise the hon. Member to bring that point into the work on the English devolution Bill, which will make sure that all of England has a voice and a role in devolution.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister has shown that her footwork at the Dispatch Box is as good as her footwork on the dance floor. At this year's election, veterans who brought along their veterans' ID card to prove their identity were turned away. Will the Minister guarantee that this will change?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that very important question. Veterans were turned away at the recent elections. We have committed to changing that, and we will introduce the necessary regulations in due course.

Ukraine

3.40 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Ukraine.

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for asking this urgent question on a matter that is so critical. As the House is well aware, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine poses a significant threat to Euro-Atlantic security and has struck at the heart of the international rules-based system on which our security and prosperity depend.

UK support for Ukraine in defending itself against Russian aggression is iron-clad. Ukraine's incursion into the Russian oblast of Kursk has proven once again what Ukraine is capable of, but its armed forces remain under considerable pressure on the frontline, particularly in Donbas, and Russia continues to bombard Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure with missiles and drones. The UK will continue to do everything we can to step up and accelerate our support, to keep the pressure up on Putin's war machine, and to hold to account those responsible for Russia's illegal actions.

On the day that the new Government were appointed, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary spoke to their Ukrainian counterparts to underline our support. Within 48 hours, the Defence Secretary travelled to Odesa, where he announced a new package of military equipment and pledged to accelerate the delivery of previously announced military aid. During the NATO Washington summit, the Prime Minister committed to providing £3 billion a year of military support for Ukraine until 2030-31, or for as long as needed. Allies also agreed a significant package of support, and agreed that Ukraine's pathway to NATO membership was irreversible.

On 18 July, the Prime Minister hosted President Zelensky and European political community leaders at Blenheim, where 44 European countries and the EU signed a call to action to tackle Russia's shadow fleet, which is enabling Russia to evade international sanctions. The Prime Minister and President Zelensky also agreed a new defence industrial support treaty that enables Ukraine to draw on £3.5 billion of UK export finance. I am sure that the House will want to be aware that yesterday, the UK-Ukraine digital trade agreement entered into force, making digital trade between our two countries cheaper and easier, boosting both economies.

In summary, Ukraine remains high on the agenda, including in our discussions with our international partners. The Prime Minister discussed Ukraine with Chancellor Scholz and President Macron last week, and the Defence Secretary will attend a meeting of the international Ukraine defence contact group on 5 September. We remain in close discussion with Ukraine on the support that it needs to prevail.

Mr Mitchell: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and may I also thank the Minister for her response?

The whole House condemned, and continues to be appalled by, Putin's illegal and outrageous attack on a neighbouring foreign state. We condemn the missile and

drone attacks launched by Putin against Ukraine in recent weeks, which targeted critical infrastructure ahead of winter and murdered Ukrainian citizens. Tragically, a missile strike the week before last killed a British national, Ryan Evans, who was in Ukraine working for Reuters. He and his friends and family are in our thoughts today.

Opposition Members welcome the fact that negotiations have been initiated on contracts under the recently signed defence export support treaty; that is a positive step. Increasing Britain's defence production remains a national priority, so that we can provide more weapons to Ukraine and build up our own stocks. In government, we made it clear that appointing a defence production envoy with a direct line to the Prime Minister would be an effective way of helping us to realise that aim; I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on whether the Government intend to see that plan through. Above all, this Government must continue, as their predecessor did, to press our allies to go further, and, by working closely with Germany and France in particular, as well as with the American Government, to procure the vital supplies that Ukraine must receive. The countries supporting Ukraine are able to leverage a collective GDP and a combined defence budget many times larger than Russia's. Will the Minister confirm that we are pressing allies to follow the UK's multi-year funding commitment for military aid?

Turning to the situation in the Kursk region, we agree with the Government that under article 51 of the UN charter, Ukraine's right to self-defence against illegal Russian attacks does not preclude operations inside Russia. Furthermore, together with our allies, we must equip Ukraine so that it is not hampered in its ability to degrade the Russian war effort before it is fully deployed. It is our intention as His Majesty's Opposition to help the Government as they in turn take all the necessary decisions to secure advantage and victory for Ukraine, but in giving that support, we expect the Government to continue the firm and clear leadership demonstrated by the last Conservative Government.

Anneliese Dodds: First, I share in the condemnation of the appalling Russian attacks that the right hon. Member mentioned. He talked about the impact on critical infrastructure and, indeed, on a British national; the whole House will want to send our condolences to his family and share in the sorrow—it is such a dreadful incident. Of course, we have seen other appalling attacks, including on other forms of civilian infrastructure. As children are returning to school in many parts of England today, we also see children return to school in Ukraine, but on Friday a 14-year-old girl was killed in Kharkiv and over the past few days a children's rehabilitation centre has been attacked through Russian aggression. We are absolutely determined that we will continue that rejection of Russian aggression.

The right hon. Member talked in particular about the need to ensure that we have that provision of armaments. We are seeking to ensure that we have a national armaments director so that we have that prioritisation. He also talked about the need to work with our allies, which, as I mentioned in my statement and will underline again, the Prime Minister has prioritised; he discussed it in detail with Olaf Scholz and with President Macron, and clearly it was critical at the European Political Community

[Anneliese Dodds]

meeting. The agreement that was come to, with that call of action against the shadow fleet, was incredibly important, and it covers the EU and many other European countries.

The right hon. Member talked about the need for a multi-year approach, including from our allies, and we will continue to advocate for that. That multi-year support is critical for the UK. We have been clear that we will extend it until 2030-31, or as long as is required. That is an incredibly important commitment made by the new UK Government.

The right hon. Member also talked about the actions we have seen taking place in Kursk. He is right that they were defensive actions; they would not have taken place had we not seen the illegal invasion of Ukraine. The language he used to describe them is therefore completely appropriate. When it comes to equipping Ukraine in that defensive activity, of course we will continue—and indeed have intensified—our commitment towards that. I was pleased to hear his commitment to cross-party working on that. My party was determined to ensure cross-party working when in opposition, so I was pleased to hear him affirm that from his new position on the Opposition Benches. We will ensure that we prioritise our support for Ukraine in the future, and I hope he will work with us to do so.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): In anticipation of this urgent question, I asked a constituent friend of mine who is currently in Kyiv what questions I should be asking the Foreign Secretary. That friend of mine will be reassured that we are increasing the amount of armaments and weapons being sent to Ukraine, because it is in desperate need of them. Overnight, Kyiv was hit 20 times by missiles, and the overwhelming question that she wants me to ask is this: what pressure can the UK Government put on the Americans to allow the Ukrainians to hit the missile sites in Russia?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising these matters. Clearly her contact with that constituent has been incredibly important in understanding the situation on the ground, and I know that my right hon. Friend has a deep understanding of these foreign policy matters. The UK is well aware that the US has committed \$105 billion in support for Ukraine. It was announced at the NATO summit at the beginning of July that Germany, Romania, the Netherlands and Italy would be working with the US to provide Ukraine with five strategic air defence systems. We have very much welcomed sustained bipartisan US support for Ukraine, which has been key in the international effort, and I know that the United States will want to continue that support into the future. Certainly, we in the UK will be doing all we can to ensure that that remains the case.

Mr Speaker: I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Foreign Secretary has spoken of his warm relations with the running mate of Donald Trump, J. D. Vance. That is just as well, because Vance said previously that he does not really care what happens to Ukraine one way or another. While Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister is talking about changes to Russia's doctrine on the use

of nuclear weapons, Vance is joking about how Britain is somehow the first "Islamist country" with nuclear weapons. Will the Minister tell the House what efforts the Government are making to rid Vance and some others in the Republican party of the idea that the security of Ukraine and the security of Europe is somehow not important to the security of the United States?

Anneliese Dodds: It is clearly not for us in this House to speculate about hypothetical scenarios, and decisions about the US election will of course lie with the American people. I underline to the hon. Member that the UK and the US have been steadfast allies, working closely together on foreign policy issues and defence matters for over a century. That has applied with leaders of all political stripes in the White House and in Downing Street, and with Parliament and Congress as well. We welcome and will continue to welcome sustained bipartisan US support for Ukraine, including passage of the supplemental funding package, which has been key to the international effort.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. She touched on stockpiles of armaments and missiles; as she knows, we have had a long-standing problem in that regard. Will she say more about what work is being done now to ensure that those stockpiles are increased and that we can supply more to Ukraine?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. We will continue to work hard to ensure that Ukraine has what it needs to defend itself in the face of Putin's illegal aggression. As I mentioned in my statement, the Prime Minister has committed £3 billion a year in military support for Ukraine until 2030-31, or for as long as is needed. That means that the UK has committed almost £12.7 billion in military, humanitarian and economic support for Ukraine since 2022, but I want to be clear that we are stepping up our military support, including via a new package announced by the Defence Secretary in Odesa in early July—soon after the election—which includes more artillery guns, a quarter of a million ammunition rounds and 90 precision Brimstone missiles, because, as my hon. Friend mentioned, the stockpile is indeed important.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It seems to me that if you are attacked by a demented bear, you either run away or hit him so hard that he runs away, but the west's policy on Ukraine appears to be to wound and not win. In that context, will the Government make an unequivocal public statement that Ukraine should be allowed to use Storm Shadow and, more importantly, the US-made army tactical missile system? Then we might actually win this war.

Anneliese Dodds: Specifically on Storm Shadow, there has been no change in the UK's position. We have been providing military aid to support Ukraine's clear right of self-defence against Russia's illegal attacks. That has been in accordance with international humanitarian law. We are clear that equipment provided by the UK is intended for the defence of Ukraine.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): As we have heard, the United States will be going to the polls later this year and many in the Republican party are unfortunately expressing scepticism about supporting Ukraine. Will the Minister encourage our colleagues and allies in the United States, as support for Ukraine is vital for our own democracy and security around the world?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning that important subject. The UK will continue to work closely with our international partners to ensure that Ukraine gets the support it needs to resist Russian aggression. At the NATO summit in Washington, the Prime Minister announced that the UK-administered international fund for Ukraine will place a new order worth £300 million for 120,000 rounds of ammunition, bolstering Ukraine's defences against Russia.

I should also mention that the UK is co-leading a new maritime capability coalition alongside Norway, which will strengthen Ukraine's ability to operate at sea, and a major drone capability coalition with Latvia to scale up the west's provision of first-person view drones to Ukraine. There is extensive and deep work with our allies when it comes to supporting the defence of Ukraine.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do the Government have a view on why certain far-right politicians in the United States, Europe and even, dare I say it, Britain seem to have a soft spot for President Putin's Russia?

Anneliese Dodds: The right hon. Member raises an important question. It is clear that Russia's activity under President Putin's illegal leadership has included an attack not only on Ukraine but on democratic values and international humanitarian law. I am pleased that we have seen bipartisan support across the House for rejecting that aggression, and I hope that that will continue.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's words on Ukraine's activities in Kursk, and I ask her to give the UK Government's fullest possible support for what is going on there. Last night, Russian missiles hit Kyiv and other major cities. It is vital that the UK takes the lead in partnering Ukraine in the defence of democracy and liberty. What progress are the Government making on completing the 100-year agreement with Ukraine?

Anneliese Dodds: I very much agree with my hon. Friend's comments on the Kursk offensive. As was mentioned, ultimately it is very much a defensive operation—we should not forget that Russia has repeatedly launched attacks on Ukraine from Kursk oblast. I also agree with his comments about recent aerial attacks from Russia. When it comes to rejecting those, we could not be clearer: intentionally directing attacks at civilian objects is a war crime. Those attacks threaten civilian access to power, heating and water supply, impacting the safety and livelihoods of millions of Ukrainians. On the 100-year partnership, we are committed to ensuring that we cement our partnership with Ukraine's leadership, which started very early on for the new Government. There is an important anniversary coming and we are seeking to mark it with renewed partnership.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Russian oligarchs close to Putin have numerous assets under UK jurisdiction, equating to nearly £23 billion. Will the Minister commit to acting on a Lib Dem manifesto commitment to begin the process of seizing currently frozen assets in the UK and repurposing them in support of the people of Ukraine, building financial resilience in UK domestic support even if US support were to waver following the US election in November?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. He is right in his implication that we need a robust sanctions regime—this Government are absolutely committed to that. Without sanctions, we estimate that Russia would have over £400 billion more to fund its war for another four years. It is important that we continue with that sanctions regime and do what we can to ensure that it is impossible to circumvent—I believe that his point was about that particular issue.

There is an international movement towards ensuring that Russian sovereign assets are put into play to support people who have been so appallingly impacted in Ukraine. We are working intensively with all our allies to pursue lawful ways to ensure that Russia meets its obligations. Together with our G7 partners we have agreed to make available approximately \$50 billion to Ukraine by the end of the year by advancing the extraordinary profits generated by immobilised Russian sovereign assets in the EU and other relevant jurisdictions. Work is already ongoing on the issues that the hon. Member mentioned, if I understood his question correctly.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I welcome what the Minister said about efforts to tackle the Russian shadow fleet. She will also be aware that an estimated £600 million-worth of refined products of Russian origin have made their way into our economy. Given her answer a moment ago about the need for a robust sanctions regime, what more can she do to crack down on that? The democracy in Kyiv will find it more difficult to win if we are also funding the dictatorship in Moscow.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important point. Putin's shadow fleet softened the blow of our sanctions regime, and it poses serious maritime security and environmental risks. In response, the new Government have already taken decisive action. Earlier this month we sanctioned 11 Russian ships, and almost all sanctioned tankers have ceased trading Russian oil. As I mentioned, at the European Political Community summit, 44 countries and the EU signed the call to action, spearheaded by the UK, calling out the risks posed by the shadow fleet and committing to work together to confront those risks. I will not speculate on future decisions on our sanctions regime, but we will of course always keep it under review.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I follow the excellent point made by the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), on Storm Shadow? There is no third country exercising a veto on how Putin uses long-range missiles, which he uses without compunction even to attack children's hospitals in Ukraine. Yet the media consistently report that there is an American veto on the Ukrainian use of Storm Shadow missiles to attack targets at depth in Russia, even though that would materially assist the Ukrainian war effort. Will

[Mr Mark Francois]

the Minister, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence talk with our American allies to get that veto removed? The Ukrainians are fighting for our freedom too and, two years in, they can no longer be expected to do it with one hand tied behind their back.

Anneliese Dodds: As I mentioned previously in this important debate, the UK Government will continue to work with all our allies from all engaged parties, seeking to ensure that we do all we can to protect Ukraine's sovereignty and to enable it to exercise its right of self-defence against Putin's illegal aggression. As I mentioned, there has been no change in the UK's position on the matters the right hon. Gentleman specifies. We have been providing military aid to support Ukraine's clear right of self-defence against Russia's illegal attacks in accordance with international humanitarian law, and we are clear that equipment provided by the UK is intended for the defence of Ukraine.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I welcome the strength and detail of the Minister's statement. My constituents stand very firmly with the people of Ukraine. Last night, I met a man called Alex, a Ukrainian who has made his life in Newcastle-under-Lyme. He has no family left in Ukraine after the recent death of his brother in Kyiv. That is evidence that this crisis remains so very serious for so many people. Notwithstanding the Minister's answer on sanctions and assets, may I urge her to look at what we can do to redouble our efforts to use assets seized from Russians here in order to support Ukrainians in their fight against tyranny, not just in Ukraine but here in the United Kingdom too?

Anneliese Dodds: I very much share my hon. Friend's deep concern about the human impact of Putin's illegal war on Ukraine. In February 2024, we heard from President Zelensky that 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed during Russia's full-scale invasion. Very large numbers of civilians have been killed, too. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reports that over 11,000 civilians have been killed and over 23,000 wounded—as of the start of August this year. On ensuring that we take action on assets, this new Government are absolutely committed to doing everything we can in this area. As I mentioned, the UK sanctioned over 2,000 individuals and entities. We estimate that, without sanctions, Russia would have over \$400 billion more to fund its illegal war. Of course we will continue to keep this under review and work with partners to ensure that our sanctions are as strong as possible.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The Minister is of course right to say that who will be the next US President is a matter solely for the American people, but a Trump presidency would, without doubt, have a significant impact on the course of the war in Ukraine, and given Trump's cosy relationship with Putin, I doubt very much that it would be a positive impact. Can the Minister reassure the House and the people of Ukraine that this Government are, or soon will be, speaking to our European allies to ensure that, in terms of procurement and engagement, Europe will be prepared to plug any gaps in what Ukraine needs to defend itself should the worst case become a reality after November?

Anneliese Dodds: This Government have engaged repeatedly with our allies on the need for continued support for Ukraine. That has been the case in respect of, for example, the European Political Community—the meetings we had, and the call to action on the shadow fleet that emerged from them—and it has been the case in respect of all the engagement we have had with NATO allies, and the Prime Minister's engagement with Olaf Scholz and President Macron just a few days ago. That engagement will continue, and it is critically important for the UK Government. We have also welcomed sustained bipartisan US support for Ukraine, which has been key to the international effort. Let me underline what I said earlier. The UK and the US have been steadfast allies, working together closely for more than a century. That has applied, regardless of political stripe, across the institutions in both our countries, and we are determined that it will continue.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I commend the Government for their positive response to the urgent question, but may I press the Minister on the Storm Shadow issue? There is really no point in the west arming Ukraine to shoot down the missiles when it cannot shoot the launch pads. What discussions are the Government having with our American counterparts? Will she confirm that a request has been made to the US Administration? When are we expecting an answer, and if the answer is no, what will we do?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government have been crystal clear that we will do everything we can to support Ukraine for as long as it takes, and to ensure that it has the equipment it needs to defend its territory from Russia's illegal invasion. The hon. Gentleman will understand that we will not comment on operational decision making.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Ukrainian refugees in my constituency have welcomed the continuity of approach to the situation in Ukraine following the change of Government here. However, the Minister has mentioned a number of times today that we are giving a long-term arms commitment to Ukraine. How can she make such a commitment, given the concerns about the equipment and ammunition available to our own armed forces, and what steps has she taken to ensure that the United Kingdom's defence industry is geared up to meet both the commitments for our own armed forces and those that she is making to Ukraine?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for making that critical point. Such a long-term commitment to ensuring the provision of defence capacity for our allies and friends is not only important for those countries—in this case, Ukraine—but extremely important for our own domestic industrial capacity. It enables us to secure long-term jobs, long-term contracts, long-term prospects and, indeed, long-term careers for people in our country who work in the defence industries.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Last week's attack on Ukraine by Russian missiles and drones was the biggest since the Russian invasion started. Can the Minister make it crystal clear that Ukraine's right to self-defence must include the ability to target the origin of those missiles and drones, including Russian aircraft in Russian airspace and Russian missile bases?

Anneliese Dodds: The right hon. Member is right to condemn the truly appalling attacks that we saw recently. They provided yet more evidence that Russia is seeking to terrorise the Ukrainian population into submission, an approach that we wholly reject and condemn and that runs contrary to international humanitarian law. The UK will continue to do everything we can to support Ukraine's resilience and its defence in this situation. Given the point that he made on this subject, let me underline what I said earlier: the Kursk operation was a defensive operation, and we should not forget that Russia repeatedly launched attacks on Ukraine from Kursk oblast.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): We have heard about the role of Russian assets in this country. The Minister will be aware of my concerns about asset ownership in the constituency of Cities of London and Westminster, and how vital it is for UK economic growth that we can pride ourselves on having clean and transparent financial markets in the City of London. Does she agree that securing transparency through trust ownership is a really important part of ensuring that we can understand ownership of assets in this country, and that we cannot wait any longer for enforcement around the transparency of trusts in order to secure our understanding of the situation?

Anneliese Dodds: I am well aware of my hon. Friend's leadership on these issues and her long-term commitment to ensuring transparency. Of course, she will understand that the precise rules around financial instruments are not a matter for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; they are of course a matter for His Majesty's Treasury. On the broader issue, however, I can say to her that we are very clear that effective sanctions will require effective enforcement and implementation. We will continue to strengthen our work—including with international partners and allies, and through our role at the UN—to maximise the impact of sanctions, to close loopholes and to close other channels for circumventing sanctions.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does the right hon. Lady recognise the enormous contribution that the Ukrainian diaspora here in the UK have made to supporting their countrymen, and not just practically but in relation to morale? Will she ensure that the Government continue to do everything they can to support such endeavours?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for making that incredibly important point. Just about every Member of the House will have had the privilege and honour of meeting Ukrainians who have moved to their constituency—sadly, not through choice but through necessity. They have enriched our communities, and they are indeed supporting those back at home. It really is important that the Government continue to work with them so that we get an accurate picture of what is taking place, but also so that we can ensure that we play our part in supporting Ukraine in its self-defence against Putin's aggression.

Gurinder Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): This House should commend the brave Ukrainian forces for the undoubted success of their incursion into Russia's Kursk region,

but we can see that they remain under significant stress across the whole region. What military support have the UK Government provided to the Ukrainian armed forces since the general election, and what commitment do we have in place going forward?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important question. I want to be very clear that we are stepping up our military support, for the reasons that he mentions. That includes the new package that the Defence Secretary announced in Odesa—I think it was on his second day in the job. It includes more artillery guns, a quarter of a million ammunition rounds and 90 precision Brimstone missiles. We are also speeding up that support: on 7 July the Defence Secretary announced that we would ensure that the package of military aid that was promised in April under the previous Government, which includes air defence missiles, would be delivered in full to Ukraine within the next 100 days.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): What action are the Government taking with our allies to crack down on sanction dodging, which is leading to critical components for military equipment, including drones, getting into Russia?

Anneliese Dodds: This Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that there is no sanction dodging and that we have an effective sanctions regime, which is critical to ensuring that Putin's illegal war does not succeed. Over £20 billion-worth of UK-Russia bilateral trade is now under full or partial sanction. Imports from Russia into the UK have fallen by more than 99%, and exports to Russia have fallen by more than 75%. I previously mentioned that we have been working to tackle the so-called shadow fleet, and working with our allies and partners to ensure that we have robust action in that area, but we will continue to keep the system under review.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on both the tone and the substance of her response here today, and I see that the Foreign Secretary is now coming into the Chamber. The President of Ukraine has lauded the UK for its leadership in arms, politics and support for Ukrainian society, but can the Minister explain why he said that, since the election, that support had slowed?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his question, but I have to say that the Prime Minister could not have been clearer that the UK's support for Ukraine is unwavering. This is a cross-party commitment coming from the UK. It is absolutely clear and we continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine. That is why the Prime Minister, within his first week in office, committed to £3 billion a year of support to Ukraine for as long as it takes. That is a new commitment, and one that we believed it was important to make, to underline that continued support. The right hon. Member will remember that, as a further signal of the strength of the relationship, the Prime Minister called President Zelensky on his first day in the job and that the Defence Secretary visited Kyiv just hours later. That commitment could not be clearer.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): BAE Systems in my constituency and its workforce across Lancashire—indeed, including in the Speaker's constituency of Chorley—have been at the forefront of the armaments supply to Ukraine. The Typhoon project at the Warton site will start to hit a lull from next year, when there will be no more assembly of Typhoons, but we know that countries directly affected by Russia's aggression across its border wish to place Typhoon orders in the coming years. There will be a delay in our ability to critically supply those important aircraft to strategic partners. Will the Minister commit to working with me and other MPs from Lancashire and with BAE Systems on how we can fill that gap in the production and assembly of Typhoon fighter jets, to make sure that, when our allies and partners need those jets, they will be available? This will also benefit jobs across Lancashire and indeed the UK economy through exports.

Anneliese Dodds: First, I pay tribute to those British workers who have been ensuring that that essential matériel is being delivered when it is so needed. That really does show UK technology at its best. I am assured that the Defence Secretary would be keen to meet the hon. Member. He is well aware of these challenges and he would be interested in having that conversation. Of course, the new UK Government have been absolutely clear that we are determined to have a long-term strategy for defence that includes our defence industries as well.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): As with so many things in international affairs, American support is indispensable. So it is with support for Ukraine, yet the election of President Trump et al threatens that. Have the Government conducted any contingency planning as to how to continue full support for Ukraine in the event of the potential election of President Trump?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I do not want to repeat word for word what I said previously. He will, I am sure, understand that the

US and the UK have worked together for over 100 years on issues of importance, and that has not varied despite the party political composition of the leaderships in our two countries. We will not be speculating about hypothetical scenarios. Instead, we will be ensuring that we continue to work with our allies to ensure that the Ukrainian people, who have so bravely been defending their country, are supported in their self-defence by the UK.

Mr Speaker: That leaves us with just Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her confident answers. They will encourage us all in this House and indeed our constituents back home as well, and I thank her for that. As she stated, as all our children—and in my case, my six grandchildren—make their way back into their classrooms in safety and security today, our minds are with those children in Ukraine who are unable to access an education, a hope or even a future. Can she outline what discussions have taken place to ensure that those children remaining in Ukraine have access to their education, to vocational training and indeed to a future?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that important point. I thank him for his kind words and I congratulate him on his six grandchildren. I am sure I have heard that before, but it is quite an achievement. *[Interruption.]* It may not be entirely down to him, of course.

The hon. Member raises a very sad issue, as we see children being put in a very difficult position. Appalling numbers of children have been killed due to Russian aggression, and there is also the impact on essential children's services, including education and healthcare. We have not managed to cover this in this urgent question, but I assure him that, when it comes to humanitarian support, the UK is absolutely committed to supporting Ukraine. As he would expect, as Minister for Development, I have been working very hard on this across a range of services, but particularly humanitarian matters and energy as we go into the winter.

Middle East Update

4.21 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the middle east.

On taking office in July, I told the House that this Government's priority in the region will be to advance the cause of peace. That continues to be our mission on every front: in Israel, in the west bank, in Lebanon, in the Red sea and, of course, in Gaza, where we need an immediate ceasefire, the protection of civilians, the immediate release of all hostages and more aid getting into Gaza.

Over the summer, we faced the prospect of full-scale war breaking out between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel. On each of my three visits to the region, including alongside my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary and, most recently, my joint visit with French Foreign Minister Séjourné, I have urged Lebanese Hezbollah, the Lebanese Government and Israel to engage with the US-led discussions to resolve their disagreements diplomatically and to reach a peaceful resolution through the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1701.

As we continue to work with our allies and partners to push for a diplomatic solution, we none the less stand ready for the worst-case scenario, including the potential evacuation of British nationals. Our message to those still in Lebanon remains clear: leave now.

Our common goal of peace in the middle east will never be lasting until there is safety, security and sovereignty for both Israel and a Palestinian state. We must all keep at the forefront of our mind the pain, the anguish and the horror this conflict has caused for so many ordinary civilians. The victims of the 7 October atrocity. The hostages and all those still enduring unimaginable suffering, whether they are hoping to see their loved ones again or are mourning their loss, as the tragic events of this weekend illustrate with the recovery of the bodies of six murdered hostages. The Israeli people still living under rocket fire, not only from Hamas but from other hostile actors explicitly dedicated to Israel's annihilation, and fighting an enemy in Hamas whose appalling tactics endanger countless civilian lives. And the innocent Palestinians, with tens of thousands killed in the fighting, their numbers growing by the day, including distressing numbers of women and children. Many mothers are so malnourished that they cannot produce milk for their babies, and families are struggling to keep their children alive—disease and famine loom ever larger.

Heroic humanitarians are putting their lives on the line to help others, including the brave aid workers I met from the United Nations agencies and at the Palestine Red Crescent Society warehouse I visited alongside France's Foreign Minister last month. Indeed, last Thursday, the UK led a session at the United Nations Security Council encouraging a continued global focus on the protection of civilians in Gaza, including the need for action on polio.

The escalation we are now seeing in the west bank, as well as in Gaza, is deeply worrying, with many communities facing settler violence amid an ongoing occupation, and so many on either side of this terrible conflict convinced that the world does not grasp the reality of Israel's predicament, or the depth of Palestinian suffering.

Throughout my life, I have been a friend of Israel: a liberal, progressive Zionist who believes in Israel as a democratic state and a homeland for the Jewish people, which has the right both to exist and to defend itself. But I believe also that Israel will only exist in safety and security if there is a two-state solution that guarantees the rights of all Israeli citizens and their Palestinian neighbours, who have their own inalienable right to self-determination and security.

As concern at the horrifying scenes in Gaza has risen, many in this House, as well as esteemed lawyers and international organisations, have raised British arms export licensing to Israel. After raising my own concerns from Opposition, on taking office, I immediately sought to update the review. On my first appearance as Foreign Secretary in this House, I committed to sharing the review's conclusions.

We have rigorously followed every stage of the process established by the previous Conservative Government. Let me first be clear on the review's scope. This Government are not an international court. We have not, and could not, arbitrate on whether or not Israel has breached international humanitarian law. This is a forward-looking evaluation, not a determination of innocence or guilt, and it does not prejudice any future determinations by the competent courts.

However, facing a conflict such as this, it is this Government's legal duty to review export licences. Criterion 2C of the strategic export licensing criteria states that the Government will

"not issue export licences if there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law".

It is with regret that I inform the House today that the assessment I have received leaves me unable to conclude anything other than that, for certain UK arms exports to Israel, there exists a clear risk that they might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

I have informed my right hon. Friend the Business and Trade Secretary. Therefore, he is today announcing the suspension of around 30 licences, from a total of approximately 350, to Israel, as required under the Export Control Act 2002. These include licences for equipment that we assess is for use in the current conflict in Gaza, such as important components that go into military aircraft, including fighter aircraft, helicopters and drones, as well as items that facilitate ground targeting. For transparency, the Government are publishing a summary of our assessment.

Today, I want to underline four points about these decisions. First, Israel's actions in Gaza continue to lead to immense loss of civilian life, widespread destruction to civilian infrastructure and immense suffering. In many cases, it has not been possible to reach a determinative conclusion on allegations regarding Israel's conduct of hostilities, in part because there is insufficient information either from Israel or other reliable sources to verify such claims. Nevertheless, it is the assessment of His Majesty's Government that Israel could reasonably do more to ensure that lifesaving food and medical supplies reach civilians in Gaza, in the light of the appalling humanitarian situation.

This Government are also deeply concerned by credible claims of mistreatment of detainees, which the International Committee of the Red Cross cannot investigate after

[Mr David Lammy]

being denied access to places of detention. Both my predecessor and all our major allies have repeatedly and forcefully raised these concerns with the Israeli Government. Regrettably, those concerns have not been addressed satisfactorily.

Secondly, there can be no doubt that Hamas pay not the slightest heed to international humanitarian law and endanger civilians by embedding themselves in the tightly concentrated civilian population and in civilian infrastructure. There is no equivalence between Hamas terrorists—or indeed Iran and its partners and proxies—and Israel's democratic Government, but to license arms exports to Israel we must assess its compliance with international humanitarian law, notwithstanding the abhorrence of its opponents' tactics and ideology.

Thirdly, this is not a blanket ban or an arms embargo. The suspension targets around 30 of approximately 350 licences to Israel in total, for items that could be used in the current conflict in Gaza. The rest will continue. The action we are taking will not have a material impact on Israel's security. This suspension covers only items that might be used in the current conflict. There are a number of export licences that we have assessed are not for military use in the current conflict and therefore do not require suspension. They include items that are not being used by the Israel Defence Forces in the current conflict, such as trainer aircraft or other naval equipment. They also include export licences for civilian use, covering a range of products such as food-testing chemicals, telecoms, and data equipment. This suspension will not prejudice the international, collaborative, global F-35 programme that supplies aircraft for more than 20 countries, which is crucial to wider peace and security. Indeed, the effects of suspending all licences for the F-35 programme would undermine the global F-35 supply chain that is vital for the security of the UK, our allies and NATO. Therefore, the Business and Trade Secretary has exempted these licences from his decision.

Fourthly, the Government will keep our position under review. Commitment to comply with international humanitarian law is not the only criterion in making export-licensing decisions. We will continue to work with our allies to improve the situation. Foreign policy, of course, involves tough choices, but I will always seek to take such decisions in line with our principles and I will keep the House updated, in line with my previous commitment.

Mr Speaker, we do not take this decision lightly, but we note that, on previous occasions, Ministers from all parts of the House—Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat—chose not to license exports to Israel. In 1982, Margaret Thatcher imposed a full arms embargo and an oil embargo on Israel as it fought in Lebanon. Conflicts in Gaza prompted Gordon Brown to suspend five licences in 2009, and Vince Cable chose not to issue new licences while conducting a review in 2014. Like them, this Government take seriously their role in applying export licensing law, reflecting the published criteria and the specific circumstances. But let me leave this House in no doubt: the UK continues to support Israel's right to self-defence in accordance with international law.

In April, British fighter jets intercepted Iranian missiles aimed at Israel, preventing significant loss of civilian life. We supported robust action against the Iranian-backed

Houthis in Yemen, who have attacked Israel directly as well as Israeli-linked shipping. Iran should be in no doubt of our commitment to challenge its reckless and destabilising activity in the region and across the world. We will continue to work hand in glove with our international partners to stand up to Iranian aggression and malign activity wherever it is found, and we continue to hold Iran to account, including through extensive sanctions.

Today, we are doing so again. We are announcing new sanctions on four Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps force targets, which have a role in supporting Iranian proxy actions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Through the UK's dedicated Iran sanctions regime we have sanctioned more than 400 Iranian individuals and entities. And through our work with partners, we are exposing and containing Iran's destabilising weapons development, where soon we will be introducing further regulations to bolster existing bans on the export of goods and technology significant to Iran's production of drones and missiles.

Let me be clear: we will continue to work with Israel and our partners to tackle the threat from Iran across the region. This Government will continue to stand for Israel's security, and we will always do so in a manner consistent with our obligations to domestic and international law. Mr Speaker, I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

4.34 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. Over the weekend, we were once again reminded of the tragic human toll of this conflict, with Israel recovering the bodies of six more innocent hostages murdered by Hamas. The only way this conflict will be brought to an end, and for the suffering to end, is through the release of those hostages. This cruel captivity has lasted almost a year. Their suffering and jeopardy is intolerable for Israel, and it should be intolerable for anyone who cares about human rights and human dignity. Many of us in this House have met with the families of the hostages. Even in the midst of unimaginable pain and anxiety, they keep the torch burning for their loved ones, publicly highlighting their plight and tremendous bravery.

Let us be clear that the onus is on Hamas. They are using the Palestinian people as human shields. Hamas have no humanity and no shame. As Hamas inflict terrible suffering on both the Israeli and the Palestinian people, it should not be forgotten that another Iranian-backed proxy—Hezbollah—is engaged in continuous attacks on Israel's northern border, with the risk of further and yet more dangerous escalation across the blue line. Our support for Israel's security is rock solid in the face of threats from those who wish it serious harm, as we showed in April this year when British personnel and weaponry were used to counter Iran's massive missile attack. We will look carefully at the limited arms embargo memorandum that the Foreign Secretary has promised the House. While he rightly does not publish his legal advice, we are grateful that he is honouring the promise that I made to the Business and Trade Committee to publish as much as possible on this. He will, I know, and as he said, be careful not to indicate, in any way at all, any moral equivalence between Hamas and the democratically elected Government of Israel.

In Government, we introduced sanctions to undermine Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. We also sanctioned extremist Israeli settlers who committed human rights abuses against Palestinian communities in the west bank, and we welcome the new sanctions that the Foreign Secretary has announced on four IRGC-Quds Force targets. Implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 1701 remains our best hope of de-escalation and peace along the blue line. Resolution 1701 provides a road map that everyone should seek to follow, and we welcome the Government's reaffirmation of their support for it. In relation to British nationals in Lebanon, it is very much our hope that since the House last considered this matter, shortly before the recess, the number of Brits who have registered their presence in Lebanon and departed from the country has risen. I reiterate that the situation in the west bank has also deteriorated and become yet more tense. While Israel must protect its vital security interests, we urge the Netanyahu Government to do so in such a way that minimises the risk of yet further instability and escalation.

Turning finally to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, we convey our thanks to the World Health Organisation and UNICEF staff who have been racing to get polio vaccinations administered across Gaza. They are doing vital work during this agreed pause. Pauses offer not only the potential to get much-needed humanitarian aid in but a window to get the hostages out, and pauses can help to create the conditions necessary to bring about a sustainable peace. On the distribution of aid, we strongly support calls for watertight deconfliction processes and the utmost protection of aid workers. Humanitarian aid can make a difference only if it is properly and safely distributed. Guaranteed deconfliction for aid convoys and other humanitarian work is absolutely essential. It is by road and truck that aid must be able to reach Gaza by all routes. This should make humanitarian aid delivery by air and sea unnecessary. Can the Foreign Secretary provide the House with more detail about how we are playing our part in international efforts to get more aid over the border to desperate people?

We all want the terrible suffering of both the Israeli and Palestinian people to end. It feels as if we are at a point where this conflict could go in two radically different directions. Although the region faces a potential conflagration, it is also possible that cooler heads on all sides might prevail. Britain's role must be to help facilitate a sustainable end to the current suffering. It is only then that we can achieve our aim of lifting people's eyes to the prospect of a different horizon in the future.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone of his response. He will know as well as anyone that these are complex and sober questions, and it is right that the House can debate them in the appropriate tone and spirit this afternoon. I recall that Lord Cameron said that he was concerned that Israel had violated international humanitarian law. The shadow Foreign Secretary himself has repeatedly called on Israel to abide by international humanitarian law and said that in certain actions it may not have complied with international humanitarian law. In April, the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), who was in her seat slightly earlier—said that the UK had no choice but to suspend arms,

so the shadow Foreign Secretary can recognise that this is not a partisan issue. I am very grateful for the tone that he has taken in this debate.

I have provided the House today with a summary of the way in which I have made the assessment. In doing so, I have been more transparent than any Government have been in the past about such decisions, because I recognise the exceptional public interest that there is in this debate. The shadow Foreign Secretary is right, like me, to underline that there is no moral equivalence between Hamas, who began this atrocity on 7 October, and Israel's prosecution of getting the hostages out and defending itself, even though I have said that there is a clear risk in relation to our export licensing regime. He is right to talk about the context in Lebanon and indeed to support the Government's message that UK nationals should leave. Let me assure him that I have not just visited Lebanon, now and on many occasions, but spoken with the Lebanese Prime Minister on three occasions just in the last few weeks.

In the west bank, of course we recognise the important security concerns of Israel, but we are deeply concerned with the way that we have seen these actions being prosecuted over the last few days, and we call for de-escalation. On the situation in Gaza, successive Foreign Secretaries have now raised with the Israelis—I raised it directly with Prime Minister Netanyahu—that not enough trucks are getting in. It is still the case today, after 11 months of conflict, that not enough trucks are getting in. The Minister for Development was assessing the situation from Jordan, as I was, just before that, with the Red Crescent.

It has been important for us to demonstrate leadership in the UN and to press for pauses so that the children of Gaza can be vaccinated against polio. We have that pause in place, I think between 8 am and 2 pm, so that those children can get the vaccinations they need so that they do not suffer.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his important statement. I agree with the shadow Secretary of State that it is clear that Hamas have no humanity and no shame. Some have said that there is only a pause to vaccinate children because polio may spread beyond Gaza. With so many children killed in this war, I understand why some may say that. The World Health Organisation says that at least 90% of children under 10 must be immunised in a very short period of time. With that in mind, can the Secretary of State please tell the House what measures the Government are taking to ensure further agreements are made to have a pause for as long as possible and that both sides can adhere to?

Mr Lammy: I was very pleased to meet—alongside the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds)—Dr Tedros, who leads the World Health Organisation, to discuss those issues and his particular concerns about disease and polio in the area. We continue to press for a ceasefire and are working with all colleagues to get it. Just before I came to the House, President Biden confirmed that the ceasefire is in reach. I urge all sides now to make that ceasefire happen, bring these horrors to an end and get the hostages out.

Mr Speaker: I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): This week, we received the terrible news of the deaths of six Israeli hostages. Among them was Hersh Goldberg-Polin, whose mother Rachel I met when I was last in Jerusalem. I cannot imagine her pain. That pain is not diluted by the pain of so many others, including, yes, the families of other Israeli hostages, but also thousands of families in Gaza, for the dead there. I am sure we send our deepest condolences to all.

We have seen horrific violence in the west bank. Israeli forces launched an operation inside refugee camps, terrifying children in their beds, and have been accused of breaking their own codes of conduct. The situation seems to go only from bad to worse, so I welcome the Foreign Secretary's remarks about the suspension of some licences for arms export to the Israel Defence Forces, but given the seriousness of the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice cases, questions remain about the many hundreds of other such licences, so I look forward to reading the published summary. I urge the Government to go further. Will they ban goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements? If the settlements are illegal, why are we allowing trade with them? Will the Government sanction Ben Gvir and Smotrich, as the European Union's Josep Borrell is considering? Can the Foreign Secretary say at least that, when it comes to violent extremists, nothing and no one is off the table?

Hersh's mother Rachel said to the UN Assembly in December of last year:

"We are at a crossroads, and when I say we, I don't mean...Jews Muslims or Christians, Americans, Palestinians, Europeans, Israelis, Ukrainians, Russians. I mean we humans... We can keep dividing the world into the paradigm of them versus us or we can start thinking about those who are willing and those who are not".

This could have been so different. Imagine if the world had listened to her in December. I urge the Government to be bolder. That is the only way to make that promise of peace a reality, and it must start, rather than end, with an immediate ceasefire.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I have now personally spoken to or met all the families of British and UK-linked hostages and have heard for myself the suffering that they have endured since their loved ones were taken on 7 October. There needs to be an end to this nightmare. I see the tremendous grief, pain and trauma whenever I visit Israel and meet hostages' families, as I have continued to do.

The hon. Lady is right to raise the issues on the west bank. We are deeply concerned about the ongoing IDF military operation in the occupied west bank and the attacks from Palestinian militants. We recognise, of course, Israel's need to defend itself against security threats, but we are deeply worried about the methods that Israel has employed and by reports of civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure in particular. It is in no one's interest for further conflict and instability to spread to the west bank. We condemn the settler expansion—particularly the record levels this year—and the increase in settler violence. I condemn the language that has been used by Ministers in the Israeli Government—Smotrich and Ben Gvir—in relation to that in particular. It is entirely unacceptable language, and should be condemned by the Israeli Government as a whole.

The hon. Lady has raised important issues. Of course, she will recognise that we label goods from settlements based on the 1967 borders, but the issues are very complex.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The escalation of military violence in the west bank has led to the reported deaths of Palestinians and increased settler violence, resulting in illegal occupation and violent land theft. Amid this escalation, the US has imposed sanctions on Israeli groups. Medical Aid for Palestinians has claimed that the UK Government have not acted with due urgency, so can the Foreign Secretary clarify the Government's position on this issue and what immediate actions they will be taking, other than condemnation of this action?

Mr Lammy: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are keeping this issue under review. We are in dialogue with our closest allies on this issue, and we will not flinch from dealing with the issues at hand if we need to.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that what appears to be a carefully calibrated response to a dreadful situation will not in any way impair the valuable co-operation between Israel and the United Kingdom where the sharing of intelligence about international terrorist activity is concerned?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is among the very few in this House who understand the breadth, depth, and importance for our own national security of that relationship. We have a very important people-to-people relationship with Israel—250,000 Jewish people in this country—and a very important trading relationship with Israel, but our intelligence, military and security co-operation is essential, not just to our national interest but to the security of much of the world.

As such, I have made this decision with regret. It is in sorrow, not in anger, and the right hon. Gentleman will know that other Governments—Conservative Governments—have gone for a full arms embargo. We have not done that today, because we recognise that with Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas, it is right that Israel has the means to defend itself.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Could my right hon. Friend reiterate the very important point that this is not an arms embargo on Israel? We continue to support Israel's right to defend itself and will continue to sell it arms, but the rules underpinning our control of arms are as they have always been: the UK will not permit the sale of arms if they might be used for internal repression or international aggression. For that reason, we have cut the number of arms export licences by 30.

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend spent a few more years at the Bar than I did, and she knows that this very sober assessment is based on a clear risk. On the basis of that clear risk, we have sought to suspend export licences for arms and weaponry that may be used in Gaza, amounting to around 30 licences. Of course, it is our sincere hope that we will get to that ceasefire, and to a sustained position that will allow us to resume working in the way that we would normally work with our Israeli friends.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I, too, met the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin in Jerusalem. It is a terrible tragedy that his name has joined the list of many thousands of innocents on both sides who have died in this conflict over the last few months.

The Secretary of State will know that I have long been concerned about the situation in the west bank. I understand that the measures that he has taken today, and indeed sanctions generally, are not purely performative—he wants them to have some bite—so I wanted to ask about the case of the Hilltop Youth. That violent settler organisation was sanctioned by the previous Government earlier this year and was recently described as a bunch of terrorists by the head of the internal security service in Israel, yet our sanctions have seemingly had no impact on its behaviour and conduct or on the violent persecution that it is visiting upon innocent Palestinians in the west bank.

Will the Secretary of State consider extending our sanctions to those who support and sustain that organisation and others, both within Israel and externally? If we are to be taken seriously on the international stage, whether in the case of Iran or these violent organisations, our measures have to have bite and effect. At the moment, seemingly, they do not.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman, who has raised these issues consistently in the House over many years, is absolutely right to draw our focus to what is happening on the west bank. Not because of the immediate violence that we have seen in the last two days, but because the level of violence—the expansion and the sense of impunity that one sees when one is in the west bank—is of huge concern. I reassure him that I continue to work with allies and to keep these matters under close review.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I speak as a long-term friend of Palestine and an advocate of a two-state solution. I am sure that he will agree that we want to see all hostages released in their hundreds and thousands.

What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of the impact of his suspension of 30 licences? Israel has shown little sign of responding to pressure from the outside world, so along with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), I ask what further steps he is prepared to take. We see those egregious behaviours in the west bank, so is it really conscionable that Israel will respond favourably to his limited but welcome announcement today?

Mr Lammy: May I say that I know the strength with which my hon. Friend talks about these issues, and has talked about them consistently over many years? Let me make it clear that the announcement that I have made today follows a process, which was set up by the last Government in 2021. We have followed that process to the letter, which is why I am here today. The point of the process is in no way to punish Israel, but to make sure that our export licensing regime remains among the most robust in the world. I recognise what he says about the west bank particularly, which is why I went to the region again just a few weeks ago.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for prior sight of the statement, and of course we welcome anything that reduces the appalling death toll in Gaza and, increasingly, sadly, in the west bank. The statement raises many questions, however, that I will write to him about later.

I will press the Foreign Secretary on the issue of the UK recognising that the Netanyahu Government's use of UK weapons poses a "clear risk" of the violation of international humanitarian law. He will be aware that there is no legal definition of what is an offensive weapon and what is a defensive weapon, so why and on what basis, if there is a "clear risk"—in his words—of the violation of international humanitarian law, has he not imposed a blanket ban on Israel until that risk has gone away completely?

Mr Lammy: We have one of the most robust export licensing regimes in the world. The process requires us to make an assessment of the clear risk in the theatre of conflict, which in this case is Gaza. We therefore made an assessment of the licences that could be used in Gaza, and I made this announcement today. Notwithstanding the concerns around international humanitarian law in that theatre of action, the hon. Gentleman should recognise the real threats that Israel faces from Lebanese Hezbollah, recognise what the Houthis are doing in the Red sea—in just the last few days, we saw a terrible attack on a Greek oil tanker—and recognise the long-standing relationship that this country has with Israel, particularly as regards the intelligence and military co-operation that keeps much of the middle east and the world safe. On that basis, my remarks are measured, and I defend that.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's decision to suspend certain arms sales to Israel. I also appreciate his acknowledgment that Israel could do much more to allow aid to reach people in Gaza. What further conversations has he had with the Israeli Government to ask them to ensure that aid workers can do their vital work safely and effectively, and that aid can get to those who desperately need it?

Mr Lammy: I have raised the issue of aid workers, and the tremendous loss of aid workers' lives in this conflict, directly in all my meetings with the Israeli Government. Another issue sits alongside this: the issue of deconfliction. In any war, there are rules, and one of the rules is that aid workers should be able to get medical supplies and aid to the civilians who need it. There have been real issues with deconfliction zones, and the number of aid workers and UN workers who have died in this conflict, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The only people who will be overjoyed by this decision are the Hamas terrorists who murdered six hostages in cold blood at the weekend. They have been handed the hope that this Government will not stand firm in their defence of Israel's right to defend itself.

Let us look at the threadbare arguments that the Foreign Secretary has used. He says that these arms might be used to breach international humanitarian law, yet he admits that the Government cannot arbitrate

[Sammy Wilson]

on whether Israel has done so to date. He says that civilian deaths have been caused, yet hardly a couple of paragraphs later in his statement he states that the civilian deaths are the result of Hamas embedding itself in the civilian population, with no regard for the people affected. The last reason he gives for his decision is that Israel is responsible for those deaths, but he then admits that it is not possible to determine who is responsible for the deaths—or, indeed, how many deaths there have been; in most cases, we rely on Hamas propaganda for that number.

I say to the Foreign Secretary that this is a bad decision, which we will live to regret. I believe that it is, unfortunately, the result of the pressure that Labour MPs have felt in their constituencies from pro-Gaza protests.

Mr Lammy: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that this party supported British fighters taking to the skies on 13 April in the defence of Israel when missiles were being delivered from Iran. This party supported the last Government in their defence of Israel following the attacks from the Houthis in the Red sea. I remind him that I have not gone as far as Margaret Thatcher went in 1982. Governments of both types—including under Vince Cable, a Liberal Democrat, and Gordon Brown—have had to make these difficult decisions. I stand by a party and, I hope, a Chamber that recognises the importance of international humanitarian law, and the clear risk assessment that we have been required to make to ensure that this country is not in breach of that law.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to suspend certain licences to sell arms to Israel; my constituents are horrified by the unimaginable and unacceptable suffering in Gaza, and certainly would not want any British exports to contribute to it. My constituents are also horrified by the unimaginable and unacceptable suffering of the hostages who have been held for over 11 months, many of whom have been killed.

The Foreign Secretary will have seen the protests in Tel Aviv last night, and the strikes called by Israeli labour unions to try to persuade the Israeli Government to make a deal and bring hostages home. From his discussions with the Israeli Government, what does he think are the main obstacles to a deal that brings the hostages home and delivers a ceasefire in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend asks a very good question, and she is absolutely right: what brings this to an end is a ceasefire. The issues boil down to the security of Israel once we get to that ceasefire. She will no doubt have read about the issues around the Philadelphi corridor, and Israel's insistence that it should still be present in Gaza; that is a matter of discussion. There have been issues around the hostages, who must come out—that is absolutely right—and the prisoners in Israel's prisons, the Palestinians in particular. We are reaching a decisive point, as Joe Biden has said. We can get there, and we need to get there to bring to an end this horror, which has gone on for many, many months.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary will be well aware of the decisions made by the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. He will also be well aware that the

world has condemned Israel for its illegal occupation of the west bank, the settlement policy and the killing of 40,000 people in Gaza. On the suspension of some arms contracts, can he explain what effect that will actually have on Israel's ability to continue the bombardment of Gaza, or will it continue unabated? Will he also explain what role, legally or otherwise, Britain has played in overflying Gaza with surveillance aircraft, and explain the use of RAF Akrotiri as a staging post for aircraft going to Israel, which many people believe are carrying weapons to be used to bomb Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is informed on many aspects of these issues. He must know that our arms exports to Israel amount to about 1% of its arms; in fact, the United States, Germany and others are much more engaged in selling arms to Israel, so when he asks about the effect, he can draw his own conclusions. I am very comfortable with the support that we give to Israel, and as he would expect, I will not comment on operational issues from this Dispatch Box.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Israeli military F-16 aircraft have dropped thousands of bombs on civilians in Gaza in the last 11 months. UN weapons inspectors confirmed that this includes bombing the premises of the aid agencies Medical Aid for Palestinians and the International Rescue Committee, which housed Palestinian aid workers, international aid workers and doctors, in January of this year. F-16s have further killed thousands of Palestinian civilians who had fled their homes to what the Israeli military had designated a safe zone in al-Mawasi. May I ask the Foreign Secretary to confirm that this arms ban will include licences related to the F-16, and if it does, that this is in service of upholding UK and international law and protecting civilian lives?

May I also express extreme concern at the ongoing Israeli military action in the west bank? Earlier this year, I was in Tulkarm refugee camp after a military raid, and last year I was in Jenin refugee camp, days after a military raid. Both those raids were much smaller than what is happening now. The west bank and Jerusalem are at boiling point, and that is alongside the horrors in Gaza. What action is the Foreign Secretary taking to uphold international law there, too?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend brings tremendous expertise to the House on the issues on the ground, particularly in Gaza and the west bank. I reassure her that we have fully assessed the export licensing regime, and weapons that might be used in the conflict—including those that she mentions—have been excluded. She is right to raise the issues of deconfliction, and the aid workers who have lost their lives. I reassure her that I have raised those issues with the Prime Minister in Israel and other members of the Government, and pressed them hard. When I came into this role, I knew that the former Foreign Secretary had done exactly the same. It is on that basis that we have, sadly and regrettably, come to this assessment today.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): We have had some very strong words from the Foreign Secretary today about the need for this war to end, and we have heard how important a ceasefire is for that, and I take him at his word. Looking forward, however, what levers does he have, and when will he pull them?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is new to this House, so I will tread very gently. I urge him to reflect on the fact that to bring about peace, as we saw in Northern Ireland, we need partners for peace. The principal partners here are Benjamin Netanyahu and Sinwar. The deal we have on the table could bring about that peace. In my past eight or nine weeks in office, I have spent more time on this issue, pressing to get that ceasefire, than any other.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): We have seen the most serious incursions into the west bank for 20 years. It is under cover of the horror happening in Gaza; otherwise it would be leading the news. Towns such as Jenin are completely cut off, with the water supply cut and the streets ploughed up. What is the Government's specific response to that, which is really a form of collective punishment? Has the Foreign Secretary looked at whether arms and equipment are being used specifically in the west bank?

Mr Lammy: I say to my very good friend that the UK position is clear: settlements are completely unacceptable and illegal under international law. They present an obstacle to peace, and they threaten the physical viability of a two-state solution. That is why we take this matter so seriously, and it is why we condemn the settler violence and remarks of incitement, such as those made by Israel's National Security Minister Mr Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Smotrich. We keep all these issues under review, and I discuss them all with our closest allies.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Amid the devastation of the bombardment and the collapse in civilian infrastructure, civilians in Gaza must now contend with polio. As has been mentioned this afternoon, to be effective, the UN vaccination programme needs to attain some 90% coverage of the population. What is the Foreign Secretary's assessment of the initial progress on the scheme? What steps are his Government taking to facilitate a swift and hopefully effective roll-out?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the question. It is horrendous that polio has returned after two decades of absence in Gaza. We convened and pressed to get this pause in Gaza to get children vaccinated so that we do not see a new flowering of that horrendous disease and affliction. I hope that the hon. Member will commend the leadership that we have shown as well as that we saw at the UN Security Council to bring about this vaccination programme in the last few days.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): We are all desperate to see an end to the suffering on all sides in this conflict. The Iranian regime and their proxies are one of the biggest barriers to ending that conflict and achieving a sustainable ceasefire. Does the Secretary of State agree that tackling the threat from Iran is vital? Will he update us on his plans to proscribe the IRGC?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the question, and I would not want the House to lose sight of the further sanctions on four individuals that I announced in the House this afternoon; Members can revisit my statement to be abreast of that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the dangers that the IRGC poses. Indeed, it has been important for me in these early weeks in office to

engage with my Iranian counterpart and to urge de-escalation, particularly in relation to any action that Iran is contemplating. This remains the very biggest and most important of issues for us in the UK, and it is absolutely right to keep it centre stage.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The news about the suspension of some export licences is indeed welcome, and I know that many in my constituency and across the country will be glad to hear it, but I am alarmed that the principle underpinning criterion 2C seems to have been inconsistently applied. In particular, the justification that the Foreign Secretary offered for not suspending licences for the F-35 appears inconsistent. There appears to be clear evidence of risk—I understand that there are online posts from the Israel Defence Forces indicating that F-35s have been used in bombing Gaza—so I urge him to review the case again and to suspend those licences. Will he also clarify whether licensing continues for R902(W) Wankel engines, which were involved in the attack on World Central Kitchen humanitarian workers?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady asked important questions about the F-35. In looking at the F-35, it is important to understand that there is a global supply chain. She will recognise the very serious threats that exist across much of the globe in other terrible theatres of conflict. I think that, were she in my situation, she too would make the judgment that we should do nothing to equip those who would cause tremendous harm in relation to this decision. That has been important—never mind the ability to distinguish, across those multiple supply chains that involve many nations, the particular bits of armoury that she talked about.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): The children of Gaza have faced an onslaught from above and now face the spread of disease. Will the Foreign Secretary consider once again bringing those who are most vulnerable to the UK for medical treatment? Polio has a lasting impact, and those who have been infected could need a lot more support with lifelong disabilities. We also see children who need amputations and life-altering operations but have not been able to access the right quality of care because the hospitals have not been there. Can we look at this again? Other countries are doing so; let us be a part of that.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. My right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and I made statements in our first weeks in office on supporting UK-Med and restoring the funding to UNRWA, to ensure that those children get the medical aid they need at this time. I am afraid my assessment is that, across Gaza, it is not sufficient, for the reasons that I have discussed, but it was important that we put all the aid and money we could into that endeavour, particularly on behalf of those young children. Another issue that I am tremendously concerned about is the amount of young people who are not in school. This has gone on for months, and young people must be in school.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his answers. I defend the right of Israel to protect all its people, as the United Kingdom of Great

[Jim Shannon]

Britain and Northern Ireland did for its own citizens against IRA terrorism, and as Ukraine has done against Russian aggression. I am ever mindful of that. Our hearts ache for those hostage families who have received the news that they feared and dreaded for almost a year. That even more forcibly underlines the need to ensure that either the hostages or their remains are brought home, and that steps be taken for peace in the middle east, which is the goal of the Foreign Secretary and everyone in this House. Will he outline what further steps can be taken along with our allies to bring about this much-needed peace?

Mr Lammy: Today's decision relates to an independent process concerning our strategic export licensing criteria. It comes on yet another day of tremendous pain for those hostage families—I am acutely aware of that. It is why I have sought to speak to those families—those who have a relationship with our own country, and those beyond as well—and to meet them when I have been in Israel. My heart bleeds for them. The pain and suffering that they are going through is torturous. That there are so many left is unbelievable. To have gone so many months not knowing whether their loved one is alive or dead is horrific. Anyone who looks at the front pages of the international news can see those beautiful young people who have been taken from us in the most horrific of ways; frankly, it brings tears to the eyes. I offer my deepest condolences—all of us do—to those families who have learned that they have lost their loved ones over the last few days.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary announced that 30 of approximately 350 arms export licences will now be suspended. That is still less than 10% of the total number of arms export licences to Israel. Given that over 40,000 Palestinians have now been killed, Israel is expanding its military operations in the occupied west bank and a Foreign Office official has resigned, stating that

“it's actually quite clear...that...Israel is perpetuating war crimes in plain sight”,

will the UK Government ensure that the UK is not complicit in Israel's war crimes, and will they suspend all arms sales to Israel?

Mr Lammy: I have followed the quasi-legal process that we have in this country—one of the most robust regimes in the world. I stand by the decision that I have made that approximately 30 export licences to Israel should be suspended at this time. Yes, that represents 10%, because it is the 10% that could be used in the theatre of conflict that we are concerned with. I gently say to the hon. Lady that we might sell many things, but I do not think anyone would suggest that we should not sell a helmet or goggles to one of our closest allies. We made that assessment in a measured and sober way on behalf of the British people, and I am satisfied with the assessment that has been made.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's decision to withdraw some arms export licences. I am confident that, even though our arms trade is insignificant, it is bound to have a repercussion on other countries that provide arms licences, so I

certainly welcome the move. What steps can he take, in liaising with his Israeli counterparts, in relation to the Palestinian children who will now receive polio vaccinations and are being moved from pillar to post, without a real safe zone? Will the Foreign Secretary seek assurances that they will be given a safe zone and not be blown away after being given their vaccinations?

Mr Lammy: Yes.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I absolutely share his pain, horror and dismay at the number of innocent civilians killed in Gaza. I recently received a letter from constituents under the banner of Families for a Ceasefire, signed by over 70 families in Monmouthshire, calling for a ceasefire and a ban on all arms sales to Israel, so I welcome the suspension of 30 arms licences. Will my right hon. Friend share with us when a further review of the remaining licences will be available? Will he consider encouraging other countries around the world to do as we have done and suspend their licences to Israel?

Mr Lammy: I recognise that this is a really big issue for my hon. Friend's constituents. I recall being in Wales a few months ago and the issue being raised with us both, when I was speaking on behalf of the Opposition. Our regime is our regime; different countries will have different arrangements. It is for them to democratically determine those arrangements, and they will have made a range of different assessments. She will also understand that, as I said, there are really only two or three countries that sell substantial amounts to Israel and, in truth, we are not one of them. I think the assessment that has regrettably been reached today should satisfy all those who have been concerned with any breaches of international humanitarian law on the basis of a clear risk, which is the export licensing criteria. As I said in my statement, it is not a judgment. It is not for me, the Government or any of us in this place to act as judge and jury. That is a matter for the appropriate international courts and must be determined in the usual way. I emphasise that it is the clear risk judgment of our export licensing criteria that has required me to make this judgment.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I welcome the Government's statement and I know that many in my constituency will as well. Our overwhelming priority must be an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that both sides must come to the table to end the conflict, and will the Foreign Office strain every diplomatic sinew to effect that?

Mr Lammy: Yes. We need a ceasefire now. It is in the hands of the major actors to bring that about, and to get those hostages out and get that hostage deal. So many families in Israel want to see that hostage deal and to bring the suffering of the Palestinian people to an end, so the aid can get in in the quantities required. It is within our reach. I will be honest with my hon. Friend: I had hoped that we would have reached that point by now, but we must still reach to get there over the coming days.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We have been talking about polio today because, tragically, we have learnt that that infectious disease is taking a

grip in Gaza. However, there are many other communicable diseases in Gaza which are spreading. Therefore, just focusing on polio will not be sufficient to save lives. What further steps can my right hon. Friend take to ensure that windows of vaccination, treatment and cure can be extended so that more lives can be saved?

Mr Lammy: I assure my hon. Friend that both the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), and I are working on these issues, and that our support for all medical aid in Gaza is paramount. Of course, sitting alongside the medical context is the nutritional context—including the threat of famine and starvation, which leads to so many medical ailments. My hon. Friend is right to emphasise these matters, and I can only say to her that we in the UK in particular continue to work on this front.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary rightly said in his statement that famine was looming ever larger in Gaza, and he has just mentioned the issue of hunger and malnutrition. The World Food Programme has managed to bring in only half the aid needed, and, indeed, recently suspended movements of its staff after they came under attack. Will the Foreign Secretary expand on the assessment of hunger and malnutrition levels in Gaza, and on the specific action that the Government are taking to push for unimpeded access to food aid?

Mr Lammy: It is of tremendous concern that over the last few days the World Food Programme has suspended its activities in Gaza because its own workers have come

under attack in connection with issues of deconfliction that have already been raised today. That has prompted tremendous concern on both sides of the House about nutrition, about starvation and about famine. We will be redoubling our efforts over the coming days, and working with international partners to see that people do not go without the food that would keep them from famine status.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's call for an immediate ceasefire, because that is the route for hostages to be returned home and for aid to flow into all corners of Gaza, and I welcome his call for a two-state solution, because that is the only route to a lasting peace in the region. I also welcome the clarity about the fact that there is no moral equivalence between the Israeli Government and the heinous action and intent of Hamas. May I ask the Foreign Secretary what steps can be taken to stop, or stem, the flow of money, aid and weapons from Iran to its proxies, who are so determined to bring about Israel's total destruction?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the tone of my hon. Friend's remarks. He is entirely right to put the spotlight on Iran. That is why I have announced further sanctions today, it is why we keep the position of the IRGC under close review, and it is why I have spoken to the Iranians twice in the last two weeks and urged de-escalation. It is also why I have been to Lebanon and met its Prime Minister, its Speaker and others, including those who could convey messages to Hezbollah. We have military intelligence capability that is among the best in the world, working with our partners, and these are issues of the utmost importance in relation to global security.

Violent Disorder

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call the Home Secretary to make her statement, I remind the House that several hundred people have been charged with criminal offences relating to these disturbances. Most of those cases are still before the courts. Public order is a matter of national importance, and Mr Speaker has therefore decided to grant a limited waiver to the House's sub judice resolution in the following terms. Members may make statements of fact about the circumstances of the unrest, about the number of people arrested, charged and sentenced, and about the kinds of behaviour exhibited during these events. However, they may not refer to specific individuals who have been charged and are awaiting trial, or engage in any discussion or speculation about individual cases.

I call the Home Secretary.

5.34 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Before I start, I want to pass our sympathies to the families of Cher Maximen and Mussie Imnetu, who died, sadly, this weekend following violent incidents around the Notting Hill carnival. Our thoughts are with their friends and families at this terrible time, and our thanks go to the police, who have moved swiftly to charge suspects in both cases. There is no place for such appalling, senseless violence on our streets, and this Government are determined to stamp out the scourge of serious violence, wherever it is found.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will now make a statement on the violent disorder that occurred earlier this summer. Just before the parliamentary recess, I made a statement to this House on the horrendous attack that took place in Southport on 29 July. Five weeks on, our hearts still ache for the three precious little girls who lost their lives, for their loved ones, and for the other children who were injured or endured unspeakable horror that day. The House will know that a suspect has been charged, and the investigation into the attack is ongoing. Those grieving families, the Southport community and the country will need answers, but, for that reason, the legal process must now take its course.

That day in the House, all of us came together in sorrow and in solidarity with the families and the people of Southport, and I spoke of the bravery, compassion and distress of the police, the paramedics and the firefighters I had met that morning, who were first on the scene. It is truly appalling that within hours of that statement, the same Southport police were facing the most disgraceful violent attacks from criminals and thugs. Police officers were pelted with bricks and bottles. The local mosque—a place of worship—was subjected to violent attack. While millions of decent people across the country were praying for bereaved families, a criminal minority of thugs and extremists saw only an opportunity to hijack a town's grief. The Merseyside chief constable, Serena Kennedy, spoke at the funeral of Alice da Silva Aguiar, where she said she hoped that anyone taking part in the violent disorder was

“hanging their head in shame at the pain”

that they had caused the bereaved family.

In the days that followed, we saw further disgraceful violent disorder in a number of towns and cities. There were repeated attacks on the same police officers whose job it is to keep communities safe, and over 100 officers were injured. In Sunderland, a citizens advice branch was set alight. In Liverpool, a library and vital community hub was torched. In Hull, shops were looted and a mosque was targeted. In Rotherham, a hotel used as asylum accommodation was set alight when people were inside. In Bolton, clashes between rival groups involved fireworks and bottles being thrown. And we saw people targeted on the streets because of the colour of their skin. This disgraceful disorder and racist hatred, included that whipped up by a hateful minority online, was an insult to those grieving over Southport.

Let us be very clear: those violent and criminal attacks were not protests. They were not about grievance. They were thuggery, racism and crime. Plenty of people across the country have strong views about crime, policing, immigration, asylum, the NHS and more, but they do not pick up bricks and throw them at the police. They do not loot shops or attack places of worship, and they do not set buildings alight knowing that other human beings are inside. There is a lot to debate on all kinds of policy issues, but no one should make excuses for violence or thuggery that risks public safety. This was brazen criminality, perpetrated in many cases by those with existing criminal convictions.

The Prime Minister and I made it clear that criminals would pay the price for their violence, and we meant it. The Prime Minister announced a new national violent disorder programme to bring together the best policing capabilities and enhance intelligence sharing across forces, and Ministers worked daily with the police and criminal justice partners to ensure that there was a strong and determined response. The National Police Co-ordination Centre operated a national mobilisation plan to ensure that strategic reserves of public order officers were ready to be deployed in support of different police forces. More than 40,000 officer shifts were worked by public order officers over 10 days, with over 6,600 public order officers deployed on one day alone. Rest days were cancelled and additional hours were worked.

The Crown Prosecution Service deployed over 100 additional prosecutors, boosting its 24-hour charging service with additional advice from the Director of Public Prosecutions so that they could move swiftly to charge. The Ministry of Justice accelerated the work on new cells to bring 500 more prison places on stream earlier, and the Lord Chancellor made it clear that the courts stood ready to hear all the cases coming through. The Home Office established a new rapid procedure for security support for mosques to ensure that communities felt supported and safe. In total, around 1,280 people have been arrested, around 800 charges have been made and over 570 individuals had been brought before the courts for offences such as violent disorder, assaults on emergency workers, arson and encouraging violent attacks online. This robust and swift response from the Government and the criminal justice system has provided a strong deterrent and shown our steadfast determination to keep people safe. Most importantly, order was restored.

I want now to update the House on some of the next steps we will take. First, we will take forward positive policing reform to build on the important work done by the National Police Co-ordination Centre this summer.

I want to particularly thank the chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council and the public order lead for the mobilisation work that they did, but the reality is that the co-ordination infrastructure and systems that they had to work with were too weak. I am therefore asking His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to work quickly with the NPCC, the College of Policing and the national lead for public order, to review the lessons from this summer's events so that we can ensure that strong co-ordination and intelligence systems are in place and that there is sufficient public order policing for the future.

Secondly, as well as ensuring that there is proper punishment for those responsible for this disorder, we will be pressing forward at pace with this Government's mission to take back the safety of our streets and restore respect for the police and the rule of law. We will put thousands more neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers back on the streets, reversing the collapse in community policing and rebuilding the relationship between local communities and forces. This Government are very clear that wherever and whenever violence and disorder emerge—whether in Hartlepool or Harehills, Sunderland or Stoke—we expect crimes to have consequences and perpetrators to face the full force of the law. The criminal violence we saw after the Southport attacks was not the only violent disorder this summer. We also saw disgraceful arson and attacks on the police in Harehills. In that case, 32 people have been arrested and in the past week three men have pleaded guilty to arson and violent disorder after a bus was set alight.

Thirdly, I have been concerned for a long time that not enough is being done to counter extremism—including both Islamist extremism and far right extremism—as there has been no proper strategy in place since 2015. I have ordered a rapid review of extremism to ensure that we have the strongest possible response to the poisonous ideologies that corrode community cohesion and fray the fabric of our democracy. Alongside that, the Deputy Prime Minister is overseeing cross-Government work to consider how we support our communities and address issues of cohesion in the longer term.

Fourthly, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology will strengthen the requirements for social media companies to take responsibility for the poison being proliferated on their platforms with the roll-out of the measures in the Online Safety Act 2023, and we will continue to be clear that criminal content online results in criminal sanctions offline. Fifthly, we stand ready to support the police through the special grant for policing, and the Home Office will work with police and crime commissioners to ensure that the Riot Compensation Act 2016 works effectively in the areas that are affected.

The country recoiled in horror at the scenes of violence and disorder in some cities and towns earlier this summer, but let there be no doubt: the minority of criminals and thugs who sought to cause havoc do not represent Britain. Instead, across the country we saw decent people coming together to support each other, to clean up the damage and to rebuild communities: the bricklayers who repaired the wall of the Southport mosque; the residents who donated funds and books to restock the Sellow library; and the volunteers in Sunderland who found a new site to offer community advice. There are many more examples,

and those small, unassuming acts of selflessness should serve as a message to the criminals and extremists that they do not speak for Britain and they never will. I commend this statement to the House.

5.44 pm

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of her statement.

I wish, once again, to pay my respects to the victims of the Southport attacks. The murder of three young girls in Southport was horrific, and our thoughts are with them, their families and friends, and of course the local community.

My thoughts are also with the families and friends of those who were killed at the Notting Hill carnival. The Government and the Mayor of London must do more to end the criminality and violence that too regularly mar this event, and they must bring forward credible plans to improve safety well ahead of next year's carnival.

I pay tribute to the bravery of our police officers across the country who put themselves in harm's way to deal with the violence perpetrated by thugs this summer. There is not, and never can be, any excuse, justification or rationale for the violent disorder that we have seen. We cannot and will not let rioting thugs or extremists win. The Government must always back our police officers to do what is necessary to maintain law and order. Attacks on the police by any group must not be tolerated, and intimidation of the public or the media cannot be allowed.

Does the Home Secretary now see that the comments made by one of her Ministers at the time of the riots, seemingly making excuses for armed thugs who intimidated the media, undermines the Government's credibility, reinforces the accusations of bias, and puts people, including police officers, at increased risk?

Does the Home Secretary now also recognise that the Labour leadership kneeling in the immediate aftermath of the Black Lives Matter disorder, when violent protestors attacked police officers, makes it look like her party takes some forms of violence less seriously than others? Does she accept that any perception whatsoever of treating the same crime differently, based on the race, religion or community of the perpetrator, increases tension rather than reduces it? Does she accept that, at times of heightened tension, Ministers must be, and must be seen to be, even-handed and demand even-handedness of others?

Does the Home Secretary also recognise that the delay in holding a Cobra meeting until almost a week after these events started was a mistake, that it created a vacuum and that it delayed the actions that could have brought this disorder to an end more quickly? At the time of the disorder, the Prime Minister claimed that he would create a "standing army" of public order police officers. What progress has been made in the intervening weeks to make that claim a reality?

After the murder of the three young girls in Southport, the right hon. Lady and I discussed across the Dispatch Box the impact of misinformation and disinformation online. When I was Home Secretary, I travelled to the United States to deliver this message directly to the leadership of the tech firms and to make clear what the British Government expected from them in this regard. Has the Home Secretary had any similar conversations

[Mr James Cleverly]

with the social media platforms about their responsibilities? And can she inform the House whether her Department will continue the review into police use of force, instituted by the Conservative Government of which I was a member, to ensure that the police are able to take firm action and clamp down on crime with all the force that the law allows, without fear of being strung up for years in endless investigations?

In government, we recruited 20,000 new police officers, but their work will be hampered if they do not feel supported by the Government when they take the firm action needed to keep the people of this country safe. Violence has absolutely no place on our streets. Anyone who engages in violent disorder or commits violent crime must face the full force of the law, no matter who they are. We will continue to hold the Government to account to ensure that they deal with disorder swiftly, effectively, fairly and even-handedly.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the shadow Home Secretary's words of support for the Southport families and his reassertion that there can be no excuse for violent disorder, but I have to say that the rest of his response sounded an awful lot more like a pitch to Tory party members in the middle of a leadership election than a serious response to the scale of the disorder we saw and the need for a serious policing response.

He asked about the strategic reserve—the “standing army”. We set up the strategic reserve and it was in place for the second weekend; we had thousands of police officers who were ready. We did not use the old arrangements that we inherited from him, where mutual aid had to be on call and stood up in a rush when it was called for. We got the police public order officers ready and deployed at strategic locations around the country, so they could move fast and be where they were needed.

That goes to the heart of the problems we inherited from the shadow Home Secretary and his predecessor. The central co-ordination that he had left in place was far too weak. The chief officers involved in trying to get mutual aid in place and to co-ordinate intelligence had very weak infrastructure and systems in place. They had not been supported over very many years. In fact, some of his predecessors had tried to get rid of a lot of the work of the National Police Coordination Centre. Instead, our approach is to strengthen it. We believe that we should strengthen central co-ordination and we will work with the police to do so, which is why I have asked the inspectorate to operate.

Secondly, the shadow Home Secretary referred to the issues around social media. Seriously—his party delayed the Online Safety Act 2023 for years. The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hove and Portslade (Peter Kyle), has already been working closely on putting more pressure on the social media companies, but the shadow Home Secretary's party did nothing for years. It is far too late for Members of his party to try to call for action. And the review into police use of force is important and will continue.

Finally, I have to say that the shadow Home Secretary is playing games, undermining the credibility of the police. He is trying to blame the Prime Minister for something that happened four years ago—saying he is

somehow responsible for the violent disorder on our streets this summer—and undermining the credibility of police officers. Each individual officer takes an oath to operate without fear or favour. May I remind the right hon. Gentleman that his predecessor as Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman), tried to undermine and attack the credibility of the police in the run up to Armistice Day? That is why we ended up with a bunch of thugs trying to get to the Cenotaph to disrupt the service and launching violent attacks on the police. The only reason the right hon. Gentleman got the job of Home Secretary in the first place was because everyone condemned his predecessor for her behaviour. I am so sorry that he has decided, in a leadership election, to follow her example—I really thought he was better than that.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): May I compliment the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor on the robust response that the whole criminal justice system took to the recent riots and violent disorder? Was my right hon. Friend, like me, concerned about the number of very young people—pre-teen, in some cases—who took part? What does she think is the solution to rehabilitation and to preventing young people of that age becoming involved in such disgraceful behaviour in the future?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the number of young people involved. Some of them had a string of convictions—they had history—but there were also young people who were drawn into violence and disorder, sometimes antisocial behaviour and the looting of shops, or sometimes into serious violence as well. There is an important issue about how we prevent young people getting drawn into violence and antisocial behaviour. That is one of the reasons we are so determined to set up the Young Futures programme, and one of the reasons we need to look at the online radicalisation of young people as part of the extremism review.

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

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. I associate myself and my party with her comments of praise for the bravery and professionalism of the police and the other emergency services, which we saw throughout these disgraceful episodes.

This is a moment for everyone in this House to make it clear which side they are on. It simply is not credible for people to talk about two-tier policing and then, in the next breath, say that they also support the police. The Home Secretary is correct to call out the disorder we have seen for what it is: thuggery, racism and crime. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches support the steps that she has announced, but does she agree that this renders urgent the need to appoint an independent adviser on Islamophobia, a post that has been vacant for the past two years, and to have a formal definition of Islamophobia, in order to underpin and inform Government policy across the board and across all Departments?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the right hon. Member's support for the police and the work they did, and for the importance of ensuring that these kinds of crimes are not tolerated and the perpetrators should face consequences. He is right that there were significant attacks on mosques, which is why we brought forward the work on mosque security. He is also right that we need to challenge Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate wherever it is found. The Deputy Prime Minister is taking forward that work.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): The Home Secretary rightly started her statement by remembering the victims of the horrific attack in my Southport constituency, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for that.

One of the most appalling aspects of the disorder we saw across the country last month was that we continually heard the claim from the thugs involved that they had been driven to commit their acts of violence by the killing of little Bebe, Elise Dot and Alice. That claim is a grotesque lie. No one is more furious about that lie than the people of Southport, who wanted to just be allowed to deal with their grief and anguish in their own way, and to support the families of those who had been killed.

It is no surprise to me that some of the targets of the violence were places of worship, a citizens advice bureau and a library. These are the places where communities go to heal, and when they are driven to improve each other and themselves. The thugs who attacked those targets set their faces against community self-improvement, so it is no surprise that those were the targets they attacked.

For those who continue to propagate the lie that the thuggery we saw came from justifiable concerns or that the actions of the mob are somehow justified, will the Home Secretary reiterate that what happened in Southport provides no justification at all for anyone throwing bricks at the police, attacking people in their own cars or burning down buildings with people inside them? For anyone to pretend otherwise is too horrific for words.

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful words on behalf of his constituents. I thank him for standing up for the people of Southport, including those families who have had to endure the most unspeakable horror and who are still having to deal with the consequences of what happened. He is absolutely right that no one should ever use the terrible attack on three little girls as an excuse for the kinds of violent disorder we have seen. I am so sorry that the families and the community he represents have had to endure not just the original attack, but people claiming to be doing things in the name of Southport. Clearly, what those people have been doing is not that, but simply crime.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that one reason why what might be called her shock and awe policy successfully shut down the violence so quickly was the speed with which the offenders were brought before the courts and sentenced? And if she does agree with that as a deterrent for the future, how can that model be adapted in other areas of justice?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member makes an important point. There is no doubt that the swift response from the police, the prosecution and the criminal justice system had a strong impact and was clearly a deterrent and an overwhelming signal to people that if they get involved in disorder they will pay the price. The implicit point in his question is that there are long delays in the criminal justice system at the moment. We have often seen long delays in prosecutions. We are keen to work closely on that. We want to see better co-operation between policing and the Crown Prosecution Service in order to remove some of the bureaucracy that is in place and to speed up charges. We recognise there has been a lot of damage to the criminal justice system. We need to tackle that and turn it round, because that is fundamental to respect for the rule of law.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): May I just say what a powerful statement my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) made? There is no excuse for being racist or for using the innocent lives of Elsie, Alice and Bebe. I thank the Home Secretary for mentioning Cher Maximen and Mussie Imnetu. It is important that we are all mindful about how we use language in this House, especially when we are referring to immigration and migration. It is also important that we talk not only about thuggery and racism, but about Islamophobia. The rise in racism is frightening, and Love Music Hate Racism is doing a lot of work around raging against hate. I hope my right hon. Friend will help to encourage it in that work. Does she agree that we do need stronger regulations around social media companies?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's points. One of the most troubling things that we saw during those days of violent disorder was people feeling fearful to be out on the streets because of the colour of their skin. That should never happen in our country, which is why we do have to challenge racism and extremism wherever they are found. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology is bringing forward measures under the Online Safety Act 2023 that will require social media companies to take action where there is criminal content. There has been considerable concern about criminal content remaining online, and we need the social media companies to take responsibility for that.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Welcome to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I agree with the Home Secretary's condemnation of violence. Indeed, I suspect her unwillingness to open up this statement is because she wants the voice of this House to be one of condemnation of violence. She is right about that, and she will know that the streets of Northern Ireland faced the same difficulties as those in England over the course of the summer. Almost 20 PSNI officers were injured on our streets. They benefited from the mutual aid support from Police Scotland during that time.

The Home Secretary is not responsible for policing in Northern Ireland, but she is responsible for immigration policy throughout the United Kingdom. May I ask her at some stage to indicate to this House and to the country what steps she will take to repair the damage wrought by the last Government through the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum

[Gavin Robinson]

and Immigration) Act 2024, which, for the first time, specifically do not apply in Northern Ireland, following court judgment, because of the Windsor framework. We no longer have a uniform immigration policy in this country, so may I ask her as Home Secretary to tell us what steps she will take to address that?

Yvette Cooper: I join the right hon. Member in condemning the appalling violent disorder that we saw on the streets of Belfast and in Northern Ireland and in welcoming the support from Police Scotland and the mutual aid that took place. He raises important issues about immigration policy. I am happy to debate those and to talk to him directly about them as it is important. There is a whole range of areas where reforms will be needed. An important debate needs to take place around border security, the asylum system, the way immigration rules operate and so on. Those are all reforms that this Government want to bring forward, but, quite simply, it is important that no one should excuse the violent disorder that we saw as somehow being related to issues about policy. Lots of people have really strong views about immigration policy, but they do not pick up bricks and throw them at the police.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The violence that took place in my constituency of Hartlepool on 31 July was perpetrated by a minority of violent thugs. I would like to place on record my thanks to the police, some of whom ended up in hospital that evening as a result of defending their town and the people who live there. It is undoubtedly the case that the violence was fuelled by the lies and misinformation that are largely, although not exclusively, perpetrated online. What can the Home Secretary do to challenge and prevent the spread of that misinformation, and also to clear the way to allow us to have the wider debate about asylum and immigration that decent hard-working people want to have free from these lies?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that there has been continual misinformation about this—often deliberate misinformation. Those who made the decision to get involved in violent disorder—attacks on the police, attacks on shops, the looting and the disgraceful behaviour—have to take responsibility for their own actions. They cannot blame things that they saw online for that.

Equally, we have also made it clear that what is criminal offline is also criminal online. There is an important responsibility on those posting online and also on the social media companies to make sure that criminal content is taken down.

My hon. Friend is also right: we should be able to have a serious debate about issues around immigration, asylum, and the stronger border controls that this Government want to introduce, but that is separate from the kind of violent disorder that we saw. Nobody should use policy issues around crime, policing, or any other issue as being an excuse for violence on our streets.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): What percentage of these cases were dealt with by district judges rather than lay magistrates, and where was that change made in the CPS? And will those changes be applied to new

disorders, for example those committed by Extinction Rebellion or Just Stop Oil, and will they be applied to the Manchester airport incident?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that decisions on charging and on which courts take the decisions is not a matter for Government and rightly so. Those are independent matters for the CPS and for the courts and the judicial system. I am happy to write to her with detailed information about the numbers of cases that have been dealt with in the different courts, as I do not have that to hand.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I wish to extend my gratitude to the Home Secretary for her statement, and echo her acknowledgment of the remarkable courage and dedication of the police. Last month, officers across the country and in my constituency of Blackpool South faced significant challenges as they bravely stood against a barrage of projectiles, working diligently to protect our local mosque, hotels and town centres from hateful extremists seeking to disrupt our communities. Lancashire police were outstanding. They stood tall and resolute in the face of diversity, just like I had seen countless times when I was serving as deputy police and crime commissioner. Will the Home Secretary join me in thanking the police across our country, especially in Lancashire, and acknowledge that we are fortunate to have such a dedicated, brave and professional group of officers who are at the frontline battling crime and disorder.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's points, and put on record my strong gratitude towards police officers across the country. I pay tribute to them. Officers gave up their rest days and worked additional overtime—they were particularly stretched during that period in August—to ensure that we had enough public-order-trained police on the streets. They did a remarkable job, and all of us should show them our gratitude and support.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): We in Scotland are grateful that we were spared any of the violence that we saw throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. The Home Secretary says that she wants a debate. Does she accept that the way that immigrants and asylum seekers have been portrayed by a host of political voices has helped to foster, foment and even encourage some of the scenes that we witnessed? Those who have been whipping up this type of activity must be held to account, as must those who peddled misinformation. Will the Home Secretary also help that debate by talking a little more positively about immigration? Stop demonising asylum seekers. Will she encourage us to have that debate, but for it to be a better debate?

Yvette Cooper: I certainly think that we should have honest and practical debates about issues, rather than debates that end up being lost in rhetoric, and often lose sight of the facts and practical issues. Some of what we saw was extremism, as well as local criminals and thugs. Some people who had a violent history of crime in the local area also got involved. To deal with the disorder, we have to deal with all the different aspects and origins of it.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the strong leadership that the Home Secretary has shown on this. The truth is that these events did not happen in a vacuum. That is why, after three days of distress and panic in Walthamstow because somebody published a list suggesting that thugs were going to come to our community, thousands of people took to our streets. They stood with members of our local mosques and churches, holding hands with them to keep them safe. They helped businesses to board up their properties. We even had knitters against Nazis.

As much as we are grateful for that solidarity, we in Walthamstow know that the fear endures even after the immediate threat has gone. That is the challenge that we have to deal with in this place: those people who promote anger rather than answers to the challenges that we face in our society. The Home Secretary talks about a review. Can she set out what she actually means by far-right extremism and such terms, because those details matter in being able to have these debates and give confidence to the communities that are targeted that we stand with them, as we did in Walthamstow that day, and as we will do every day?

Yvette Cooper: Nobody in Britain should ever feel afraid because of the colour of their skin. That is the really troubling thing that we found people saying and feeling as a result of the violent disorder earlier in the summer. I have set up a review around countering extremism. I have had concerns for a long time that not enough is being done to counter extremism in this country. That means far-right extremism, Islamist extremism, and some of the other forms of changing extremism that do not fit necessarily into the clear, more historical, categories.

There has been a definition that the Home Office has used for a long time around “extreme right-wing” extremism, and some of the issues online, but we also know that there are changing patterns, particularly with online radicalisation. That is why the review is so important. The last countering extremism strategy was set out in 2015. So much has changed since then, especially around online radicalisation. We need to tackle all forms of extremism and violent hatred. It is so important to our wellbeing as a democracy and who we are as a country. We have always stood against that kind of extremism, and we must continue to do so.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): The amount of stabbings and deaths by stabbings in this country is reaching shocking levels. Over the past few weeks, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have fast-tracked the violent criminals in these riots, and got them into court and in prison within two weeks. Is it not about time that we did the same with these yobboes—these thugs—who are carrying knives?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member’s support for the speedy response from the police and criminal justice system to the violence that we saw on our streets. I agree that it is a serious problem that we have inherited such long delays in the criminal justice system and problems getting cases swiftly to court. Knife crime has substantially increased in recent years, which is why the newly elected Labour Government have made halving knife crime part of our mission for safer streets across

this country. We want stronger action against young people who are caught and get drawn into knife crime. We want a stronger Young Futures prevention programme, and stronger action against online companies that continue to make it far too easy to get hold of knives. We have to take stronger action across the board to speed up processes and ensure that there are consequences for knife crime.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The appalling racist riots may be over for now, but the ideology behind them is a growing threat, both here and internationally. In Germany, for example, the far right has just won a state election for the first time since the second world war. Does the Home Secretary agree that to prevent more people being won over by the far right, our Government must deliver proper improvements in living standards in order to combat disillusionment, and refuse to march to the beat of the far right’s drum on immigration and Islamophobia?

Yvette Cooper: Clearly, we want to see increasing living standards right across the board. That is immensely important. We also need a serious and sensible debate on a range of policies, including on crime, immigration and other issues that the Home Office is responsible for. We have to take much stronger action to counter the kinds of online radicalisation that we have seen, whether we are talking about far-right extremism or Islamist extremism. That is why we are setting up a new review on countering extremism. We also have to ensure that those committing disorder and violent crimes take responsibility, because there is no excuse. No policy issue or living standards can ever excuse the kind of violence, racist attacks and disorder that we saw.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The ugly, racist mob violence in our towns and cities this summer was incited and organised by far-right groups, often using electronic platforms including Telegram and X. For example, on Telegram, groups have distributed instructions for making petrol bombs. Locations of hotels housing migrants and offices of immigration lawyers were also shared. Elon Musk, the proprietor of X, has greatly amplified some accounts that promote racist violence in our cities, while failing to take action to remove others. In the Home Secretary’s response, will she look at options for prosecuting those who own platforms that may have enabled or committed crimes under section 2 of the Terrorism Act 2006?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will be aware that full implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 has been long delayed and is still needed. One of the provisions of the Act is a requirement on social media companies to remove illegal content. Many of the examples that she raises are of illegal content that is still available online, which is shocking and irresponsible. That is why we need the speedy implementation of the Act, starting with the requirement to remove criminal content. Social media companies should also take much broader responsibility for ignoring their own terms and conditions, their responsibility towards communities and public safety. They need to take that more seriously.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Can I encourage Members to ask short questions and the Home Secretary to make answers shorter, as I would like to get everyone in?

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for her statement. I agree with her point that it is perfectly possible to have a debate in our country about immigration and many other issues without resorting to looting shops, attacking minority groups and throwing bricks at police. In my constituency, I regularly have conversations with local people who feel that net migration is too high, and who worry about the cost of asylum hotels and the number of people entering our country illegally. In electing me, they have elected an MP who is prepared to raise those issues in Parliament and work with the Government to address them. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is how a democratic country like ours should operate, rather than a bunch of hooligans using those subjects as an excuse to smash up shops, burn cars and attack the police?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We can all have an important debate in this place—the kind of debate that people have in communities across the country—about the issues that she raises around net migration and border control. Most of us across the country talk about all those issues and work out what actions and policies are needed. There is no excuse for taking the kind of violent action that we have seen, and attacking police officers, whose very job is to keep us safe.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): At the start of the trouble in Northern Ireland, I went to our Deputy First Minister and got her, with the help of the local health trust, to visit our local hospital, where we were able to offer some form of reassurance to people, of whatever background and every country of origin, that they had our total support. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is a good, positive way to approach this? Does she also agree that we must identify and speak about the issues that many people have with illegal immigration, and try to ensure that we do not see in this country what we have seen in countries across the EU?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right that in this country, we have always had people come together and work together to tackle problems and debate issues. The people responsible for this violence and these attacks, including on our police officers, do not speak for the United Kingdom—they really do not. They do not speak for any part of the UK, and we should never let them do so.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): For too long, Muslims have been scapegoated for the failings of the political and economic system by the same type of politics that led to the hostile environment for migrants. Can the Home Secretary outline the steps that she will take to ensure that any measures that arise from the rapid review of extremism do not perpetuate or extend harm to the very communities—Muslims and migrants—who have been the primary target of the far right's violence?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point. The whole purpose of the review on countering extremism is to make sure that we tackle the kinds of extremism that we have seen grow in this country in recent years. That includes far-right extremism, Islamist extremism, the violent Islamophobia and attacks that we have seen, and concerns around antisemitic attacks. We have to make sure that we do so, and it is immensely important that we work with the communities who are often the most affected by extremism and the damage that it can do.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I join in the condemnation of the thuggery and violence that we all saw and deplored, but can I take the Home Secretary back to the point to which the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) alluded? Is she comfortable with the fact that under the Windsor framework, any immigration policy that she devises must pass through the filter of EU law, and be subject to its requirements? As long as that prevails, how can a Home Secretary implement a national policy? Will she act with this Government to set aside what they inherited from the Tory Government: the loss of sovereignty over immigration—and so many other matters, as far as Northern Ireland is concerned?

Yvette Cooper: There will be many opportunities in this House to talk about the details of immigration policy—I will certainly do that—and I am very happy to discuss further with the hon. Gentleman issues such as border security and wider immigration policy, but this statement is about the violent disorder that we saw this summer, how we ensure that it cannot be repeated, and the reforms in place to address that.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I welcome the strong leadership that this Government and Home Secretary have shown. Even though Peterborough avoided the right-wing thuggery that many places saw earlier this summer, despite the best efforts of online misinformation and rumours, the events of the summer cast a long shadow on communities and constituencies like mine. I put on record my thanks to Peterborough's Joint Mosques Council, Community First and Peterborough's community group, as well as the police and council officers who worked around the clock to keep businesses and communities safe. Can the Home Secretary give confidence and comfort to communities like mine that, in the weeks and months ahead, we will continue to tackle extremism, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred? This is not just about this summer; those problems have been rising over recent years and are at the source of the issue that we need to tackle.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. That is why the Deputy Prime Minister is taking forward work around community cohesion. We should also recognise that, right across the country, the overwhelming majority of people were truly appalled by what we saw from a small minority of people. The action that we took was important, because it meant that the small minority involved in disorder faced consequences, but they do not speak for Britain, and certainly not for my hon. Friend's community.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, her clear, strong leadership and her swift action. Well done, Home Secretary. That is what every MP and people across this great nation wish to see. In Northern Ireland, we remained untouched by the unrest seen on the mainland, but I will just say this about Newtownards. Sometimes it is easy to focus on the negatives, but there are positives as well: people of all religions and political persuasions came together as one and stood together against what happened. We have to take some encouragement from that.

With regard to community tensions, it is essential that everyday people who have legitimate concerns about illegal immigration are not drawn into situations that become less about the right to display disapproval and protest, and more about violence. How will the Government seek to ensure that those with legitimate concerns are heard, and that those whose intent is simply to disrupt and destroy are dealt with appropriately?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the points that the hon. Member makes and his recognition of the seriousness of, and the damage done by, the violent disorder. He is right that most people in the country want a serious debate about the importance of net migration coming down. We have been clear about our view on that, and about why we need stronger border security. We also need to recognise that most people across the country want stronger border controls, and for the UK to continue to do its bit to help those who have fled persecution and conflict, but they want the rules to be properly respected and enforced, and those who do not have a right to be in the UK properly returned.

There is a whole series of proper issues around immigration that we should debate. Most people want to be part of that debate; the overwhelming majority do not want to go anywhere near this kind of violence and thuggery, because that is not the kind of country we are. Those are not the values that most people in this country have. As the hon. Member says, most of us want to come together to support each other, and to have serious debates, not attack police officers and communities.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I start by extending my condolences to the family, friends and loved ones of the three little girls murdered in Southport. Liverpool has a very proud history of fighting right-wing terrorism on the streets of our city. However, the diverse communities of my Liverpool Riverside constituency, particularly those who are visibly black and Muslim, are still very anxious about going out, due to the rise in racism and Islamophobia. My right hon. Friend mentioned the Deputy Prime Minister's work on community cohesion. I would be grateful if she confirmed whether local authorities like mine will receive additional funding to undertake that work.

Yvette Cooper: The Deputy Prime Minister will be working with local councils across the country on what we need to do to improve cohesion. She and I have discussed many times the importance of these issues and of working alongside each other. The Home Office will lead the work on countering extremism, and her Department—the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—leads the work on strengthening community cohesion with local councils. My hon. Friend

is exactly right: we cannot have a situation where people feel afraid or at risk on the streets of this country because of the colour of their skin or their religion. That is why it is so important that the two programmes on cohesion and extremism work in parallel.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary agree that those who suggest that this country has some form of two-tier policing serve only to undermine our brave frontline police officers, who put themselves at risk every single day to maintain order, and that anybody who suggests that does not do so in our country's name or traditions?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Police officers in this country take an oath when they become officers to operate without fear or favour. They work immensely hard, right across the country, to uphold that. Rightly, we have operational independence for policing. Those claims have been used by those who want somehow to legitimise attacks on the police, who work so hard to keep us safe. It is wrong to make those claims. We should support and work with the police to raise standards across policing and to ensure that they can continue to keep our communities safe.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): The scenes outside a hotel in Wath over the summer took place just a few miles away from my constituency. A group of rioters set a hotel on fire, knowing full well that innocent people were inside, including a constituent of mine who was being housed there with her children, under the statutory responsibilities of the local authority, as she had recently been made homeless. Local police officers worked 20-hour shifts to keep her safe. The day after the riots, local people attended to clear up the rubble, and in the weeks after community groups, like the Dinnington community boxing club, organised events to show unity and solidarity in the face of violence. Does the Home Secretary agree that that, and not the acts of those mindless thugs who attacked the hotel in Wath, is the true spirit of South Yorkshire?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point and speaks powerfully for his constituency. I am so sorry that his constituent was affected by the violence in that way. He is right to talk about the true spirit of South Yorkshire and the communities that come together. Right across our coalfield communities, there is a spirit of solidarity—of really strong communities pulling together and not standing for such violence and thuggery.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): My constituents were appalled by the criminal disorder that we saw on our streets at the start of August, which was in no way representative of our city. The contrast between thugs who preferred destruction and the decent law-abiding majority was clear in our community's response—be it Northumbria police officers standing up and protecting our communities in the face of attacks; the hundreds of residents of every race and religion turning up the day after to sweep away not just the shards of glass, but the shards of hatred that had been sown the night before; or the Sunderland citizens advice bureau refusing to let the arson attack prevent it from providing services. Will the Home Secretary join me in praising the response of the people of Sunderland and of similar communities

[*Lewis Atkinson*]

across the country, and does she agree that we should build upon their example as we look to strengthen community cohesion in the future?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. He speaks strongly for the people of Sunderland, who came together. Volunteers ensured that the citizens advice bureau could keep working to support local people who are vulnerable and need advice and help. They have worked with the police and local communities, and they speak not just for Sunderland but for the whole of Britain.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the statement and for the swift action taken during the violent disorder to reassure mosques and Muslim communities that blatant Islamophobia will not be tolerated. She announced rapid access to the protective security scheme for mosques, which was welcomed by mosques across the UK, to help them provide additional security when needed. Can she confirm how many mosques have accessed that funding, and what proactive engagement the Home Office has had with mosques and Muslim organisations to support them in their funding applications?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the emergency procedure that we brought in to accelerate support and security provisions for mosques. Frankly, everybody has the right to feel safe at their place of worship, without fear of attack. I will send him further details on the precise numbers, but dozens of mosques came forward and were provided with swift support to ensure that they had security in place under the accelerated procedure. It is important that Muslim communities feel safe.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for her statement and welcome the range of police reforms that she outlined. I thank Dorset police for their rapid and proactive work with local residents, community groups, mosques, protesters and counter-protesters to prevent two organised protests in Bournemouth town centre from descending into the type of violent disorder that we saw in other parts of the country. It will take time to roll out those police reforms—I hope they include reform of the funding formula, which currently does not recognise the seasonal challenges that we face every year in Bournemouth—but does she agree that we are lucky to have such dedicated and professional police forces on the frontlines, preventing crime and disorder with limited resources?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the tradition of British policing, of which I think we should feel proud. The idea that the police should operate without fear or favour, that they are operationally independent, and that the police are the public and the public are the police—the tradition of policing by consent—stretches back to Peel. That is why the drop in confidence in policing over recent years is a real challenge, why the Government are determined to turn it around and work with the police to rebuild confidence in policing, and why we will continue to support the police, including with more neighbourhood policing. We should feel proud of and support the British policing model.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. She will be aware that the riots, which sought to exploit the Southport killings for a racist and Islamophobic agenda, included one in Middlesbrough that saw homes, businesses and vehicles damaged in a predominantly Asian and Muslim area, where thugs created roadblocks that allowed only white British drivers to pass. That racist violence caused real fear, resulting in the postponement of the Middlesbrough Mela, the premier celebration of multiculturalism in the north-east. The community, which so magnificently cleaned up the mess, refuses to be cowed, so the mela will go ahead this coming weekend. Will the Home Secretary join me in welcoming the restoration of the Middlesbrough Mela, as well as all mela events held across the country, as important demonstrations of working-class communities enjoying and celebrating our diversity?

Yvette Cooper: I am glad to hear my hon. Friend's description of the way in which communities come together to celebrate. It is distressing to hear about the fear that was created and the community events that were delayed because of it. I thank him for continuing to champion his constituents throughout the violent disorder that we saw in Middlesbrough. He and I have spoken about the things that happened, and I thank him for standing up for his constituents.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): There has been much discussion of the role that social media played in fuelling the violent disorder that we have seen on our streets. Many of the extremists were swiftly arrested and charged; does my right hon. Friend agree that those who spread pernicious and poisonous online lies should also share responsibility for the disorder that we have seen, and that online thugs who deliberately stir up hatred and division should have been similarly punished? If not, what does she think can be done about this increasingly wicked online behaviour?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right: we have seen deliberate attempts to radicalise people or promote extremism online, including on social media platforms, and we have seen illegal content not taken down. Obviously, incitement and encouragement of serious violence and racial hatred offline has been a criminal offence in this country for many years, but what is criminal offline is also criminal online. People need to take responsibility for the crimes they commit, which is why we have taken this behaviour so seriously, and why we are so clear that the Online Safety Act 2023 needs to be implemented to make sure that the social media companies take some responsibility for criminal content online.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Last month, Elon Musk fanned the flames of violent disorder. He personally amplified extremist accounts and, shamefully, even said that he believed our country was heading for "civil war". Some 10 months previously, the leader of the Conservative party invited Elon Musk to Downing Street, and in a stunt, they even superimposed his new logo on to the front of Downing Street. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that was a major error of judgment by the Conservative party, and that Elon Musk has no interest in our democracy—only in himself?

Yvette Cooper: There is an important point here, which is that the social media companies and their owners need to take some responsibility for the criminal content that appears on their platforms, but also for the way that they operate—for the way that their algorithms operate, and how they can be used and manipulated by extremists. As for misjudgments by the Conservative party, there are too many to list now.

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

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to a statement from the Cabinet Office on the infected blood compensation scheme. I call the Minister.

6.42 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I think this is the first time that I have spoken with you in the Chair, so I congratulate you on your election.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update the House on the Government's work on the infected blood compensation scheme, following my letter to Mr Speaker during the recess.

The infected blood scandal is a shameful mark on the British state, and those who have been impacted have waited far too long to receive financial redress and true recognition of their suffering. The inquiry's report shed light on the trauma inflicted on thousands of people across the country. The voices of people who are infected and have been affected have gone unheard for far too long, which has compounded the trauma. The devastating findings of the report bear repeating: victims were used as objects of unethical research, and people were misled about the treatments they needed and received. As Sir Brian Langstaff KC put it, there was a "cover-up" that was

"more subtle, more pervasive and more chilling"

than an "orchestrated conspiracy to mislead". It is a shameful part of our state's recent history.

On 26 July, I updated this House on the engagement exercise being undertaken by Sir Robert Francis KC, interim chair of the new Infected Blood Compensation Authority, with the infected blood community on the compensation proposals that were published on 21 May. As I told the House, the Government were carefully considering Sir Robert's feedback with a view to publishing his report and the Government's position on it in advance of 24 August, which was the statutory deadline imposed by the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 for establishing the infected blood compensation scheme in regulations. I assure the House that this Government upheld that commitment, and I thank all the officials who worked in the Cabinet Office to ensure that that deadline was met.

On 16 August, the Government published on gov.uk an update on the infected blood compensation scheme, Sir Robert Francis's report on his engagement exercise, and the infected blood inquiry response expert group's final report. I met with some representatives of the community and with Health Ministers from the devolved Administrations, and I made calls to parliamentarians on both sides of the House so that they were informed of the Government's progress prior to publication.

I have come to the House today to provide the Government's update on next steps, but I would like to acknowledge the work and the valued contributions of Sir Robert Francis and the expert group appointed by the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) at the start of the year. It is the Government's intention to deliver a comprehensive compensation scheme at the

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

earliest possible opportunity, in order to provide justice and closure to the infected blood community, which has historically been neglected and mistreated.

I put on record my thanks to Sir Robert Francis. Through both his compensation framework study in 2022—which was taken into account in the inquiry—and his recent engagement exercise in June with key representatives of the community, he has contributed greatly to the development of the infected blood compensation scheme. He listened to the concerns of the community, and his most recent report took on board both those concerns and other feedback from a diverse group of representatives.

Sir Robert made 74 recommendations to the Government, covering a wide range of areas, including the future of the current infected blood compensation schemes, additional supplementary awards for those who were subjected to unethical medical research, and amendments to the five key heads of loss that inform the total compensation package for victims. The Government accepted the vast majority of those recommendations: 69 of the 74 were accepted. For the five that the Government have not accepted, it is because we believe that a different solution will be more practical and better for the victims.

The Government heard the infected blood community's concerns about the 21 May proposal to phase out the regular infected blood support scheme payments upon delivery of compensation payments. I know that that proposal was causing great anxiety to those in receipt of, and reliant upon, those payments. The Government have listened, and we have changed the compensation proposal accordingly. Regular support scheme payments for those registered before 1 April 2025 will continue for life as part of the compensation package.

Support scheme payments are not the only thing to change. In the next set of regulations we will enhance the total compensation package to introduce a supplementary additional autonomy award of £10,000 for those who were subject to unethical medical research, as a specific acknowledgement of the impact on their personal freedom. That award will be uplifted to £15,000 for those who were subjected to research at Treloar's college as children, as recommended by Sir Robert. I want to make it clear to the House that those payments will be on top of the comprehensive compensation package currently set out in the regulations that a person will receive.

Another of the community's concerns about the 21 May proposal was the social impact award for affected individuals. Again, following feedback, we are increasing that award for individuals who are assumed to have lived in the same household as an infected person for two years or more.

The scheme has been designed in line with the principles of the inquiry, having regard for

“speed of provision, simplicity of process, accessibility, involvement, proactive support, fairness and efficiency.”

We recognise that this means that the scheme will not cover every circumstance in the way an individual assessment would, so in order to ensure that every applicant is justly compensated, we have introduced a health impact supplementary route for additional compensation.

Sir Robert produced a wide-ranging report following the engagement exercise and some of his recommendations relate specifically to the delivery of the scheme. Although it is for the Government to deliver the design of the scheme and to ensure that the legal framework to deliver it is in place via new regulations—and we remain committed to doing that—it is of course the case that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority will be administering the scheme.

We welcome the recommendations and we are confident that the authority, of which Sir Robert is the interim chair, will work tirelessly to operationalise and implement the compensation scheme as soon as possible, so that money can be passed to victims at the earliest opportunity. I would also like to thank the infected blood inquiry response expert group, which has informed the Government's development of the infected blood compensation scheme.

As Sir Robert recommended, we have published the expert group's final report, which provides more detail on the rationale for decisions taken on the scheme design. The expert group report includes detailed descriptions of each of the heads of loss that make up the total compensation package, the clinical markers used to determine severity bandings, and the formulae for the care award and financial loss award.

As I have referenced, the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 required the Government to establish the infected blood compensation scheme by 24 August. I am pleased to confirm to the House that on 23 August we laid the regulations that will give the Infected Blood Compensation Authority the powers necessary to pay compensation through the core route to the infected, both living and deceased. This will allow individuals who were infected with HIV, hepatitis C or hepatitis B through the use of contaminated blood or blood products to receive the compensation they so wholly deserve. Personal representatives of those who have tragically passed away as a result of their infection will be able to apply for compensation on behalf of their loved ones.

The Government are clear that although laying the regulations relating to infected individuals taking the core route is an essential step to delivering justice, the work is not finished. A second set of regulations will provide for other elements of the compensation scheme, including compensation payments to affected individuals and for claims under the supplementary route. We are committed to delivering this second set of regulations when parliamentary time allows, to ensure that those applying under these routes can start receiving payments in 2025. The Government's plans regarding that second set of regulations are in the documents available on gov.uk.

It is an important step to have the compensation scheme enshrined in law, but I know that many people will want to know exactly when they can expect to receive their compensation. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority will deliver the compensation scheme and I know the interim chief executive and his team are working hard to put the operational systems in place with the aim of beginning payments by the end of this year. That will involve user testing with members of the community who have volunteered to help the authority to ensure that it is designed to address the specific needs of applicants.

Those who are registered with the infected blood compensation schemes will have their details shared with the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, to deliver on the promise that the Government will endeavour to make the process as user-friendly and free of distress as possible. Beneficiaries of the infected blood compensation schemes will be contacted in due course regarding the sharing of their data with the Infected Blood Compensation Authority.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update the House today on this important work. The victims of the infected blood scandal have waited far too long for justice, and I am encouraged that we are now beginning to deliver this long-awaited compensation. I undertake to continue to update the House as this work progresses. I commend this statement to the House.

6.54 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the Paymaster General not only for early sight of the statement, but for his communications with me over the recess, when he kindly updated me and gave me advance notice of his intention to make a statement to the House today.

The Paymaster General rightly reminds the House of the gruesome nature of this part of our state's recent history with respect to the infected blood scandal. He points to the fact that people were misled over treatments they needed and received, and Members on both sides of the House will need to take ownership of the enormous delay in bringing justice to those who have suffered so much over several decades.

I am grateful for the Paymaster General's update on the work that the previous Government commissioned. After the infected blood inquiry's final report was published on 20 May, we took swift action to establish the Infected Blood Compensation Authority on 21 May, when we also appointed Sir Robert Francis as interim chair of the authority and asked him to work with Sir Jonathan Montgomery as chair of the expert group to undertake an engagement exercise with the infected and affected communities. The right hon. Gentleman kindly updated the House on 26 July, when he confirmed that he was considering the outputs of that engagement exercise.

Those conversations were always intended to be a critical step in ensuring that the Government—whichever Government—delivered a final scheme that brought justice to the deserving victims, and was seen by them to do so. I welcome the Government's determination to continue listening to the concerns of the infected and affected communities.

Could the Paymaster General confirm whether thought has been given as to how representatives of the infected and affected communities will be embedded in the organisational structures of the compensation authority? In my 18 meetings across the UK in May, it was very clear to me that their levels of trust in any Government would likely remain low, so determining exactly how their voices will be heard in future is critical.

In essence, the statement acknowledges that the Government have met their obligation under the statutory deadline imposed by the Victims and Prisoners Act to lay regulations to enable the scheme to be operationalised by 24 August. I warmly welcome that. The statement makes it clear that the Government will accept 69 of the 74 recommendations of Sir Robert's June engagement exercise,

and they offer a better practical solution for the five that they do not accept. Having read them, that seems sensible.

As the Paymaster General will know, however—I recognise the pressure that he will feel—what victims want to hear from him is when all the regulations will be laid, when the claims will be processed, and when the deserved payments will be transferred into victims' bank accounts. The statement does not offer anything specific in that regard. I would welcome any further details on the timetable for the laying of further regulations pertaining to the infected communities core route for compensation delivery.

As the Paymaster General knows, those communities have suffered the most and the urgency of their need for the final balancing payment remains acute. Today's statement does not give them clarity on the timetable they can expect. It was my understanding that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority was aiming to make the final balancing payments on the core route by the end of 2024. I think he committed to that, and it would be good if he reconfirmed that in his response.

I will move on to the supplementary route outlined in the statement, which involves a commitment to provide a supplementary additional autonomy award of up to £15,000 to those subjected to unethical medical research. Further, a recommendation to increase the social impact award for affected individuals has been accepted. We on the Opposition side of the House support these new developments, but I have a few questions about the implications for delivery.

I ask the Paymaster General to clarify the additional autonomy awards for unethical medical research, especially for the nearly 100 haemophiliac children from Treloar's, who the Government have now stated will be paid a higher £15,000 award. Comments have been reported from some in the Treloar's community who appear unhappy with these relatively modest supplementary amounts. It would be helpful if he reiterated and explained how unethical research can be quantified, graded and added to the heads of loss that already take account of loss of autonomy and social impact.

Furthermore, it continues to trouble me that those who determined that this research should take place in the first place appear unaccountable for those decisions. I recognise that is not the Paymaster General's personal responsibility, but we need to keep that in focus in the broader response to Sir Brian Langstaff's report. May I also ask when the estates of the infected who have died will be paid? Many thousands of individuals who have lost family, friends and loved ones will be entitled under the terms of the scheme, and they now need to know a realistic timeline for those payments to be made. Equally, when will the work to evaluate the affected communities' individual entitlements begin, and what is the timeframe for when payments will be made to those qualifying individuals?

Finally, I would like to address the decision of the Government to continue the existing payments of the infected blood support scheme beyond the final payment from the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. There is now surely a risk of administrative complexity whereby victims continue to interact with existing support schemes and the newly enabled authority. I urge the Minister to consider the trade-offs between efficient speedy delivery of final compensation packages with administrative

[John Glen]

overlaps and the confusion arising amid a very troubled and vulnerable group of distinct communities that can often disagree with each other.

I conclude by thanking the right hon. Gentleman sincerely for his openness and clarity about what he is intending to do. However, I urge him to bring more specificity on the timelines for different communities to this House as quickly as he is able. I note he acknowledges that the victims have waited too long for justice, and I am encouraged that the Government are beginning to deliver, but as he used to urge me, speed is of the essence, and granular timetables that some of his officials will be reticent for him to specifically commit to are now required if good will is to be generated from the combined efforts of all parties in this House in 2024.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman not only for his work in Government in seeking to deliver this compensation package, but for the constructive tone he has taken in responding to the statement. I will try to deal with the issues that he raised. First, he is right to raise the continuing importance of engagement with the infected and the affected, which I know is a priority for Sir Robert Francis in how he conducts the business of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about some of the timelines. In respect of the estates of deceased infected persons, there will be a further interim payment of £100,000, and applications for that will be open from this October—next month. I can confirm, as he asked me to, that the timetable for payments to the infected on the core route should start to be made by the end of this year. In relation to the affected, which he also asked me about, I would expect those payments to start to be made next year.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked about the payments for unethical medical research. I should say to the House that no amount of money is ever going to make up for the horrors we have seen as part of this scheme, but the recommendations made to us by Sir Robert Francis were in the sum of £10,000 for unethical medical research generally, and because of the very specific breach of trust at Treloar's, that those payments should be £15,000. The Government have accepted those figures, and these amounts of compensation serve as a marker of those appalling unethical medical practices. However, it should be pointed out that, given the other heads of loss, that will form but a small part of the overall amounts I would expect to be paid out under this scheme.

On accountability, the shadow Paymaster General will be only too aware that individual prosecutorial decisions are quite rightly independent decisions for the prosecuting authorities. However, I can confirm that on 9 August I wrote to the National Police Chiefs' Council—I think he has had sight of that letter—to make it clear that the Cabinet Office and, indeed, the Government will co-operate fully and make any evidence within our control and possession available, as appropriate, so that decisions can be made about people being held to account.

The final point the shadow Paymaster General made about complexity is a sound one, and I think one of the priorities—and I know it is a priority for Sir Robert Francis

—is to ensure that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority operates in a way that does give those making claims to it the most appropriate possible experience with appropriate support from caseworkers. I think it is absolutely essential that it does that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Clive Efford.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on your new position.

I am grateful to the Minister for keeping in contact and keeping me informed of progress on this matter. I have two constituents who are directly affected—one affected and one infected. My constituent's husband, who died 30 years ago, was a former Treloar's pupil, and she has recently received a payment, but there is no written explanation of what she has received. She does not know if it is for her, her son, her husband, or all three of them, and she does not know how it is going to be delivered, including whether it will be through her husband's estate and if that will plunge her back into probate. Some affected people are still experiencing issues.

My other constituent is a former Treloar's pupil, and he is upset about the £15,000 payment and does not think it is anywhere near enough. I think this shows that those people who have been campaigning for 40 years want to be more involved in the decisions being made about them. I hear what the Minister has said, but I certainly think that they want to hear how they are going to be engaged so that they can make their voices heard about the issues. While generally welcoming what has been proposed, they want to be able to influence things as they go forwards, and I would like to hear from him how he thinks that can be achieved.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. On the first point he makes about his constituent who has received a payment but without any clear explanation, one of the things the Government are committed to do is to try to make this whole process as clear as we possibly can. If he wants to write to me about that particular case, I can ensure that the explanation and, indeed, the correspondence is looked at appropriately.

On my hon. Friend's second point, he is absolutely right that the voice of victims must continue to be heard. I think the consultation exercise that took place during the general election campaign was hugely important. It is important that the Government listened and made the substantial changes to the scheme we have made on that basis. It is hugely important, too, that the voice of victims continues to be heard as the infected blood compensation scheme continues its work, and I know that is a shared priority for Sir Robert Francis. On the £15,000, can I also say that we accepted that recommendation in full from Sir Robert Francis? It is a marker of the appalling unethical medical research, but as I said in my response to the shadow Paymaster General, the overall awards, which appear under five different heads of loss, will of course be substantially larger, and that is a very small part of them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrats spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Paymaster General for his statement, for his update and for confirmation that the establishment of the infected blood compensation scheme has been achieved in regulation on deadline. That is a significant step forward, which I think we should all recognise. It is a significant step forward for the families who feel they have waited far too long, and many of us have such constituents. I do, and I also have a constituent whose family were very close family friends, so we witnessed what they went through for four decades.

An important thing to bear in mind is the trust that was broken with those families over what they went through, and we need to continue to work to re-establish that. So I would ask the Paymaster General if he will continue to update this House, but also to recognise that, in setting out the timeline, phrases such as “when parliamentary time allows” and “in due course” put doubt in people’s minds. People have been let down too often before, and they need more reassurance. Can he tell us more about the timeline, can he reassure them and can he reassure all of us that he will continue to come to this House regularly with updates, when possible?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the constructive tone of that contribution and her recognition of the importance of meeting that deadline. She is entirely right to raise the issue of trust and I am very conscious of that in all the work I carry out in this area. She is also entirely correct to raise the issue of timetabling because it is hugely important to the victims and there are three things I would say. On the estates of deceased infected people, there will be the opening next month, in October, of interim payments of £100,000. The final payments to infected people that go down the core route of this scheme will start by the end of this year. And payments to affected people will start next year. The timetabling of appropriate regulations is done with that timetable in mind, to ensure we get those payments to people as quickly as possible.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, but will he outline the categories of loss that victims can claim against the scheme, and how will this inform the size of the compensation award that they can claim?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The report sets out the five different areas of loss: those from injury and the social impact, then the autonomy award for the real effect on people’s freedom and family life, and also the loss from the care people have received, and financial loss as well. Those are the major heads of loss under the scheme and it is important to reflect the very different ways in which people were affected. It is also important to accept, as Sir Brian Langstaff set out, that a tariff-based scheme is crucial as well. That is to try to make this process as simple as the Government possibly can and to ensure people receive the justice they deserve.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The infected blood scandal is the health service equivalent of the Post Office Horizon disaster, with the added torture

that it has gone on much longer. It took 40 years—over 40 years—before my constituent Lesley Hughes even discovered that the blood transfusion she had been given in 1970 had given her hepatitis C and subsequently cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. So although the end now appears in sight, I first raised her case in 2015 and I did not think we would still be waiting for a resolution nine years later; I hope the finishing tape really is at last about to be breached.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The thoughts of the whole House will be with the right hon. Gentleman’s constituent, and I know from my own service in this House in previous Parliaments that he has raised this issue on a number of occasions before. I would say to him, and indeed to this House, that there is no dispute that decades have passed when people should have achieved justice and did not. We had this scandal of infected blood and infected blood products in the 1970s and 1980s, but it was compounded by the failure since to recognise what had gone wrong and to try to make recompense for it; there is no doubt about that. The undertaking I give him is that the Government will push this forward as quickly as we possibly can, and I hope finally we will get to where he wants, which is the position where compensation has finally been paid to those who so richly deserve it.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): What progress been made in establishing the Infected Blood Compensation Authority?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Now that the regulations have been laid, as I indicated, it is operationalised, and I know Sir Robert Francis will now be moving as swiftly as he can to be in a position to deliver that final compensation to the infected down the core route and to start those payments by the end of the year.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank the Paymaster General for his statement, which is testament to the long-fought campaign for victims, including the campaigning done by my constituents Judith Thomas and Ruth Jenkins, whose husband and brother Christopher Thomas died in 1990. The UK Government have announced that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority will work closely with the devolved Administrations to deliver payments in Wales, and the statement outlined meetings that were held with the devolved Health Ministers. In May, the Senedd heard that the UK Government will bear the costs of the scheme in full. Will the Paymaster General today reaffirm that commitment, and assure victims in Wales that they will not face any delays in compensation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I can reassure the right hon. Lady that in advance of the action I took in the summer, I spoke to the Health Ministers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I am very committed to working with the devolved Administrations. I repeat the commitment that this will be funded by the UK Government. I am also happy to give the commitment that there will not be undue delays, whether in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): For constituents like Justine Gordon-Smith in Edinburgh North and Leith, of whom my right hon. Friend will

[Tracy Gilbert]

be aware, the resolution to this scandal can be achieved only when Governments work together, so I appreciate those reassurances. What actions have my right hon. Friend and his colleagues taken to drive forward the results with the Scottish Government?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I entirely agree on the importance of the Governments across the United Kingdom working together on this issue, and that is exactly the approach that I took in doing this work over the summer, and as I indicated to the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), I repeat my commitment. I spoke to Health Ministers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland before taking this action.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the fact that the Minister has come to the House so quickly to give the assurances that he has given, but reading the statement, I see quite frequently such phrases as “at the earliest opportunity” and “if the parliamentary timetable allows.” Those who are suspicious will wonder if this will be dragged out. May I ask two questions on the details? The Paymaster General has indicated that those on regular payments can keep them if they so desire, but will that be on top of the compensation package, or will the compensation be adjusted to take that into consideration? Secondly, if people go down the health impact supplementary route for additional compensation, will it delay the payment that they are entitled to, or will the comprehensive package be available to them, with the additional compensation added on after more information is given?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the first point, the Government are saying that people can have both a continuation of the support schemes and the lump-sum compensation as well. Awards are made under five heads of loss: injury, social impact, autonomy, care and financial loss. The continuation of the support schemes is taken into account for only two of those: the future care element and the future earnings element. The other elements stand alone. That is one of the big changes the Government have made to allow these support schemes to continue.

On the health impact supplementary route, the regulations have set up the core route. That health impact special route has been set up because there will be circumstances in which the health impact and condition is not quite captured by the core tariffs under the scheme. This route has been put in place to make the package more individualised. Again, I undertake to the House that action will be taken as swiftly as possible.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will appreciate that injustice is often compounded by a brutal, faceless and unnecessarily complicated bureaucracy; ostensibly established to right the wrongs, it quite often fails to do that. That is certainly what I have heard from my constituents affected by this scandal. What support in getting compensation will be available to victims of this huge injustice, and will the Infected Blood Compensation Authority have dedicated caseworkers to help people navigate the process?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises valid points on behalf of her constituents. Yes, the Infected Blood Compensation Authority will have dedicated trained caseworkers available. Their purpose is to make this process distress-free and as accessible as possible. That is hugely important for the work of the scheme.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I welcome broadly what the Paymaster General has outlined, but I have a couple of points to make. One is around those children and adults who were infected. The £10,000 and £15,000 seem relatively small sums, compared with the overall package, particularly given what those people were subjected to. Secondly, and more broadly, the Paymaster General has outlined the start dates of the process. Is there an end date that he can point to, so that we will know when all the financial compensation is delivered to the victims of the infected blood scandal?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the first point, the Government have accepted the figures suggested by Sir Robert Francis in full, and I re-emphasise, because it is so important, that these awards are a small part of the overall awards. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will look at the tariffs for the core route to see the amounts of money that will be paid out. I am not suggesting for a moment that they can make up for what has happened, but that will give a sense of how much £10,000 or £15,000 is in the totality of the award. He asks for a bit more information about completion. Clearly it is for the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to work as speedily as it can. As I have said, I would expect the infected core route final payments to be made by the end of the year, and payments to the affected to start next year.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The communication with representatives of the Scottish Government is welcome, but can the Minister reassure us that representatives of the infected and affected in Scotland will be listened to as well? Can all payments be excluded, as far as possible, from income when it comes to benefits eligibility? On the administrative point, if people do not respond quickly enough to the data protection query—this is a very big, overwhelming thing to deal with—will they be given support? Can the Minister confirm that they will not be sent just one letter, and will not be left out and not given compensation if they do not respond? They should be given every encouragement and support in making their application, particularly if they find that difficult.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. What she says about encouragement, support, proactive communication and clarity is hugely important. She is entirely right to raise the issue of victims in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and indeed England. I am sure that she will appreciate that it was crucial for me, in working with the devolved Administrations, to speak to the Health Ministers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but she is entirely right to raise the matter of the voice of victims, too.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): At least four of my constituents still live with the consequences of this scandal. Among them is a resident of Kendal who lost her daughter due to infected blood products.

She has since raised her grandson, who has of course grown up without his mother. The lack of urgency, clarity and commitment shown by a series of officials and Governments over the past 30 years and more has robbed everyone's constituents, including mine, of justice. As a result, so many victims tragically lost their life before compensation became available, as we know. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that this year we will see compensation not just for those who were infected, but for those who were affected by the devastating loss of loved ones? Many cases, including that of the constituent I referred to, are deeply complex. Will he personally look at the details I will send him, and ensure that my constituents are aware of what is available, so that they can get support as soon as possible?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The thoughts of the whole House will be with the hon. Gentleman's constituent on the unimaginable loss of her daughter. If he wants to write to me, I am more than happy to look at those details. I would expect compensation payments to the infected to start by the end of the year, and payments to the affected to start next year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I put on record my thanks to the Paymaster General for a most positive statement, and for the clear commitment to getting the contaminated blood compensation paid. If I may say so humbly and graciously to the Paymaster General, he has shown the compassion and understanding that the people out there want to hear. The words he has put forward are much appreciated by us as elected representatives, but also by our constituents, so I thank him for that.

The Paymaster General will know my long-held position on this issue. Indeed, in years past, we have both stood up from the Opposition Benches at all times to speak on this issue, so I know he will be in absolute agreement that compensation must be prioritised. He has stated that, but realistically when does he believe that the roll-out will be completed? Will Members have access to the route to compensation, so we can help ensure that our constituents receive what they have needed for far too long from Government—that is, not from the Paymaster General specifically, but from this Government and the Governments that came before?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks and, as ever, his constructive tone. He raises an important point about how Members of Parliament can continue to raise concerns for their constituents once the Infected Blood Compensation Authority is fully up and running. I am holding a drop-in for Members from across the House tomorrow, and I will endeavour to continue to ensure that as much information as possible is made available to Members, so that they can continue to speak up for their constituents effectively.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for that statement, particularly perhaps on behalf of all those who have not spoken, but have affected constituents.

Technology in Public Services

7.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I beg to move,

That this House has considered technology in public services.

It is the first time I have had the privilege of speaking under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful for it. May I start by welcoming the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) to his place? I had his job, and I realise just what a privilege it is. Today, I think we have nine Members seeking to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to make their maiden speech. In advance, I offer them my very best wishes in this nervous moment. I look forward to hearing them. I am about to perform my maiden speech as a Secretary of State, so we are all in it together.

My mum was scanned three times in 18 months because of chest pain, and each time the scan came back clear. Not one of the scans detected the disease—lung cancer—that without warning would take her away from her family. Today, it takes an artificial-intelligence-powered scanner in Huddersfield hospital just seven seconds to detect the earliest signs of lung cancer. Seven seconds is all it takes to give somebody back decades with the people they love. I firmly believe that had my mother received that kind of care, she would still be alive today. I would have celebrated her 80th birthday just this weekend gone. It is that belief in the power of technology to change our lives for the better that will guide this Government's approach.

It is all too easy to think of technology such as AI as being impersonal, alienating or distant, but the first thing I think about is people—the teachers in our schools who will deliver a personalised lesson to every pupil and help them fulfil their potential, and the patients in our hospitals who can access lifesaving drugs for diseases that until recently were untreatable. Technologies can change our everyday lives in ways that are both ordinary and extraordinary.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Secretary of State is making a fine maiden speech in his start at the Dispatch Box. As a previously practising doctor, I know that one thing that could really help is using some of the AI we see coming forward in the back office. The previous Government committed to a £3.4 billion NHS productivity plan. Are the Government still committed to taking that forward, because that investment would have significant benefits for staff and patients?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for that intervention and welcome the hon. Member to his place, too. The Government take extremely seriously the role that AI and digital technologies have in productivity in all public services and, as my speech unfolds, I hope that he will hear more detail about the scale of our ambition. To take just one of the schemes that we will be unfolding, the fit for the future programme—a £480 million commitment in our manifesto—will be responsible for driving innovation through the NHS, with adoption of the very latest scanning equipment as well as other equipment right across the NHS in England. Those are just some of the things that we are committed to, and I assure him that the Government are wholly committed to this agenda.

[Peter Kyle]

Nothing about change is inevitable. The future of technology is ours to shape, and the opportunities it offers are ours to seize. My ministerial team and I want to see a future where technology enriches the life of every single citizen and a future with safety at its foundation, because only when people are safe and feel safe can they embrace technology and the possibilities that it presents.

Today, Britain's tech sector is showing us what that future might look like, but far too often our public services are simply stuck in the past. The contrast could not be clearer. Much of the century so far has been defined by the sheer speed of technological advancement. The digital revolution has transformed our lives in ways that would have been unimaginable just a couple of decades ago. Most of us can access our bank accounts anywhere, at any time, and transferring money takes just seconds. Social media and video calls have given grandparents back precious time with their grandchildren, no matter how far away they may live. Young people live in a world where they can find thousands of jobs at the click of a mouse and work for a global brand without having to leave the community they love living in. Yet, as innovation has accelerated, the state has fallen further behind. Our citizens still need to contend with up to 190 different accounts, with 44 different sign-in methods, to access Government services online. Each of them is easy to lose or forget.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): This is obviously a positive debate, as there are so many benefits for us all. I could not remember 191 passcodes—I struggle to remember my own to log in every day in Parliament—but of course we have to underpin everything that we are talking about in terms of technology with cyber-security. In Cheltenham, we have a 4,900 member-strong community speaking for our industry in CyNam, and of course we have GCHQ, where thousands of people work every day; they do not ask for our thanks, but they deserve it in bucketloads.

The Secretary of State may be aware of the golden valley development in Cheltenham, which I recently sent him a letter about and which would include the national cyber innovation centre. I wonder whether he might like to find out more about that by sending members of his team—or he could come himself—to have a chat with me about it.

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman, who I welcome to his place, spent quite a bit of time on his intervention, but I realise that there is simply so much to talk about in his constituency. I pay tribute to the organisations he referenced, including GCHQ and CyNam. The work that they do often goes unthanked, but it is absolutely essential to the security, wellbeing and economic welfare of our country. I certainly intend to visit as soon as I can, and it would be great to meet any of his representatives at any point; I am sure that my ministerial team will be willing to do so as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One of the things that comes up all the time in my constituency is the great difficulties that elderly pensioners have with online commitments. They do not understand them, not because

they are silly or anything, but because the processes are too technical for them. Will the Secretary of State assure me that when it comes to ensuring that pensioners are looked after, nothing will disadvantage them in any way when it comes to getting their moneys?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the hon. Member's intervention, which was his first on me in this Parliament; I doubt that it will be the last. I will come to digital exclusion a bit later in my speech, which I hope will answer his question. If not, I am happy to return to the point. I will also return to cyber-security—I do hope that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) learns his parliamentary sign-in codes as quickly as possible, as that would be a good start to a secure and safe parliamentary career.

I realise that every one of these log-in details is easy to forget. Engaging with the state has become a bureaucratic burden on working people—one that they can scarcely afford. Unbelievably, UK adults spend 3 billion hours each year dealing with Government-related admin; for the average citizen, that is 1.5 working weeks every single year. That is less time to spend with their kids when they get home after a long day's work and less time to get outside or see friends to stay healthy and be happy—put simply, it is less time to do the things they like and to be with the people they love.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend on his excellent, moving speech, which is his first from that Dispatch Box. My condolences about his mum. He will be aware that during the pandemic, the evidence review commissioned by the former Health Secretary exposed widespread inequity and racial bias in the use of oximeters—little gadgets used to look at oxygen in blood. It also revealed that algorithms used in artificial intelligence—in social security, for example—have inequity potential. How can we ensure that, along with all the benefits that he correctly mentions, there is also protection around equity?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that incredibly important point. I hope she will see that one of the themes of my speech is indeed tackling inequality and inequity, as well as outlining how I believe this is one of the progressive causes of our time. If we are not careful and do not shape this agenda in the right way, with progressive values and safety baked in from the start of everything we do, we will not have the trust of the public, and every citizen will not benefit as they should.

My hon. Friend references issues in the life sciences aspects of the agenda. The Health Secretary and I are joined at the hip on this; we co-developed the life sciences action plan, which we are jointly rolling out, he and I both chair some of the work relating to the life sciences action plan, and the two of us—working for a Government and a Prime Minister who care so much about tackling the inequities that currently exist in society—will ensure that these issues will be central to the agenda as it unfolds.

Every day, people in Britain are confronted with a glaring technology gap between the private sector and public services—a gap that has become impossible to ignore, between the personalised and paper-shuffling, the efficient and the inconvenient, the time-saving and

the time-wasting. That gap is not just a policy problem to solve but one of the great progressive causes of our time.

The previous Government promised us a small state, but after 14 years all they did was give us a slow one. They gave us a state that takes away time from those with too few hours to give: parents on low income who are already missing out on time with their families because they are working overtime just to make ends meet; and the people at the margins of our digital world, or excluded from it all together. By closing the technology gap, we will restore every citizen's belief that the state can work for them.

When the previous Government set up the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, they recognised the transformative power of technology. They were right to do so, but if we want to lay the foundations for a decade of national renewal, we must be much bolder. We need to rewire Whitehall, because technology is much more than just another sector to support or a strategic advantage to secure; it is the foundation for every one of our national missions.

From kickstarting economic growth and making Britain a clean energy superpower, to breaking down barriers to opportunity and building an NHS that is fit for the future, our task is fundamentally different and our approach must be, too. That is why we have made DSIT the digital centre for Government. By bringing together digital, data and technology experts from across Government under one roof, my Department will drive forward the transformation of the state. That transformation will not just save people time; it will save taxpayers money, too. This Government are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge that we face.

Dr Evans: Could the Secretary of State explain what that means in reality for the Cabinet Office and the role that DSIT now has? Who has the organisational responsibility and the control over what goes on in Whitehall and his Department?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the question. The delivery functions of digital transformation have moved from the Cabinet Office and other Departments into DSIT. Governance of such services remains shared between us, including a powerful role for Treasury oversight. We want to harness the best of Government, and we must do so by working collaboratively. That is the missions-led approach that the Prime Minister has championed, and it is a belief that I have baked into DSIT and the way that we work. I recognise that the challenges that we are seeking to solve with a powerful digital centre of Government can work only if we provide a resource that other Governments aspire to draw down on and work collaboratively on. That is the target that we have set ourselves and that we are setting about trying to achieve.

As I said, the Government are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge that we face. We promised to mend Britain's broken public services. Now, we must do so with the worst set of economic circumstances since the second world war. With taxes at a 70-year high and a £22 billion black hole in the public finances, we cannot afford to duck the difficult decisions. The solution is not unchecked spending. It is long-term, sustainable economic growth, delivered in strategic partnership with business.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Women in business could add £200 billion to the economy if they were invested in at the same rate as men in business. The female founders community has been in uproar since it was announced that Innovate UK would award only half of the 50 £75,000 grants from its women in innovation fund, even though almost 1,500 women applied for them. Innovate UK has since reversed that decision. Would the Secretary of State meet those from the community to understand their experiences, find out what went wrong and ensure that Innovate UK better supports the Government's growth mission by better supporting female founders?

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful for that intervention; my hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. First, on the broad themes of under-represented communities in the tech sector, the issue is multifaceted. It is not just about some people being excluded from the products that are emerging from the tech sector; it is also about access to the great jobs that are being created in the tech sector itself. It is clear that there is regional and socioeconomic imbalance, and that there are other equality issues. I remember very well in the 1990s trying to get into university, and the system back then diverting people like me away from it. I had to apply four times and go back to secondary school at the age of 25 to get into university. Now I see a tech sector that is not dissimilar—sometimes it diverts people from certain backgrounds away from it or fails to attract into the sector those people with great potential.

We need to do better than that. We need to lead from Government. When I saw Innovate UK's decision, I was unsettled, but I was very pleased that it then came out so rapidly—not only reversing the decision and going back to the full 50 grants but issuing a forthright apology for the mistake that led to the problem in the first place. Such issues should not emerge. I know that Innovate UK will learn those lessons, but we need to ensure that the Government are at the forefront of delivering support for the sector and creating the jobs and technology of the future, and making sure that it does so in an equitable way. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to put that on the record, and I look forward to meeting the community she mentioned.

A missions-led approach to reforming our public services will harness the power of technology to make them more productive. Let us take artificial intelligence. It is not just doctors and teachers who are using AI to change the lives of the public they serve. In Greater Manchester, citizens advice centres are using Caddy, an AI-powered co-pilot tool developed with my officials to help staff and volunteers provide more helpful advice to the people who need it. Digital experts in my Department are thinking about how we can use AI to connect clean energy projects to the grid more quickly. Stories such as these are just the starting point, but they remain all too rare. Why should any citizen be denied cutting-edge healthcare, clean energy or a world-class education? Why should a vulnerable person struggling with eviction or debt struggle to get the help they need?

Adopting AI across health, education and policing could boost productivity by almost £24 billion a year. If we fail to do so, the benefits of AI could become the

[Peter Kyle]

preserve of the privileged few. The urgency of our task demands decisive action, because people should not have to wait for better public services. Rightly, they expect that we will fix the public finances fast. That is why we will publish the AI action plan, led by Matt Clifford. The action plan will work out how we can make the very best use of AI to grow the economy and deliver the Government's national missions. Then we will set up the AI opportunities unit to help make the action plan's recommendations a reality.

My Department will transform public services for the people who use them, by working with Departments across Whitehall to pioneer safe, new and innovative applications for AI. Every one of those applications will depend on two things: digital infrastructure and data. These will be the driving force behind Britain's digital transformation, better hospitals and schools, safer streets and transport that works for working people.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. Transforming the public sector is something that I think we all, across the House, can get on board with. I wonder whether in any of the pay negotiations that have happened or will happen across Whitehall, the acceptance of technology in the public sector will be part of a quid pro quo for the future.

Peter Kyle: I think the right hon. Gentleman pits productivity-enhancing tools against the interests of workers. I do not believe that is the case. If we take my example of Huddersfield hospital, which I had the pleasure of visiting, people have been retrained because AI is very good at giving all-clears—20% of people were given all-clears. Therefore, the radiologists are retrained and come back on a higher pay scale for doing so, and productivity has gone from 700 scans a week to 1,000 scans a week. It is not only cost-neutral but cost-beneficial for the Department. Those are the kinds of productivity gains that enhance work and the satisfaction of workers in the workplace.

We are the Government. We have some agency in how this technology is used and rolled out and how it supports people in the workplace. We will ensure that we deliver value for money for the taxpayer and services that are cost-effective for the taxpayer, but we will also aspire to ensure that workers' rights and satisfaction in the workplace increases. We are a Government who respect the work of the civil service and the value it provides to our country. We want to ensure that these tools sit alongside that ambition to deliver greater outcomes for the country, while ensuring that the civil servants who work so hard for our country take a bit more pleasure from their work, by being assisted by some of this technology that we will introduce to the work of Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Peter Kyle: It will be a pleasure to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I do not want to cut into the time for the maiden speeches that are coming up, so I will not take too many more interventions after this.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way, and I look forward to hearing the rest of his contribution. As someone who does not have much of a grasp of technology, I understand that many people have a fear. The Post Office Horizon scandal is an example of where the system should have said no but instead said yes—a real problem. When people were travelling with British Airways, the system conked out for 24 hours. Those are examples of things going wrong. What can the Secretary of State do to give us confidence that the system will work?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. As I will say in a moment, all of this is contingent on one key principle: building trust with the public. We need to do so through actions, not just words. We have to take the public with us every step of the way, because otherwise we will not have the permission to deliver the transformation that, ultimately, will be profoundly beneficial for them. I have striven throughout this speech and since I have had the pleasure of this role, in opposition and in government—

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being generous with his time. On that point about the public being confident in any systems we roll out, does he agree that we need to ensure guard rails are in place so that organisations and companies know what their responsibilities are?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful. The interventions are building up, but I think I can answer both together to satisfy both Members. Yes, safety has to be built in at the outset and the public need to see that. We have inherited a problem with safety in our country. Women and girls do not feel safe outside after dark. Parents do not think their children are safe online. We have an issue with safety that we need to get a grip of. I feel incredibly strongly, as do Ministers and the Department, that we need to reassure people that as we embrace the technological advances that sit before us, we do so in a way that has safety built in from the outset. That is something we will do, and we have high expectations that others will do so too. As I will mention in a moment, we are setting statutory obligations on people at the pioneering side of AI.

Dr Luke Evans *rose*—

Peter Kyle: I am afraid that I will not give way a third time, because others have to get in, and otherwise you will give me a glare, Madam Deputy Speaker—if the hon. Gentleman has not yet had one of those, when he does he will understand why I am moving forward at pace.

To build a smarter state, we need to build a state with digital infrastructure that is faster than ever, from the data centres powering cutting-edge AI to the broadband connections creating opportunities for all our communities. We must also manage public sector data as a national strategic resource. For far too long, public sector data has been undervalued and underused. We must replace chaos with co-ordination, and confusion with coherence. That is what the national data library will do. With a coherent data access policy and a library and exchange service, it will transform the way we manage our public sector data. It will have a relentless focus on maximising

the value of that data for public good, on growing the economy and creating new jobs, and on delivering the data-driven AI-powered public services that they deserve.

The digital revolution promises to overhaul the way citizens engage with the state, but as with every technological revolution before it, we know that it brings risks. With those risks come uncertainty, instability and, for some, fear. We do not believe that people should have to choose between those two competing visions of our future: between safety and prosperity, and between security and opportunity. By shaping technology in the service of people, we will grow the economy, create jobs and lay the foundations for an inclusive society in which every citizen can see a place for themselves.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a fine speech, but could he say a little bit about the cross-Government conversations that should be happening about upskilling and the opportunities for workers? What is cutting-edge technology today can be obsolete in six to 12 months' time. Is there a plan for a rolling programme of training and upskilling, so that workers who work with technology can keep pace with it as it develops over time?

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend—it is fantastic to see him back in his seat, and we can see no better reason why when he makes such incisive contributions. I am in very close touch with the Education Secretary over the skills agenda, and my Department is in very close touch with the Department for Education, because we can only seize these opportunities and ensure that they are available to everybody from every background if we get skills right. At the moment we are not, but there are some pioneering projects that I have visited. We ought to ensure that they are accessible to everybody who needs them. I can assure him that is essential to the conversations we will be having.

Even as we seize every opportunity to build a better future, we will responsibly manage the threats that new technologies pose to our security. The first duty of any Government is to keep our nation safe. Thanks to years of neglect, Britain has been left catastrophically exposed to cyber-attacks, with disastrous consequences for public services and working people alike. Over 10,000 out-patient appointments were postponed following this year's attack on the NHS in London—that is 10,000 people forced to wait to access the care they needed. If we do not act, we know there will be more attacks to come, and more hours lost in our hospitals and our schools. The Prime Minister has been clear that in an ever more volatile world we will do what is necessary to defend our country from those who seek to do us harm. That is why we are introducing the cyber security and resilience Bill, which will shore up our cyber-defences and protect our public services in the decades to come.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Supercomputing and artificial intelligence are key drivers for making us more cyber-resilient. Will the Secretary of State please clarify why £1.3 billion has been cut from that budget?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I welcome him to his place. It is good to see him participating in these debates. It gives

me the opportunity to respond to his question. He asks why I cut something. Can I just point out to him that I cannot cut something that did not exist in the first place? We have a former Prime Minister who announced a scheme but allocated not a single penny towards it. We have a former Chancellor of the Exchequer who at this Dispatch Box in his last Budget announced a scheme, but did not go back to his Department and allocate a single penny towards it. I did not cut anything, because nothing existed in the first place. Words matter when you are in government, and they must be followed through with action. I am afraid that the previous Government were all words and no action.

That is why we will be bringing forward binding regulations on the handful of companies that are developing the most powerful AI systems of tomorrow. The principle behind both pieces of legislation is simple: trust. We will rebuild Britain's public services. Public trust in technology will be our cornerstone. To earn that trust, we will always put people's safety first. We must also show that technology can be a force for good, and that is what we will do. Every person who receives the kind of scan my mother did not receive, every family with years longer together, every child with an education that gives them the opportunities their parents never had—every one of those people is a testament to the power of technology to change lives for the better. And yet for each of those people there are so many more who are missing out on an education that could change their life, or on the scan that could save it. By closing the technology gap, this Government will ensure that every person benefits from the digital public services that they deserve, and we will give Britain's future back.

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

7.58 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. On behalf of those of us on the Conservative Benches, I welcome you to your place.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome the Secretary of State and his Ministers. I congratulate him on a maiden speech that had much in it to commend and congratulate him on his stewardship of what is a fantastic Department. He is fortunate to be supported, as I know from my experience, by a team of outstanding officials. I pay tribute to their deep knowledge and dedication.

Our constituents know that innovation and technology is our future. The Secretary of State's Department was already at the heart of our mission, supported by a record 29% increase in investment, from 2023 to 2025, to grow the economy and cement Britain's science and technology superpower status. The former Member for Chippenham, my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) and I left the Department in good shape, with, at that time, an expected underspend in this year's budget. It may well be that we were better at fending off the Chancellor than the Secretary of State has been. I note the changes to the machinery of government, which see government digital services and the incubator for AI and other functions move from the Cabinet Office to his Department. Whether or not that is a good idea, time will tell, but what is clear is that it

[Andrew Griffith]

makes it even more important that he and his team now deliver—and where they do so, seriously, they will have our support.

We could not open this parliamentary term on a more important subject. Productivity drains in the public sector take money directly out of taxpayers' pockets, and that is not fair on hard-working families. We know that the public sector accounts for roughly 20% of our national output, and that is often a source of national pride, but the hard truth is that public service productivity is far lower than that in the private sector. Few Departments—the Secretary of State talked about this—are without opportunities to deliver public services better and at a lower cost to the taxpayer. We can, together, transform NHS productivity, and make use of advanced technology and sensors to better secure our borders or defend our country—even from new domains such as space. We can introduce driverless trains to stop trade unions holding passengers to ransom, support farmers and food producers wishing to wean themselves off migrant labour through agri-tech and robotics, implement better use of tagging and “smart” prisons, and improve case flow in the criminal justice system—and a great deal more.

There are many brilliant officials across the civil service who are helping to foster this tech revolution, but I am afraid that their morale is being undermined by this Government's early approach to appointments. It is on their behalf that I ask the Secretary of State, “What was it, Secretary of State, about the £66,000-donating, Labour-supporting Emily Middleton that first attracted you enough to make her one of the senior civil servants in your Department?” For the truth is that there are real questions to answer. What exercise did the Secretary of State go through between announcing the new Department on Monday and appointing a new director general later in the very same week to satisfy himself that not one single civil servant across Government was fit to perform that role? Did he disclose the £66,000 donation to the permanent secretary on his appointment? Did he tell the Civil Service Commission about the £66,000 donation and the links to Labour? Was it him or someone in his office who told Emily Middleton to delete her LinkedIn account? Why, given that the ministerial code is clear about the duty of Ministers to “ensure that no conflict arises, or could reasonably be perceived to arise”,

did he not recuse himself from all decisions and discussions on this matter? If the Secretary of State will not use this opportunity to come clean, to answer all these questions and to publish the relevant correspondence, I really think it is time for Sir Laurie Magnus, the independent adviser on ministerial interests, to investigate.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend has raised an important point on a specific issue. This is not a junior appointment, or a private office appointment, or an advice appointment. This is a director general appointment, at the second most senior level of the civil service. I am not aware, and I wonder if my hon. Friend is, of any occasion on which such an appointment has been made in such a way in the past.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend has made an important point, and he is right: this is a director general-level appointment in the civil service, second

only to that of the permanent secretary and one of, I believe, only three director general-level appointments in the entirety of the Secretary of State's Department. This is someone with the power to hire and fire and advance and promote civil servants, and someone—[*Interruption.*] This is an important point. Once this Rubicon has been crossed, once the civil service has political—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Will Members make their remarks to the Chamber rather than exchanging them across the Benches?

Andrew Griffith: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will make some progress. I understand that colleagues will want to move on to other points, but this is a very important point. Once this Rubicon has been crossed, it will not be possible to un-bake that cake of an independent civil service. Imagine the ambitious civil servants—the directors, the directors general—who never even had the chance to be considered for this role!

Max Wilkinson: Interested as I am in this question of process and the discussions about cronyism, I turned up here to listen to a debate about tech and public services. I was wondering whether the hon. Gentleman had any opinions on that subject.

Andrew Griffith: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have a chance to speak about exactly that subject later. However, it is critical and, I think, a point of commonality across the House that we can deliver change only through professional and competent civil servants, and it is important that the morale of the Secretary of State's Department, like that of every other Whitehall Department, is maintained.

Gareth Snell *rose—*

Andrew Griffith: I have finished making my points on this subject, and I am happy to move on in the interests of the debate.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman has talked about the morale of the civil service. Would he care to tell us how he thinks that was affected by a former Prime Minister's referring to the civil service as “the blob”, and by Cabinet Ministers walking around their offices leaving passive-aggressive little notes asking, “Where are you?” It is very easy to make the snide comments that the hon. Gentleman is making, but it is not very relevant, is it?

Andrew Griffith: I accept that we have strayed some way from the important topic that the Secretary of State came here to talk about tonight. Much as I would enjoy continuing this discussion with the hon. Member, I am happy to move on and address more of the Secretary of State's points.

It was the last Government who launched a wide-ranging public service productivity review to address these issues, and to understand for the first time how technology can transform our economy. It was the last Government—this was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans)—who decided to harness the potential of artificial intelligence in healthcare with the NHS AI lab and a £3.4 billion investment fund to cut

admin and fast-track diagnoses. I was not 100% clear about this, and I do not want to wilfully misinterpret what was said by the Secretary of State, but I hope that the fund continues and we continue to see that opportunity.

The public have benefited directly from the sort of vast improvements that the Secretary of State talked about, thanks to the last Government's embrace of technology. It now takes less than three weeks to receive a new passport—often much less—thanks to the adoption of cloud-based working practices. As of March this year, 99% of passport applications were processed within the target timeframe, a performance which, sadly, I do not think many other parts of Government achieve.

Some will have concerns about what the implementation of new technologies in the public sector will mean for those who work in it. If we are honest, we must recognise—and the Secretary of State well knows—that the business case for many new technologies has an impact on workers. The Secretary of State must filter out naysayers, even if they happen to be his party's union paymasters. Whatever those paymasters say, disruptive technology is good for the public and vital to economic growth.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman claims to support UK technology and science, but he is on the record as opposing solar and wind farms. Is he actually a shadow anti-science Secretary?

Andrew Griffith: I could not be happier to debate that topic, but I am very conscious of the number of Members who, I was told, are trying to make their maiden speeches, and I think it is the case, Madam Deputy Speaker, that every intervention we take at this stage potentially jeopardises their chance of doing so. In short, however, there is a very fine place for solar: it is on the roofs of warehouses, car parks, supermarkets and new homes, where appropriate, but it is not on productive farmland.

In government, we significantly increased spending on public sector research—by 29%, to £20 billion in the current financial year—and our recent manifesto pledged to increase that by a further 10% over the life of this Parliament. May I ask the Secretary of State, and the Minister who will wind up the debate, if they can pledge to match that ambition to a sector that is desperate to see such certainty of funding?

The Secretary of State has my sympathy. I cannot imagine how difficult his phone call with the University of Edinburgh, which had already invested £30 million in the exascale supercomputer, must have been. This was a national facility that would have enabled significant advances in AI, medical research, climate science and clean energy innovation. The investment was fully costed, amounting over many years to what the NHS burns through in three days. There seems to be confusion at the Treasury: just because semiconductors are becoming smaller in size, it does not mean that the Secretary of State's Department must follow suit.

Peter Kyle: The shadow Secretary of State said that the exascale project was fully costed. Could he confirm that it was fully funded too?

Andrew Griffith: Yes. The exascale investment was being delivered through UK Research and Innovation, an enterprise that receives nearly £9 billion every single year and that, under our manifesto, would have had a growing level of investment across the entirety of the

spending review. There were plans in place to deliver the investment, which is why Edinburgh was so confident that it would be delivered. It was a clear priority in our spending plans and communicated in writing by the Secretary of State's predecessor to the chief executive of UKRI. Notwithstanding the fact that the Treasury seems to have got his tongue immediately upon taking office, a project that the Treasury never loved seems to have been mysteriously cancelled. The project was being delivered by UKRI, an organisation with significant financial resources that far exceeded the £1.3 billion cost of the supercomputer. It is the wrong decision at the wrong time.

Dawn Butler: I wonder how the shadow Secretary of State feels about the Rosalind Franklin Laboratory in Leamington Spa, which received over £1 billion in Government funding. The last Government put it on Rightmove.

Andrew Griffith: The last Government did not do that; it was an independent institute that had multiple sources of funding. As the Secretary of State and his Ministers will discover, funding of that nature is competitive funding that is allotted by independent research councils. It would not have been within the gift of me or any other Minister to abrogate that competitive funding process.

Inevitably, there are projects that are funded and projects that are not funded, but the exascale computer was a very clear priority. It sat within the overall financial resources of UKRI and, under our Government, there was an expanding level of resource. People should have absolute confidence that the programme would have continued and been delivered in the context of the much larger amount of money that is spent through the Department, but by the Government as a whole. That was a good decision, and it would have had huge benefits to the UK. The chief executive of UKRI has talked at length about the benefits, and I think the Government are making the wrong decision. I urge the Secretary of State to go back, lock horns with the Treasury and seek to continue the project before it is too late, before contracts are cancelled and before technology is not procured.

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman has said quite clearly that it was announced in the Budget, but it was contingent on a manifesto that had not even been written at the time of the Budget, in order to deliver the money promised in the Budget. He is an accountant by trade. Could he explain to the House why a Chancellor of the Exchequer standing up and making a commitment for which he has not one penny allocated until potentially winning a general election, which has not been called, is irresponsible?

Andrew Griffith: The Secretary of State will understand that at any point in time, a Department may go through a triennial spending review, although actually the triennial spending review had not fully happened. Governments also make forward-looking commitments and declarations of intent, and commission work, whether from arm's length bodies such as UK Research and Innovation or from officials in the Department, to deliver their priorities. I do not think that the Secretary of State disputes that this was a clear priority. Looking at the aggregated spend through UKRI and the different funding councils

[Andrew Griffith]

that were going to deliver the supercomputer project, including the Science and Technology Facilities Council, there is no question but that it would have been delivered. It was not contingent on growth; a Government of any persuasion, advised by their independent civil servants, would have delivered the programme through organisations such as UKRI. That is why Edinburgh University was so committed to it. It had been announced by the previous Government, and equipment was being procured.

As we seek to compete with modern states that are busily investing in exactly this sort of facility, it is important to recognise that it is wrong to simply recoil from the project. It is not something that the Treasury ever loved, and the Secretary of State has to push hard, as we did, but it is wrong to allow a step back on that brilliant project, which would unlock so many of the benefits that the Secretary of State talked about this evening. Again, I ask him to lock horns with the Treasury, and use every opportunity to see what can be done to revisit the decision. It is a very important project, and part of an ambition that I think we share for the future of this country.

In conclusion, the first duty of government should be to do no harm, and we cannot afford to get this agenda wrong. We will judge the Government by their actions. Where they are bold in order to deliver better outcomes at a lower cost to the taxpayer, they can count on our full support. We will help this progressive Secretary of State to face down the union luddites in his party. We on the Opposition Benches will support efforts to place the private sector at the heart of reform of the NHS, but the people of the UK cannot afford half-hearted efforts, the Treasury curtailing the departmental budget to pay for public sector pay rises elsewhere, or the abandonment of real ambition that can unlock the potential of technology to benefit this country for years to come.

8.16 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate on technology in public services. Many new Members are waiting to give their maiden speech, so I shall try to be brief on this subject, which is dear to my heart, and on which I am very passionate.

The Labour Government understand the importance of technology and its potential to transform our lives. In a speech just last week, the Prime Minister promised to harness the full potential of artificial intelligence for the public good. As the Secretary of State laid out, we are already making progress. A few days ago, the Government released a bank of example lesson plans and curricula to help train generative AI tools—not to undermine teachers or try to replace them with large language models, but to free them up to spend more time teaching the next generation. Only two months in, that is not bad.

It is really important that we have good news stories to tell about technology in public services; indeed, I want to start by praising technology generally. I consider myself a tech evangelist, and I know that many of the new intake consider themselves tech evangelists, too. We cannot count how many lives have been saved by remote medicine; how many businesses have been started, enabled or grown through technology; how many marriages

have been saved by couples not arguing about how to get directions; and how much joy has been shared through cat memes.

Technology can and should be a force for good, which is why I went into engineering—to make the world work better for everyone. As the Secretary of State laid out, the opportunity that technology offers public services is huge. In opposition, I shadowed digital, technology and science briefs. Given the dire mess that 14 years of Tory government has made of our country and our finances, praise for anything that happened under the Tories' multiple and ever-changing regimes is rare, but I want to give credit where credit is due. The creation of the Government Digital Service back in 2011 was world-leading. It was a Labour idea, and it delivered real benefits to both the public and the civil service. From online tax returns to driving licences, the GDS model of user-centred, agile service development reaped some big wins, which saved the Government money and saved people time. The report I commissioned in 2014, "Technology for Everyone: The Prize of Digital Government", highlighted the opportunities, as did the "Our Digital Future" report, published in 2020.

But the Conservative Government did not follow through. They did not succeed in driving change through every Whitehall Department, or outside of Whitehall into local government, so they squandered the promise of GDS. Digital government lost its way between departmental silos, Conservative factionalism, a lack of investment, and a focus on woke lanyards, rather than technology adoption, so we have not made the progress that we should have. My constituents spend too much time trying to interact with public services in ways that are repetitive, time-consuming or plain hostile, and I have had constituents in tears in my surgeries because they cannot make a benefits claim or are put on hold by some service for hours on end.

Mr Holden: Technology is the subject of this discussion, but there is also the issue of connectivity to that technology. Is it not the case that in parts of the country, connectivity could be a major issue, as well as the technology itself?

Chi Onwurah: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and for highlighting the lack of progress by the last Conservative Government—and indeed their failure to roll out acceptable digital infrastructure across our country.

Good news stories about technology have been replaced by tech horror stories—about workers imprisoned unfairly because of Post Office software failures, and about students being treated unfairly by exam algorithms. This entrenches opposition to technology. Too many of my constituents feel that they are being tracked, monitored, surveilled and analysed. They do not want to go online without feeling safe and secure.

Work by the Collective Intelligence Project highlights that safety, participation and progress must go hand in hand, because only public confidence in AI will enable us to drive adoption in public services and improve productivity. That is why the Government are so right to emphasise safe deployment. Pre-deployment evaluation of foundation models by our world-leading AI Safety Institute will boost public confidence, and provide transparency about when AI is used in the public sector, and how it will help to maintain trust.

I have worked in technology deployment for many years, and bitter experience has led me to the conclusion that whatever the problem might be, technology is not the answer on its own. You cannot force technology on people. Co-creation is an overused term but an underused reality, so engagement, participation and partnership working need to be part of the plans for adoption. The group Connected by Data has great examples of this type of participatory decision making. Camden Council, which was led until recently by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould), has done excellent work in this regard.

I am sure that I do not need to tell the House that AI is the subject of hype as well as hope. In partnership with the What Works centres, we need to evaluate different uses of AI in our hospitals and schools, for example, so that we can scale up the most cost-effective solutions while avoiding expensive failures. The private sector has driven the adoption of so many of the technologies that have transformed our lives, but we must build state capacity in tech by recruiting more diverse science and technology experts to the civil service, so that Government can innovate. We need fair, open and transparent procurement processes that will enable British start-ups as well as big tech companies to bid for Government contracts.

Given the previous Government's responses to my parliamentary questions, I am concerned that our digital infrastructure may be too dependent on single or dual suppliers, or on proprietary systems. I hope that the Secretary of State will consider that, and the role of start-ups and open source in ensuring resilience. Digital inclusion was neglected by the previous Government. Age UK estimates that around a third of over-75s—that is 1.7 million people—do not use the internet. We must tackle the barriers, which include infrastructure availability, cost and the skills gap, but we also need to recognise that some people may never be comfortable with digital access to Government services.

Finally, we should remember that we too are a public service. I have raised the adoption of technology in this place many times. Indeed, I worked closely with the House authorities during covid to deliver a remote Parliament by introducing Zoom into the Commons. We must lead by example when it comes to adopting technology to improve our performance. I am standing to be Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee because this is so important to all our constituents, but they often feel that technology is something that is done to them, rather than with them and for them. The benefits of technology have not been shared fairly. Under a Labour Government, this will change, and public services will lead the way.

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

8.24 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to begin this new parliamentary term debating the role of technology in public services. I start by extending a special welcome to the friends and family in the Gallery eagerly waiting for the many maiden speeches to be made this evening; I will be brief. You can start timing me if you wish, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Under the Conservatives, Britain's public services have steadily deteriorated, with insufficient investment across the board. Schools, hospitals and prisons are literally crumbling, and transport projects were axed on a ministerial whim. In a cost of living crisis, when people are looking desperately to public services for support, tackling the big challenges in our public services is absolutely essential.

I am a technophile. I am a former science teacher. I spent most of my childhood buried in science fiction, and you can draw a straight line from "Star Trek" to where I am standing now. That is "Star Trek, the Next Generation", in case anyone was wondering. So today I will focus primarily on the positives, but if we want buy-in from the public, we need to show the public that this Parliament also understands and legislates for mitigation of the risks of technology. I will touch on that, too.

Technology has the potential to revolutionise our public services, making them more efficient, accessible and responsive to the needs of every citizen. Automating routine tasks can free up staff time, so that staff can deal with more complex issues, and using digital platforms can reduce the need for physical infrastructure, which lowers costs. Digital services can help us reach those in remote areas, and real-time data or open data initiatives help to make Government processes more transparent. There are many examples of local councils and public services already innovating and using technology to improve services. Online GP appointments and digital prescriptions, where appropriate, can free up GP time, as surgeries are under ever-growing pressure. The Secretary of State spoke movingly about his mother and the technology that she sadly did not have, but he is right to point out that technology is transforming our NHS day to day, and we must welcome that.

Going back to my heartland of teaching, online learning platforms have been used incredibly successfully in the education sector, particularly during the lockdowns, and we have learned much about what works, and what does not, when it comes to technology in the classroom. But when those delivering public services look at introducing innovations and new technologies, there are also significant barriers. Despite recent funding increases, council budgets are expected to be 18% lower in real terms in 2024-25 than in the early 2010s, with demand for acute services increasing post-pandemic.

Local services are too often struggling with tight ringfenced budgets, which prevent the strategic investment needed to upgrade outdated systems and implement digital technologies. How many people have spent their time in a queue, waiting to talk to the local council, and wondered why on earth we still have this old technology? Digital and technology skills are often also highlighted as a big concern for local authorities, who face a growing struggle to recruit and retain skilled technologists. Public services find it hard to compete with the salaries of the private sector, or to invest in training and development.

Artificial intelligence is by far and away the sexiest and one of the most significant and talked-about areas. That technology is developing rapidly, and we risk falling behind. If implemented properly, it can improve experiences for service users. Chatbots and virtual assistants can help with personalising services and addressing queries. Automated data analysis can evaluate larger quantities of data in a shorter timeframe, and where AI is used to support the creation of datasets, accurate

[Layla Moran]

patterns and trends in data can be identified. In my area of Oxfordshire, the county council is piloting the use of generative AI to support administrative tasks, and the scheme will look at whether AI can speed up routine processes in order to reduce costs. The previous Government's announcement that £110 million of funding will be ringfenced for the deployment of AI across the public sector was a welcome development, and I would like to hear from the new Minister whether the Government plan to follow through on this scheme, which I think is well worth investing in.

But AI is not without its challenges. It reflects the values and biases of the humans who create it, causing campaigners to raise concerns. In August 2020, the Home Office agreed to stop using a computer algorithm to help sort visa applications after it was claimed that the algorithm contained entrenched racism and bias. It essentially created a three-tier system for immigration, with a speedy boarding lane for white people from the countries most favoured by the system.

Earlier this year, it emerged that the Department for Work and Pensions had stopped routinely suspending benefit claims flagged by its AI-powered fraud detector. Campaigners had long raised concerns that potential bias in the system could lead to unfair delays for legitimate claimants. The campaign group Big Brother Watch said:

"DWP's overreliance on new technologies puts the rights of people who are often already disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable, in the backseat."

It is vital that the Government are open and transparent with the public about how and why AI and algorithmic models are being used, so I am pleased the Department recently said that the algorithmic transparency recording standard is now mandatory for all Departments, but I would argue that we need to go further.

The Liberal Democrats want to see a clear, workable and well-resourced, cross-sectoral regulatory framework that promotes innovation while creating certainty for AI users, developers and investors. My colleague Lord Clement-Jones tabled a private Member's Bill, the Public Authority Algorithm Bill—the Liberal Democrats know how to party—in the other place during a previous Session. This important Bill would have regulated the use of automated decision making in the public sector by requiring a public authority to complete an algorithmic impact assessment where it uses an automated decision-making system. I urge Ministers to look at the Bill and to work with colleagues in both Houses to develop the right regulation. If they have not had a chance to speak to Lord Clement-Jones, a former Chair of the Lords Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence, I would encourage them to do so.

Technology offers so many opportunities, but we will lose public support if we do not get to grips with the risks. The Liberal Democrats want to embrace these opportunities for innovation and change, and we also want to protect citizens' rights, their identities and their data. It is vital that we put the right infrastructure and safeguards in place to help our public services make the most of new opportunities while keeping our country safe.

I hope the Government are ready to think strategically and to invest for the long term by putting science and innovation at the heart of their plan for economic growth.

If they do, the Liberal Democrats will support them and, where appropriate, they can expect us to challenge them too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Patricia Ferguson to make her maiden speech.

8.32 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I thank you, your team and all parliamentary staff for your cheerfulness and support over the last few weeks? I promise that I will eventually stop asking how to get to places, but it might not be for a while yet.

I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I listened carefully to her very interesting speech, from which I learned quite a lot. Then again, those who know me will know that giving my maiden speech in a technology debate is probably not the best idea there ever was.

As I rise to make my first contribution, I am acutely aware of the great honour afforded to me by the constituents of Glasgow West, who elected me to represent their interests in this place. I will never allow the allure of politics or the mystique of this place to obscure that bigger picture.

Although I am the first Member for the new constituency of Glasgow West, I am conscious, too, of the contributions made by my predecessors in Glasgow North West and Glasgow Anniesland who served our communities so well. Carol Monaghan, my immediate predecessor, championed the condition ME and worked to give the issue wider prominence, and John Robertson succeeded in amending the Welfare Reform Bill 2009 to ensure that people who are registered blind or partially sighted could claim the higher level of disability living allowance.

But perhaps my most illustrious predecessor is the late Donald Dewar, who served in this House for many years and was both a shadow Minister and a Cabinet Minister. Donald was my MP when I joined the Labour party and, over the years, he became a good friend. He was, of course, the father of Scottish devolution and Scotland's first First Minister, which is really quite an accolade—it is also quite difficult to say, to be honest. He was also the man who persuaded this working-class woman, brought up in a room and kitchen in Maryhill and on the 21st floor of the Red Road flats, that she could, and indeed should, be Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament—an encouragement for which I will always be grateful.

My thanks must also go to another Scottish First Minister, Jack McConnell—Lord McConnell, as I suppose we must now call him, as he serves in the other place—who trusted me to be the Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and, subsequently, Cabinet Secretary for Tourism, Culture and Sport. I loved both jobs and had the most amazing experiences, not least launching the National Theatre of Scotland and submitting Glasgow's successful bid for the 2014 Commonwealth games.

The experience of working in that Cabinet helped me to understand the importance of working across Government and, in our case, working across parties, because we were in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, many of whom are still friends to this day. That was the important thing I learned, and I am delighted that this Labour Government understand that principle and are using the benefit of joined-up government to make progress.

It is also good to see this Government's commitment to the open and transparent use of public money. For those who do not know, the Red Road flats were a large development of multi-storey flats in the north of Glasgow. At its peak, the estate housed more people than the town of St Andrews, but for many years it had no shops or facilities. When we build the houses that we so badly need across the country, I sincerely hope we will recognise that people need facilities as well as homes. That is responsible planning and responsible use of public money, and I was delighted to hear the Deputy Prime Minister recognise that necessity in her statement earlier today.

I also want to talk a little about my constituency. I have listened to many maiden speeches in this Chamber and heard Members extol the virtues of their constituencies, so I now have a bucket list of places I want to visit. I have to say that my constituency is very beautiful, but that is not what intrigues me most about it and it is not the thing of which I am most proud.

I am most proud of the many wonderful organisations that support the people and communities in my area. The G15 project works so hard with young people in the Drumchapel area to host Drumchapel TV; many a "Newsnight" presenter could learn something from the station's young interviewers. For years, Drumchapel food bank has supported some of the most vulnerable people in our community. Kingsway Community Connections supports a diverse range of people to achieve the best possible in their communities. And, of course, the Yoker resource centre, led by the indefatigable Sandy Busby, has supported the people of Yoker for decades.

Drumchapel may now be a working-class Glasgow overspill estate, but it still has traces of the Antonine wall, built to delineate the northernmost limits of the Roman empire. Scotstoun, another of our local communities, is home to the mighty Glasgow Warriors rugby team, who recently won the united rugby championships title, and Victoria Park, the site of a grove of fossilised trees that have stood in that spot for 330 million years.

One issue that has long concerned me is the disparity in life expectancy between people in parts of my constituency and their more affluent neighbours in other parts of Scotland. That difference can be anything up to 12 years. Perhaps even more stark is the fact that people in our most deprived areas have a healthy life expectancy gap of 23 years for men and 23.9 years for women. Many of the reasons are obvious: poor housing, low pay, lack of opportunity and poor living conditions—all reasons why I support the new deal for workers being spearheaded by the Deputy Prime Minister, and the pursuit of economic growth being pursued by our first female Chancellor of the Exchequer. That people should have comprehensive rights at work and the dignity that comes with it is vitally important.

Glasgow West is home to some notable companies employing large numbers of people, including Edrington, the makers of the Macallan, Highland Park and the Famous Grouse—other whiskies are available—and Mortons Rolls, who make the perfect accompaniment to the Lorne sausage, a delicacy that is a sad omission from Parliament's restaurants.

It is appropriate in this debate to mention BAE Systems, one of the last Clyde shipbuilders, which recently invested some £14 million in a new training academy. I met some of its 140 new apprentices just a few weeks ago, and their enthusiasm was infectious. It was also

great to see the way in which technology was being incorporated into their training. No longer was it necessary for young welders in training to be exposed to great heat and noxious gases. The young people were working on welding but doing it virtually. It was amazing to watch—so realistic and so clever. Indeed, some of the more experienced welders are using that technology to practise and rehearse how they approach the more difficult tasks that they will encounter. That virtual programme is very impressive. If the Minister or any of his team ever want to visit, they just need to tell me and we can make arrangements.

Another large employer is, of course, the NHS. Glasgow West is home to Gartnavel hospital and to the Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre, famed for its groundbreaking research and treatment since 1886. The Secretary of State referred to how much better diagnosis can be with the use of AI and other technologies. As a cancer survivor myself, I understand just how important the facility is to people across the west of Scotland and beyond. I am also aware that early detection and treatment are vital, and that it is often within our most deprived communities that the take-up of screening is at its lowest—that situation has to change. I very much hope the current Scottish Government are sincere in wishing to work with the UK Government to ensure that that problem, and others that beset our NHS, can be eradicated on both sides of the border.

Up until today, when I submitted my resignation, I was also a councillor in my constituency. I thank all the community groups and organisations that do such great work in ward 14. Glasgow West is well served by its councillors, but I have to single out my ward colleague, Councillor Paul Carey BEM, who has represented the Drumchapel/Anniesland ward for more than 20 years with tenacity and dedication.

Donald Dewar often spoke about the imbalance in the social arithmetic, and the need to rebalance the equation by reducing poverty and by giving all our children the best possible start in life and the opportunity to fulfil their potential. That will only be achieved by working across Government, which is why I welcome the establishment of the poverty taskforce and why its mission is so important to all our constituents and to the work of this Government. People across this country have put their belief and trust in us. It is up to us now to make sure we deliver for them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Alex Brewer to make her maiden speech.

8.43 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson). I congratulate her on a moving maiden speech, and I hope to add another place on her bucket list.

I am honoured to have been elected as the first Liberal Democrat MP for North East Hampshire, a constituency that has had only two previous MPs: James Arbuthnot—now Lord Arbuthnot in the other place—who is known for his important role in supporting Jo Hamilton and other sub-postmasters and postmistresses; and Ranil Jayawardena, who likewise wanted the best for our communities and campaigned for better infrastructure locally, alongside carrying out his ministerial roles.

[Alex Brewer]

Boundary changes mean that those in Lychpit and Old Basing, who are warmly welcomed into North East Hampshire, were previously represented by Dame Maria Miller in the Basingstoke constituency. She was a strong advocate for women in Parliament and encouraged those of all parties.

I am only the second woman to stand for Parliament in North East Hampshire, and only about 15 have stood before me in any of the constituencies now covered by the current boundaries, so it gives me great pride to be in the Parliament with the highest number of women ever. That achievement would not have been possible without the support of my dad, my late mum, and my husband and children.

North East Hampshire is a place that people often travel through: by train between London and the west country, or by road on the A30 or the M3, stopping perhaps at Fleet services. Those who live there, however, enjoy good schools, good transport links, low crime and plenty of countryside—all the reasons, in fact, why the place often tops the list of the best places to live in the UK, and why my family and I chose to move there 10 years ago. I encourage Members, the next time a journey takes them that way, to stop and visit. If they wish to indulge their interest in political history, they could choose to stay at the Four Seasons. The hotel is situated in the former home of Sir Henry St John-Mildmay, the fifth Baronet of the Dogmersfield estate, who was also, coincidentally, a Liberal political candidate in 1865. Or they might choose Highfield Park, where Neville Chamberlain spent his final months.

Once a visitor has arrived, there is plenty to experience. History enthusiasts should visit Odiham castle, Basing House and the Roman city walls at Silchester. Those with a military interest will not be disappointed with a constituency that boasts RAF Odiham; Stratfield Saye House, the home of the Dukes of Wellington; and Blackbushe airport, created as an airfield during the second world war.

For nature lovers, there is so much to choose from: the Hazeley Heath nature reserve, or a sturdy walk up Beacon hill to look out over Caesar's camp. If they like their nature by the water, there is Fleet pond, the Basingstoke canal and our two chalk streams, the Loddon and the Whitewater.

After all that, perhaps they might be in need of refreshment. North East Hampshire is home to dozens of village pubs, cafés and bakeries. From the award-winning Street Bakery in Old Basing to the Heron on the Lake at Fleet Pond, looking out over the water, there is something for everyone. We even have a local gin distilled at Upton Grey.

One of the joys of the area is that each town and village has its own personality, with a high number of independent businesses that makes each one unique. A walk through Bramley is entirely different from a stroll along Hartley Wintney High Street or a meander through Yately.

What unites all of these places is the people. Each unique town or village has a strong sense of community, and the people of North East Hampshire are unfailingly generous with their time and energy in pursuit of this goal. This community spirit was seen most recently

when Hook infant school and local homes and businesses were victim to a summer flash flood. People rallied around, helped clean up, raised funds, donated items, hosted friends whose homes were damaged and offered sympathy. It is in this way that all the communities within North East Hampshire are connected.

But this place that I love to call home is not without its challenges too. Connecting our towns and villages takes more than good will. Our roads, particularly our smaller roads, are in a terrible state, public transport leaves a lot to be desired, and bus routes are sparse at best. It is also surprising that North East Hampshire is behind the national average in the adoption of 5G mobile services, especially when we consider the above-average employment in the technology sector—one that will be vital for the modernisation of both Government and our public services. The investment that is needed to ensure joined-up and efficient public service processes is as vital as the investment needed in North East Hampshire's transport.

The UK has a proud history of research and innovation, but when nurses are still taking patient notes with pen and paper, it is clear that action is needed. Indeed, the National Audit Office's report only last year stated that "outdated IT systems...are a key source of inefficiency"

in Government. We cannot be a country needing to catch up, and I hope that the Government will draw on the expertise of those in the technology sector to quickly implement the best possible solutions, while ensuring that individuals' personal information is held with the highest possible security.

I also encourage the Government, in their review of technology in public services, to consider the role that charities play in supporting the sector. The tireless work of organisations such as Citizens Advice and the Trussell Trust, as well as countless local and regional charities, is the bedrock of our communities. Such organisations support the public sector to deliver many vital services across health, education, housing, criminal justice and more. In my view, it is essential that those organisations are also invested in, and integrated into, the new systems that will be created. I look forward to working with those local organisations, those businesses and the people in North East Hampshire, and I thank them for putting their trust in me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dr Allison Gardner to make her maiden speech.

8.50 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches tonight. I, too, am honoured to make my maiden speech during this debate on the use of technology in public services, coming as I have from my previous role in the NHS AI and digital regulations service.

Mine is a new constituency, with the majority of the old Stoke-on-Trent South and the northern part of the Stone constituencies within its boundaries. The new Stoke-on-Trent South is hence a diverse area, combining a great industrial heritage of mining and ceramics with the agricultural and rural communities of Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire. Our urban area centres around one of the six Staffordshire pottery towns of Longton,

which proudly boasts the largest number of our iconic bottle ovens, including those of the Gladstone Pottery Museum, where “The Great Pottery Throw Down” was filmed. Naturally, ceramics and tableware are a major part of our history and culture. Indeed, you can spot a Stokie anywhere in the world, for they will be turning over any cup or plate to see whether it comes from Stoke-on-Trent—you know it! I invite Members present to join the “turnover club” and investigate the provenance of pottery and china right here in the Palace of Westminster.

Of course, our industrial strength extends beyond ceramics and includes innovative firms such as Goodwin, with high-tech mechanical and refractory engineering divisions, which I had the pleasure of speaking to last week. Goodwin, along with other excellent businesses, including Trentham’s Minuteman Press, offers dozens of high-skilled apprenticeships, giving our workers award-winning opportunities to develop key skills for the future. Indeed, within north Staffordshire we have Keele and Staffordshire Universities, a medical and veterinary school, and excellent further education colleges offering great courses and apprenticeships.

The rural part of the constituency includes Blythe Bridge and Barlaston, and extends to Tean, Swynnerton, Yarnfield and Oulton, with many villages in between. It is where my partner Jim’s family have lived and run their sawmills for generations. Walk anywhere in our countryside and you will see public footpath signposts made by Jim himself. History, land, family and a love for our north Staffordshire home—I am going to get emotional—are embodied in those signs.

Indulge me too as I mention my daughters, Chrissie and Lucy, and my sister Siobhan, and thank them, alongside Jim and his children, William and Sophie, for putting up with me in my passion to build a better future for everyone’s children in my constituency. Thanks are also due to the great team that supported me throughout.

With this new combined constituency, I must acknowledge the hard work of the two former Conservative Members, Jack Brereton and Bill Cash. Jack was MP for Stoke-on-Trent South from 2017. I commend him for his work in tackling the scourge of monkey dust, and for his ambitions for better transport across Stoke and north Staffordshire. I commit to continuing that important work, and welcome the moves being made by this Government to rebuild our transport services to be run for the people, benefiting our economy, opportunity and the environment. Bill Cash has had a parliamentary career spanning 40 years. Indeed, Bill was an MP before Jack was born. I wish Bill well in his retirement.

In Stoke-on-Trent South, Jack was preceded by the Labour MPs Rob Ffello and George Stevenson. I thank George for his no-nonsense advice and support. I should also mention another MP called Jack: Jack Ashley, a Labour MP who I have the honour of being compared to. This is a formidable challenge to meet. Jack was elected in 1966, the year I was born and the year that we won the world cup, in which the great Stoke City player Gordon Banks played a key role. His statue stands proudly outside the bet365 stadium in my constituency. So 1966 was a good year all round, by my reckoning, as we can now add me to its accomplishments as the first female MP for Stoke-on-Trent South.

Jack Ashley became profoundly deaf while he was an MP and was reportedly the first deaf Member of any elected assembly. Although he initially thought that he

would need to resign, he turned to technology, using a Palantype transcription system. Jack’s visit to the BBC’s Ceefax department even inspired a project to develop a computer program to convert stenographic outputs to TV subtitles. As a hard-of-hearing MP who wears AI-enabled hearing aids, it is fitting that I remember Jack Ashley in today’s debate.

It is the norm for MPs to claim in their maiden speech that their constituency is the most beautiful. I could, of course, argue that, describing our quintessential countryside, pretty villages and farms, the canals and of course the River Trent, or I could talk of the beauty I find in our industrial landscape—I am going to get emotional again.

However, I want to talk about the people, because it is in their spirit, their friendliness and their sense of community that true beauty lies—in the heart of the people. From Tracey, who runs Meir Watch, and Arfan, who owns Sizzlers pizzas, coming together to feed and clothe children in need, with no expectation of thanks or profit; to the fantastic PEGiS—the Parent Engagement Group in Stoke—who I had the pleasure to meet at their summer picnic, working to support SEND families, with no-nonsense women such as Michelle and Keeley cracking on and getting stuff sorted; or Jason, passionately fighting to clean up our waterways; Craig, battling grief from the loss of a friend to campaign for safer roads; and the village who reached out to me, worried about asylum seekers, not because they had given in to the politics of division and hate, but because they were worried that the children were not getting any schooling. When I attended their summer fête, they had reached out and invited the refugees to come and join in the fun—and come they did.

This is the heart of the people of my constituency, reaching out and caring for those in need without judgment, with friendly, no-nonsense, practical support, and believing in the power of community action. This is true beauty. I pledge to all the people in my constituency that I carry them in my heart and mind at all times. I am acutely aware of the trust they have placed in me. I will get some things wrong, no doubt, but know this: I will always do my best. I will work hard, I will always hold the vision of a better life for them and I will always fight for the place that is my home.

Before I turn back to the topic of this debate, technology in our public services, I will take one more little trip into history, if I may. In Barlaston we have the World of Wedgwood, where I like to treat myself to a genteel cream tea, drinking out of Wedgwood china and pretending I am posh. I heartily recommend visiting. The founder, Josiah Wedgwood, was a great innovator and entrepreneur who invented creamware and green glaze, to name just two. He understood that science—in his case, chemistry—practically applied in an industrial context turbocharged innovation and development. He was also a master marketer, apparently, pioneering money-back guarantees, illustrated catalogues and buy one, get one free. If he were alive today, we can only imagine what his innovative and entrepreneurial spirit would make of this digital world.

Josiah was a polymath, and that is something worth noting. It is important that we recognise that in considering technological innovation, we must take a multidisciplinary approach, with the full participation of those who will implement, use, govern and be impacted by the technology day to day. Technology in the public services offers huge

[Dr Allison Gardner]

potential, but there are also risks if it is not properly developed and deployed, as we have seen with biased risk assessment models for child welfare and benefit fraud models.

In my previous career with the NHS, I saw the great potential that diagnostic technologies can offer, particularly in radiology, which I saw in action when I visited the radiology department at the Royal Stoke, for example. Such technologies can be transformative, streamlining pathways and saving hours of work, but they do not and should not replace human oversight. Proper governance and regulation are required, and always with a “safety first” principle. It must be transparent and accountable. I hope we get it right; in fact, we must. In delivering transformative change in our public services, we must develop the governance and regulation that will maximise the benefits and mitigate the risks—not just for the people of my constituency or the country, but because by moving forward to a bright new age with modern and innovative public services, as they once were and will be again, we can be an example to the world.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Chris Coghlan to make his maiden speech.

8.59 pm

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate. I was moved by the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner)—particularly her devotion to her constituents. I already have some Stoke-on-Trent pottery in my kitchen, and I am always open to more.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Sir Paul Beresford. He significantly tightened the legislation around child protection, and I—a father of three little girls—and parents across the country are grateful to him for it. I am hugely honoured to be the first Liberal MP for Dorking and Horley in over 100 years. It is my home: I grew up in Peaslake, just half a mile outside the constituency. Growing up, I was astounded by the beauty of our Surrey hills—from Leith hill to Box hill—and I still am. When I visit places across my constituency, I often think about my mum. She visited those places, too, and I know that they brought her great joy. She died of ovarian cancer three months after I was born. That is why the Liberal Democrat 62-day cancer treatment guarantee is so important to me.

Growing up, I developed a passion for public service, which helped me to move beyond the pain of her loss. It is why, when I saw that ISIS was murdering people, I joined the Foreign Office and Army Reserve, and served in Iraq. It is why I left my job in a hedge fund to start a charity training African entrepreneurs with Violet Busingye, a Rwandan refugee from the genocide. It is why I am here now.

Statistics show that one of the worst places in the country for the special needs crisis is Surrey. A headteacher in Horley wrote to me to say that she has to take special needs children even though she does not have the specially trained staff to support them, as is their right. One mum wrote to me to say that her son had been out of school for two years, with no tuition and no placement

in between, and that she is now having the same struggle with her daughter. They are just one of hundreds of such families across Surrey. Imagine the impact of missing two years of school on that little boy’s life chances. Imagine if he had instead been in a nurturing educational environment—one that was integrated with employers who cater to the unique talents of autistic people, such as above-average analytical capabilities, attention to detail and conscientiousness. Indeed, perhaps we should consider the contribution that autistic people could make to the technology that we need in public services—the topic of today’s debate.

Sadly, the outcome can all too often be very different, as I discovered some years ago when I went back to my old house in Peaslake. Fiona, who had bought it off my dad—she is in the Public Gallery today with her daughter, Cara—showed me every room in the house, except my old bedroom, which, strangely, had my name, Christopher, written above the door. On my next visit, Fiona told me what had happened to her autistic son, Christopher. As a young man living alone in Leeds, he had been unable to get the support that was his right. Horrifically, he was exploited and murdered by a man who had just been released from jail. Of the many things that went terribly wrong in Christopher’s case, one was that the Mental Capacity Act 2005 provides for a presumption of capacity, which can prevent the NHS and social services from intervening when they should. In fact, in a post-legislative scrutiny report, a 2014 House of Lords Select Committee found that the Act is failing those who it was designed to protect and empower.

Ever since Christopher’s death, Fiona has been campaigning to change this law, and it is my intention that she will succeed in doing so. I am proud that Fiona’s MP, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), and I are working on this together. Christopher’s MP was the right hon. Member for Leeds South (Hilary Benn), who of course is a Cabinet Minister and as such is bound by collective responsibility, but Fiona has been full of praise for the support that he has given her and her family. I believe it would be right and honourable for Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs to change this law together, because that change would bring comfort to Fiona and console Cara. It would mean that in 10, 20 or 30 years’ time, if another little boy or girl is born in Christopher’s circumstances, they might avoid Christopher’s fate. That is why I came to this place—for those who need to move beyond pain to peace.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Natasha Irons to make her maiden speech.

9.5 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) for his moving and powerful words. It is an extraordinary thing to become a Member of Parliament, and becoming a Labour Member of Parliament who gets to sit on the Government Benches is even more extraordinary. I share the sense of pride and urgency that we have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) and from the hon. Member for North

East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) in their maiden speeches, and I congratulate them on their contributions to this debate.

It is the honour of my life to represent Croydon East in this place, so I thank the people of this new constituency for putting their faith in me. I will never forget what a privilege it is to be their voice in Parliament, and I will do all I can to fight for Croydon's future. As south London's most iconic borough, Croydon is a place so big that it needs four Members of Parliament to represent it. Like the reunion tour of a much-loved '90s band, my constituency has been reformed under an old name with new boundaries, so I pay tribute to my predecessors, starting with the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for his work for the people of Selsdon and his commitment to public service. While I cannot apologise for campaigning against him in the election, I can attest to the number of constituents who spoke highly of him and his contribution to their community when I met them on the doorstep.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), who is not only Croydon's first female MP, the founder and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and violence reduction and now a Minister in this Government, but the kind of MP where everybody knows someone who has been helped by her. I thank her for her kindness, advice and encouragement over the past few months, and hope to build on her legacy and continue to stand up for Croydon in the way that she has always done. I am thrilled to join those Members and my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed), someone who continues to work tirelessly for his constituents and who, as Secretary of State, is now taking on the urgent fight to clean up our waters. I look forward to us working together in the best interests of Croydon.

Croydon East represents so much of what is great about our city. Whether it is the bustling life of South Norwood, the close-knit communities of Addiscombe and New Addington, or the stunning views from Shirley Hills, Croydon East is a place filled with diversity, ambition and strong values. However, even in this vibrant corner of south London, the shadow of inequality persists. Whether it is the fact that a child in Croydon East is twice as likely to live in poverty as one just a few miles away in Croydon South, or that a man living in New Addington North has a life expectancy a decade shorter than a woman living in Shirley South, these stark disparities remind us that too many remain trapped in a cycle of inequality.

When we talk about technology in public services, we must not get lost in grand plans and digital transformations: we must remember those who use these services, and how they will be put to use. What do they mean for the community leaders at the coalface of the cost of living crisis—those who run services such as the Food Stop, Pathfinders and the Community Family Project in New Addington that often step up when there is no one else to step in? What do they mean to groups such as the Friends of Shirley Library, which is fighting to keep the library open—a place that not just tackles loneliness and isolation, but plays a critical role in closing the digital divide? What do they mean to my constituent Michael Lyons, a veteran who has campaigned to ensure that the memory of servicepeople from the first world war lives on? How will we ensure that digital public

services remain as accessible to him as they are to the rest of us? With a considered application of technology, we have an opportunity to break down barriers instead of creating new ones, to bring people closer to democracy instead of driving them further away, and to rebuild our public services so they work better for the people who need them most.

As someone who grew up in south London in a family that was always political but did not think that politics was for people like us, I know that the decisions that we make in this place have the power to change lives for the better. Choices that have been made in this room took my family from sleeping on our living room floor to decent social housing. They enabled my mother to go back to university to retrain and to get a better job. And they gave me the opportunity to go to university, to get a career in public service broadcasting, to serve my community as a local councillor and to make my way to these Benches.

As an MP in London's youngest borough, I want to spend my time here putting the wellbeing of our young people back on the political agenda. There is no longer-term plan than ensuring that our young people have the opportunities they deserve, so that they can go on to live the successful lives that we want them to. We need a national plan for what it is to be a young person in this country, and I look forward to showing how Croydon stands ready to lead that vital work.

Finally, every Member of the House will have those people in their lives who have supported them to get here, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank mine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), who allowed me to see that there was room for people like me in places like this. Without her encouragement and advice, I simply would not be here. I can only hope to be half the MP that she is. I thank my mum and dad for their support and unwavering belief in me. It is their hard work and determination that changed our lives, and I am so proud to continue our family's track record of serving our country. To my spectacular husband, who encouraged me to get involved in politics because he was sick of me shouting at the TV: thank you for your patience and your endless support, and for being the greatest dad imaginable to our lads.

It is really an extraordinary thing to be a Member of Parliament. I hope that in our time here, we make choices in this room that change the lives of the people outside of it for the better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Caroline Voaden to make her maiden speech.

9.12 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I congratulate all the other Members who have made their maiden speeches this evening, from the whiskey and sausages of Glasgow West to the pottery of Stoke-on-Trent South, the young people of Croydon East, and the beautiful tour of North East Hampshire, which I have driven through many times. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) for delivering an incredibly powerful and moving maiden speech with no notes—very impressive.

[Caroline Voaden]

It is very relevant to join in this debate on the role of technology in public services following several conversations that I had during recess about the challenges of connecting Devon and, in particular, the South Hams and Dartmoor to high speed internet. It is something that I will be coming back to with the Minister. If we are going to support rural communities, small businesses, the self-employed and those studying online, we have to get them connected. We must also be aware of the danger of digital exclusion. For all those who cannot use computers, particularly older people, we must ensure that there is always a decent working offline alternative to apps and QR codes.

I am very proud to say that I am the first non-Conservative MP to be elected in my large rural constituency for over 100 years. It had a very short flirtation with Liberalism in 1923 when Henry Vivian was elected. Sadly, he lasted only 10 months before being replaced by another Conservative. Vivian was the founder of the co-operative housing movement, and it is a real shame that he did not last a bit longer, because we could really do with his legacy in South Devon.

It is a spectacular part of the UK, from the art deco hotel sitting atop Burgh Island to the eastern slopes of Dartmoor, the Rivers Dart and Avon that meander south to the sea, the headland at Berry Head where you can spot dolphins playing in the water, and the rolling hills and hedges of the South Hams. It is the place I made home 17 years ago, after leaving London. I took my two small daughters to Devon to be nearer family after the death of my husband from cancer in 2003, and it is great that they are both with us today.

Being widowed at 34 with very young children is a brutal experience, but it taught me many things—the power of community, the value of friendship and family, the strength of support from kindred spirits. Here I pay tribute to the Widowed and Young organisation, which I chaired for a couple of years. Hanging out with a bunch of widows may not sound like much fun, but being with people who understand what you are going through at a difficult time, and who can truly empathise, is transformational. I will always champion community and support groups who bring people together.

Leaving London for a rural community was a bit of a gamble. Busy London play parks were replaced by empty fields, and I was almost the only single parent in the school. I did feel like an outsider. We had no internet connection, and had to dial in through a satellite dish on the roof, which drove me completely insane; but we got some battery hens and watched in awe as their feathers grew back and they began laying eggs again. I learned to manage a septic tank and oil-fired central heating. I navigated the complete lack of buses and the absence of breakfast and after-school clubs, which was not easy for a single working mother.

Rural life poses many extra challenges, so three years later we moved to Totnes, I met my lovely second husband, and this special town became home. It is often described as alternative, but I prefer to say that it is a place that knows the meaning of the word “community”. It is a place where it is quite normal to question the idea that a planet with finite resources can support infinite growth, a place where the seriously wealthy question

why they are not being taxed more to support those who have less, and a place where radical thinking is seen as a really important thing to do.

My constituency is where Agatha Christie lived by the River Dart, and further downstream, naval recruits are trained at Britannia royal naval college. We have wild camping on Dartmoor—long may it continue—paddleboarding in the bay, surfing on the south coast and the world’s biggest pirate festival in Brixham, as well as ancient family farms, stunning beaches and thousands of miles of hedgerows.

We also have the revival of the cirl bunting, a success story championed by my predecessor but one, Sarah Wollaston, who sat on several Benches in this House. Once near extinction, there are now over 1,000 cirl bunting pairs singing from the farmland of South Devon and Cornwall because of the environmental work done by farmers in my constituency. It is proof that farming for food and restoring nature can go hand in hand.

We have one of the country’s largest fish markets at Brixham, as well as shell fishermen, oyster farms and scallop divers. An energetic conversation about sustainability and the long-term future of the fishing industry is being had, and I will work with fishers and scientists, so that we can create policy here that ensures that we can continue to fish while protecting stocks for the future.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Anthony Mangnall, who worked hard to establish the National Independent Lifeboat Association. Together with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, it provides an incredible emergency service for all those who work or play on the water. On land, we have hundreds of hospitality businesses that offer a brilliant experience—I recommend hon. Members all come and try them out—but they have taken a massive hit over the past few years, and they really need our support now to survive.

However, there is so much more to South Devon that does not make it on to the postcards or the chocolate boxes. We have Britain’s most expensive seaside town in Salcombe, where an average house costs £970,000, but not far away we have left-behind neighbourhoods where people struggle to make ends meet on low-paid seasonal work and live in poor-quality housing. This disparity of wealth can be hard to get your head around. I would like us to think really hard and creatively in this place about how we can help even out our society, so that no one is raising a disabled child in a mould-filled home within sight of a millionaire’s yacht in the harbour below.

The lack of public transport leads to loneliness and isolation, and adds to the lack of opportunities for our young people for work and socialising. We must invest in it as a public good. Our schools in Devon are hugely underfunded compared with schools across the UK, which impacts the life chances of our children. We have communities that have been hollowed out by second homes to the extent that schools are closing, village shops have long gone and the last pubs are closing. Families are being evicted so that landlords can turn their homes into short-term holiday lets, and second homes registered as businesses are causing our council to lose out on millions of pounds a year of desperately needed resources. We must close this loophole.

We have businesses struggling to get staff because no one can afford to live nearby and there is no social housing, yet developers build and build to support the

immigration of wealthy retired people from other areas of the country. We have more than met our housing targets, but we are still in a desperate housing crisis. The solution is not just build, build, build; it is about land prices, what we build and where, and who buys those homes. What we need is social housing, more community land trust schemes, innovation and ideas for breaking out of the developer-led disaster we are in.

We are the home of innovation and good ideas, and I would like to quickly highlight one organisation, LandWorks. I declare an interest, as I worked there for six months in 2018. LandWorks is an inspirational prisoner rehabilitation charity that I hope the new prisons Minister will soon visit, given the crisis we are in nationally. Its amazing work has been shown to cut reoffending rates and reintegrate prisoners into society.

We also have a growing cluster of high-tech photonics companies attracting talent from home and abroad and providing highly skilled jobs. That is exactly the kind of modern manufacturing that this country desperately needs, so it was disappointing to hear last week that these companies are missing out on partnerships, funding and investment because of Brexit. One company is weighing up whether it will move its headquarters out of the UK into the EU. Members will not be surprised to hear that as a former Member of the European Parliament for the south-west who got involved in politics in June 2016, I will continue to try to find ways to mitigate and lessen the damage Brexit has caused, particularly to my shellfish exporters, my food and wine importers, our musicians, and all those sectors that are struggling to find staff.

South Devon is a constituency of many parts, and it is right at the top of the list of the most challenging constituencies in which to deliver Lib Dem leaflets—*[Interruption.]* Well, maybe my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) beats me on that. I want to finish by expressing my heartfelt thanks to an incredible group of volunteers who supported my campaign, many of whom were not Liberal Democrats, and who were lending their vote and their time and their shoe leather because they wanted to be represented by a different kind of voice. I would also like to thank my dad, with us today, who never tired of campaigning to help me get here—and I would just like to say that I am really sorry I didn't campaign harder for you in 1983, when you came quite close to sitting on these Benches. I could not have done it without them all, and it is the honour of my life to represent them and all the residents of South Devon. I will work hard every day for them, for our environment, for our planet, and for a different kind of politics.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Alice Macdonald to make her maiden speech.

9.22 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to make my maiden speech today, and to follow the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons); I congratulate them on their moving maiden speeches. They brought their constituencies to life vividly, and I hope I can do the same.

I am proud to be the Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament for Norwich North, and my first message is one of thanks to the people of Norwich North for

putting their faith in me; however you voted, I am here to serve you. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Chloe Smith, who served Norwich North for 15 years as a Minister and Secretary of State, including for science and innovation, and of course as a constituency MP. Like me, Chloe is a Norfolk girl; we went to nearby secondary schools, and I know that one of her passions was opening up opportunities for young people, which is something else we share.

The last Labour Member of Parliament for Norwich North was Dr Ian Gibson, a fierce advocate for our community. It is apt that I am making my speech in this debate, given his passion for science and innovation, and I am pleased to say that a new fellowship is being set up in his name at the Quadram Institute in Norwich: the Invest in ME Research Ian Gibson fellowship.

I also follow in the footsteps of Dorothy Jewson, elected in 1923 to represent Norwich, and one of the first three Labour women MPs. She was known for action to tackle poverty, and was key to the creation of many of Norwich's beautiful parks. She is also noted for refusing to wear a hat in the Chamber. I fully agree with her when she said that women were not in Parliament to discuss dress or millinery, but to do something. Doing something is what I intend to do. My priorities are shaped by what I have heard from my constituents. That is why I will fight for better health, better homes, good education and decent jobs, and fight to tackle the biggest crises we face: the cost of living and the climate crisis.

I could not be prouder to come from Norfolk. I grew up in a rural Norfolk village and have made my home in Norwich North. The constituency spreads from the northern reaches of the city—from the estates of Mile Cross and Heartsease, the pubs of NR3 and our amazing green spaces, such as Mousehold Heath and Waterloo Park—and into the Broadland area, comprising Sprowston, Thorpe St Andrew, Old Catton, Hellesdon and Drayton, each of which has their own unique identity.

As many other Members have said, our strength comes from our active and vibrant communities. Local organisations, volunteers and parish and town councils bring so much to our area—organisations such as the Hellesdon dementia support group, which I visited just last week, the Sprowston youth engagement project, the many food banks and community hubs, and the environmental organisations working to protect nature. The better-known landmarks in Norwich, from the magnificent cathedrals to the castle, may be in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), but Norwich North has many unique attributes, and many things that can provide inspiration to our Government, and I will touch on just a few today.

We are home to Norwich airport, from which I flew this summer. That was convenient, but the airport is also a key driver of economic growth. It is pioneering green aviation, with the first all-electric pleasure flight launched last year from Norwich airport. We are also home to one of the first large-scale social housing estates in the country, Mile Cross, which marked its centenary just last year. When it was built, there was a desperate need for homes, and that remains the case today, when we need social and affordable housing in particular. On the many industrial estates, we can find example after example of small and medium-sized businesses harnessing creativity, innovation and providing much-needed jobs.

[Alice Macdonald]

Beyond the boundaries of Norwich North, there is a huge life sciences cluster at Norwich research park, which is relevant to this debate. To give just one example, scientists from the park are working closely with the UK Health Security Agency and the Food Standards Agency to harness the power of microbiology to protect our food supply. The same technologies were used during the pandemic to identify covid variants for the Government. I thank the Secretary of State for visiting Norwich just this year with Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales to meet students and staff from Norwich University of the Arts, which is providing so much inspiration to many of the innovators of the future.

We are also home to the Canaries—Norwich City—and reportedly the oldest football chant in the world, “On the ball, City”. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) is sadly not in the Chamber today, but I wanted to remind him that while we did not make it to the premier league, in the time it took Oasis to break up and reform, Ipswich have still not beaten the Canaries. I will remind him of that when I see him. I will also mention the great women’s football we have in Norfolk and Norwich. In fact, just a few weeks ago I went to the opening of the Lauren Hemp community pitch in Broadland constituency.

For all its advantages, Norwich North faces many challenges. Three in 10 kids live in poverty, thousands are on the housing waiting list, we are a dental desert and too many children, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities, do not receive the education that they deserve. That must change. As important as what I intend to fight for is how I do it. Time and again, people told me that they were sick of us shouting at each other, and of adversarial politics. Norfolk is now a rainbow county; anyone who saw the election results will know that we have practically every single party represented. I promise to work with everyone and anyone who wants to get the best for our area. I also note Norwich’s long history as a place of refuge. It is officially a city of sanctuary and a tolerant, welcoming place, and I know that will continue. After the events of this summer, that is more important than ever.

I am proud to stand here as a Labour and Co-operative woman MP. My path into politics was inspired by many women, starting with my mother, who is still persevering in the Gallery up there, and I thank her for that, as well as for the inspiration she provided to me as a local councillor; she showed me the difference that politics can make. I want to thank my family, my dad, my twin sister, my friends and my partner for all their support.

I am privileged to have worked for the former Member of Parliament for Camberwell and Peckham, Harriet Harman, who taught me so much about politics—about sticking to one’s principles, taking on the most difficult of challenges and always, always saying thank you. I joined this House after years of working in international development, having worked in some of the poorest countries of the world, and also years of serving communities as a councillor. In everything I have done, from the local to the global, I have focused on fighting inequality and injustice, opening up opportunity, bringing people together to find solutions and working through differences. That is the approach that I will continue

to take: to stand up for opportunity, to stand against inequality in Norwich North, nationally and internationally, and always to focus on what unites us.

In conclusion, I want to finish as I began, with a message for the people of Norwich North: your home is my home, and I pledge to give it my all—to stand up for you, for our fine city and for our great county.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am going to call the Front Benchers at 9.40 pm, so that gives probably our last Back-Bench speaker 10 minutes. I call Mike Martin.

9.30 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak; I am particularly delighted to be called in a debate on technology and public service—of which more later. I congratulate all the other maiden speakers today. It is clear that we are going to have not just a good Parliament but a great Parliament.

I come to this place from Tunbridge Wells, which is famous for a few things—not least the abilities of its residents in writing to newspapers’ letters pages. Of course, I am speaking of the phrase “disgusted of Tunbridge Wells”, and as someone who has spent the last two months perusing the inbox of the MP for Tunbridge Wells, I can assure hon. Members that my constituents have lost none of their ability for forceful expression with the pen. The phrase “disgusted of Tunbridge Wells” does confuse me, though. Why is it that they are disgusted, for they live in the best constituency in the country?

I invite hon. Members who do not believe me to come to Tunbridge Wells later this month, when we will be hosting the world cup for Subbuteo. This is a big deal—it was previously in Rome and it is now in Tunbridge Wells. Hon. Members may not know that Subbuteo is actually from Tunbridge Wells: we invented it and had the factory that created the kits that were sent out to everyone. I can see recognition in some hon. Members’ faces; perhaps there are some Subbuteo aficionados in the House today. Because of this fact, we in Tunbridge Wells are particularly proud to be able to say that this September, football will be coming home to Tunbridge Wells.

At this late hour—I can see that I have eight minutes left to go, Madam Deputy Speaker—hon. Members may be pleased to hear that I will not provide a long geographical survey of my entire constituency, suffice it to say that the villages that make up the greater part of my constituency are the most beautiful anywhere and the towns, of which we have three—Southborough, Paddock Wood and Tunbridge Wells—have for centuries had visitors for sport and recreation. In the case of Paddock Wood, that is hop picking, and of course in Royal Tunbridge Wells people come to take the water.

Perhaps the most famous visitor who came to take the water was Henrietta Maria, who was Queen of England and wife of King Charles I. Henrietta—if I can call her that—was passing through a period of infertility, so it is said, so she came to Tunbridge Wells to take the water and shortly after fell pregnant with King Charles II. We know that King Charles II was

restored to the monarchy and shortly thereafter we had the Bill of Rights and the glorious revolution—so if you will forgive me for a slight bit of hyperbole, Madam Deputy Speaker, I think we can safely say that Tunbridge Wells is the source of modern British democracy.

It is of course right that I speak of my immediate predecessor, Greg Clark, who I know is a good friend of yours, Madam Deputy Speaker. In addition to serving the Crown as a Minister, Greg was Chair of a Select Committee and was the epitome of the constituency MP. Many of us have spent the last couple of years knocking on doors around our constituencies and speaking to future constituents. As hon. Members know, when knocking on doors, we tend to hear the same things and themes seem to come out, and the theme in Tunbridge Wells was that Greg Clark is a good bloke. I would knock on a door, and people would tell me, “Well, we had this big family problem, and he spoke to the relevant Government Department and his office went above and beyond.” I would feel a bit deflated. I would then go to the next door, and they would say, “He was wonderful. Not only did he solve the problem; he came to see us personally to explain what he had done.” I can tell the House that it was utterly disheartening to campaign over the last two years, and I was utterly delighted when he stepped down! I wish him the very best of luck—he is going to run a technology innovation cluster at the University of Warwick, so perhaps the Secretary of State would like to reach out to him; he is a good guy to know.

I would like to finish on a serious topic: the defence of His Majesty’s realm. It has been said so much that it fades into the background, but the world that we live in today is more unpredictable and dangerous than it has been for the last 80 years. Of course, there are the geopolitics that we understand—a relative decline in western power, and previously middling powers jockeying for space and seeking to rewrite the international order; I do not need to name countries for hon. Members to know who I am talking about—but overlaid across it are a number of global trends, including climate change, demography, migration and technology regulation. As geopolitics pull us apart, all those challenges require that we work together. It is quite a difficult needle to thread.

With this going on, the state of the UK military is dire. We have an Army that cannot deploy a division, an Air Force that cannot defend its own airfields and a Navy that cannot crew its own ships, and sitting above that concerning situation is a hole where British strategy should sit. I stand here as someone who spent two years at the sharp end of British strategy in Afghanistan, and I can tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that when you are fighting a war at that level and bullets are flying and people are dying, it breaks you when the country that has sent you there does not have a strategy. This is a non-partisan point because all three main parties, including my own, sat in government during the period that we were in Afghanistan.

What happened in Afghanistan is not unique in British foreign policy. We have not really had a clear strategy for 30 years. It is a very good thing that the Government are initiating a strategic defence review, but previous defence reviews have maintained the illusion that Britain is a global power without giving sufficient resources to back up those ideas and policy goals. I have a piece of

advice for the Government: in the review, before they start talking about planes, tanks and ships—technology in public service—they must have a clear idea of what British strategy is. By clear, I mean realistic. Realistic means matching their goals and aims to the resources that they are willing to put in. That is quite a difficult question to ask, which is why successive Governments have fudged it for the last few decades.

There is an easier question that the Government can answer, and if they can answer it, the rest of the review will flow smoothly: in military terms, is Britain a global expeditionary military power, or is it a power dedicated to ensuring regional security in the Euro-Atlantic area—the area from the Arctic to the Mediterranean, and from Greenland to Suez? It cannot do both. It can only do one. If the Government can answer that question accurately and clearly, then all the other subsidiary questions, like who our friends and allies are, will follow on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I said I would call the Front Benchers at 9.40 pm.

9.40 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I would like to start by paying tribute to all the Members who made their maiden speeches. I congratulate each and every one of them on that nerve-racking experience. We may not always agree on many things or we may agree on a lot, but clearly they will all be formidable contributors to this House.

I would also like to welcome the ministerial team to their place—and the new Secretary of State. As the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) said in his opening remarks, the Front Bench have my utmost respect for serving in public office. Being a Minister is a great privilege and we know that it also places burdens on those closest around us, so I genuinely wish them well. The civil servants I worked with in the Department, including those in my private office, were hard-working, dynamic and top notch. I am sure Ministers will have the same experience.

As His Majesty’s Opposition, we will of course hold the Government to account. We will challenge them where challenge is required, but let me be clear: our sole intention is only to ensure that the United Kingdom remains at the forefront of global innovation and technological advancement. Ministers may not believe me when I say it, but I do want them to be successful because their successes are the nation’s successes.

It is in that spirit that I welcome some of the announcements on enhancing technological use in the public sector, because, as has been said, productivity in the public sector lags behind that of the private sector. The private sector has largely recovered from the pandemic, but the public sector remains less efficient than it was before. That is important for two reasons. First, the public sector—our services that we are so privileged to have, whether the national health service or our police, to name just two—represents 20% of the national output. Improving technology in our services means improving the very services that the British public rely on. Secondly, public services are funded by taxpayers’ money. It is not our money or the Labour party’s money. Hard-working British people pay their taxes for these services, so it is morally right that we all do all we can to make our public services fit for purpose and as efficient as possible.

[Saqib Bhatti]

That is why the previous Conservative Government launched the comprehensive public service productivity review to address low levels of public sector productivity. In our national health service, we utilised AI to cut administration to keep more staff on the frontline and increase the speed of diagnosis, including better diagnoses of stroke, and lung and breast cancers. Our police officers were kept on the streets, rather than pushing pens, with the use of technology to speed up simple administrative tasks, which meant that crime fell in every part of the UK—except, of course, in Labour-run London. We see and welcome the value of better technological uses in the public sector.

I have some questions for the Minister and for the Secretary of State, which I hope the Minister will be able to answer on his behalf. First, over the summer we were all appalled by the riots that gripped the nation and the role that social media played. Digital accessibility for our most vulnerable people matters, and part of that must be that the public have trust in using social media and online platforms. Antisemitism and anti-Muslim incidents have seen a huge rise online. Ministers will have met social media companies, including X. Will the Minister please clarify what actions will now be taken, as we move forward, to ensure that social media is not used to perpetuate and amplify antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred?

Secondly, one of my last acts as Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy was to instruct officials in the Department to start reviewing and refreshing the Government's digital inclusion strategy, and to present options. The timing of the general election prevented that work from making progress, but there is no reason why it cannot continue now. Will the Minister confirm that she will continue that work? Will she commit to ensuring that the necessary funds are put aside, so our public services are more digitally inclusive? Conservatives recognise the importance of making our public services truly accessible. As the last review occurred 10 years ago, will she commit to ensuring that the review is carried out in a timely manner? If our public services are to be truly inclusive, they must be digitally inclusive, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

I am also keen to know what happened to the AI Bill, the legislation that the Secretary of State promised so often when he was in opposition, and what he intends to do about AI regulation. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what assessment she has made of the number of AI companies that will be created as a result of his plans, how much investment will be generated, and how many new jobs there will be. Why was the AI Bill not ready for the King's Speech?

Let me now turn to the Secretary of State. He has had a very busy summer, but whether it was productive is another question. Countries across the world are brimming with ambition, investing in some of the most exciting and transformative technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and ensuring that they are at the forefront of global technological innovation. Let there be no doubt that this is a global race, and I fear that in its first few months in office the Labour party may already have done enough to ensure that this great nation of ours never comes close to winning that race.

The previous Conservative Government set out an ambition to be a science and tech superpower by 2030. I note that the Secretary of State has not shared that ambition, so imagine my surprise when I saw that in one of the Government's first big moments, one of their first big acts was to cut £1.3 billion of investment in supercomputer capability and related research funding. The Secretary of State talks about being a partner to the tech industry. Well, on hearing the news of the cutting of exascale funding, one tech entrepreneur said to me, "With friends like these, who needs enemies?"

Perhaps the Secretary of State—or the Minister, on his behalf—could clarify whether he fought against that decision or endorsed it. Was he able to stand up to the Chancellor, or was he so intimidated by her that he lost his voice? We know that the Prime Minister was unsettled by that portrait of Margaret Thatcher, so perhaps the Secretary of State was similarly unsettled by the Chancellor. Did he even bother to fight for Britain's AI and tech entrepreneurs, or were the trappings of ministerial office so enticing that he forgot to defend the single most important investment that would have ensured that we maintained our top position in the global AI race for decades to come?

But let me offer the hand of friendship. [Laughter.] I assure the Secretary of State that the hand of friendship exists. If he is worried about standing up to the Chancellor, we on this side of the House will of course support him. He does not need to be afraid. We believe in economic growth, so we will help him to stand up to the Chancellor. After all, his successes will be the nation's successes, and that is our priority.

Let me move on from exascale. Over the summer, it became clear that the Labour Government had capitulated to the junior doctors and given them inflation-busting pay rises without asking for any modernisation or efficiency improvements in return. Before that decision, did the Secretary of State meet the Health Secretary and insist on efficiency improvements or better use of technology, or was giving in to Labour's trade union paymasters more important? He did say that they were joined at the hip, so perhaps he will be able to show what he did to fight for the tech entrepreneurs of this country. I note that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) asked him a question that he did not answer.

I also note that the Government have been silent on the NHS productivity review, which was backed by more than £3.4 billion. Again, he did not answer a question, asked on this occasion by my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans). Can the Minister now confirm that that funding is safe, or is it part of the Chancellor's "black hole" calculations? Our plan and our review were backed by the NHS and would have saved 13 million clinician hours. What, actually, are the Labour party's plans?

When the Transport Secretary capitulated to the transport unions, did this Secretary of State meet her? Did he insist on better use of technology to improve our transport system, so that he could benefit consumers and protect taxpayers, or did he just watch from the sidelines and drink the Kool-Aid? This may have passed him by, but so far, in its first two months in office, the Labour party has already handed out £14 billion to its trade union paymasters in no-strings-attached public sector pay deals. So it is all well and good for the Secretary of State to

grandstand at the Dispatch Box, but the facts are painting a different picture. I just hope that he can find his voice and stand up for the tech sector before it is too late.

Let me explain why this is so important. We have already heard the Secretary of State repeat the farcical claims about the Chancellor's "black hole", having inherited a tech economy that was the third most valuable in the world; a tech economy that was being recognised across the world for its ability to nurture more tech unicorns—that is, more companies valued at £1 billion—than France, Germany and Sweden combined; a tech economy that was growing and creating millions of jobs annually, and attracting billions of pounds-worth of investment.

If the Secretary of State did make the decision to cut the £1.3 billion of exascale funding and now talks down that same tech economy, and in doing so undermines those very tech entrepreneurs who will help to fund our public services for decades to come and makes it less attractive for investors to invest, he cannot sincerely stand at the Dispatch Box and argue that he believes in economic growth—not if his first major economic act was one of economic mutilation. I implore him to go back to the Chancellor and challenge this decision. He should not let the Chancellor's political games undermine him or the tech industry, which has so much potential. It is in his power to ensure that we nurture tech innovation so that the tech start-ups of today can become the tech giants of tomorrow. I say to the Secretary of State that he should not squander this opportunity. Otherwise, his legacy will be defined by what he did not do, rather than what he did do.

9.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): I am honoured to close the debate tonight, and not only because I am speaking from the Government Dispatch Box for the first time, but because I have heard so many truly wonderful maiden speeches. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) for speaking so movingly about Christopher. I thank Fiona and her daughter for joining us in the Gallery, and I pay tribute to Fiona for her continuing work in Christopher's memory.

Members of all parties have talked about safety, fairness and the economic opportunities offered by technology in public services. Members, especially those on the Government Benches, have spoken with passion and conviction about the need for change and to make true on our manifesto promises, which is what this Government will deliver.

We can all agree on the importance of ensuring that the technologies of tomorrow deliver benefits for people in communities across the country. The question, of course, is how. The Government must work with the incredible universities, of which we are so proud, and with the innovative start-ups that many hon. Members have spoken about this evening, but we must also lead by example by harnessing the power of technology in our public services to improve people's lives.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I congratulate those on the Front Bench on their speeches tonight. Does the Minister agree that councils are very important in this area? When I was the cabinet member for health, my council signed an agreement with the

Open University to become the first dementia-friendly city, which involves not only medical technology, AI and the first robot that can identify when somebody with dementia has not drunk enough and bring them a bottle of water, but social innovation around using colours in wayfinding—whether it is in our shopping centres or play parks. Does the Minister agree that the partnership needs to expand to include business, start-ups, councils and the Government, as well as our other public sector partners, in order to create the behaviour changes, innovation and advancements that we are all looking for?

Feryal Clark: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. As someone who served in local government for a very long time, I recognise the innovation in our local authorities. The work we are doing within our Department includes working very closely with our local government partners, so I thank her for her intervention.

One of the first places I visited in my new brief was Hammersmith hospital, where I met doctors who are using a new AI tool that can spot signs of ageing in the heart that are invisible to the human eye. The tool promises to calculate a person's "heart age" from an MRI scan and, for the first time, pinpoint the genes that could make the heart age faster. In the process, it could transform the way we diagnose and treat heart failure.

That is just one of the projects I saw in Hammersmith hospital that is focused on the safe, ethical and responsible development of AI. Such projects will be a crucial part of our mission to build an NHS that is fit for the future—a mission to which this Government are completely committed. We want to seize every opportunity that technology offers to improve lives for our people—whether that means life-saving healthcare in our hospitals or a world-class education in our classrooms. If used rightly, technologies such as AI can transform the productivity of Britain's broken services. With a £22 billion black hole in the public finances and taxes at a 70-year high, saving taxpayers' money is more important than ever.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is important to use AI to save taxpayers' money by doing the basics, such as setting up an automated online booking system for hospital appointments rather than sending out letters that we all fail to respond to?

Feryal Clark: The hon. Member is absolutely right. That is why the digital centre for Government will be working with Departments across Government to ensure that we are putting those innovations and improvements in place.

Led by Matt Clifford, the AI opportunities action plan will identify the biggest opportunities to leverage AI to accelerate growth and deliver on the Government's five missions. We will ensure that this is backed by funded commitments, including those on compute, which will be taken in the round. AI will be at the heart of DSIT as the new digital centre for Government. We have brought together data, digital and tech experts from across Government under one roof to drive forward the digital transformation of our public services. A key part of that is ensuring that the centre has the very best leaders, all appointed in line with civil service recruitment.

Alison Griffiths: Will the Minister give way?

Feryal Clark: I am sorry, but I want to make some progress. We do not have very much time.

As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) highlighted, we need to ensure that the civil service has the digital and data skills needed for today's challenges and tomorrow's. We are committed to reducing the Government's reliance on contingent labour, reducing costs and growing capability for the long term. We have set standards for the digital and data skills that all senior civil servants will need to have and delivered a digital excellence programme that has upskilled more than 1,300 senior civil servants against the criteria. We have also launched a new at-scale digital apprenticeship programme, TechTrack, and rolled out training on AI for all civil servants to build their confidence.

Safety will be at the heart of this. Many hon. Members have rightly expressed their concern about the risk of discrimination and bias in AI systems. That is why data and AI practitioners across Government use tools such as the algorithmic transparency recording standard, which was developed by my officials to support the safe, fair and transparent use of algorithms in the public sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) has highlighted the importance of the safe development of AI. Safety will also be embedded in our new AI Bill, which I can assure the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) will introduce binding regulations on the handful of companies that are developing the most powerful AI systems of tomorrow. It will also be the foundational principle behind the cyber security and resilience Bill, which will shore up Britain's cyber-defences and protect our public services in the decades to come.

The digital revolution must be safe, and its benefits must also be accessible to everyone, including the vulnerable communities that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) talked so movingly about in her speech. That is why we are committed to tackling the connectivity issues mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah) and by the hon. Members for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) and for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) this evening. That includes the 5G innovation regions programme, which has invested over £36 million in 10 regions across the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) has spoken about the importance of closing the digital divide.

We have spent the summer talking and listening to digital inclusion experts, local authorities and many others who are working on the frontline of digital inclusion, but this is just the start of the conversation. We want to tackle the important issues together, including through inclusive digital platforms such as gov.uk One Login, which offers a straightforward and secure way to access a range of Government digital services.

The Government programme will soon expand the routes for proving identity to include those without photo documentation. That will benefit pensioners, students and minors, who are too often excluded.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Banking Services: Rural Northumberland

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Anna McMorris.*)

10 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate.

The Minister will know as well as I do, and as well as Members on both sides of the House do, that there are banking deserts across the country, with many people shut off from accessing very basic face-to-face services. The figures merely hint at the crisis in my constituency. Northumberland has lost more than half of its bank branches since 2015, and figures from Which? show that Hexham has lost over 70% of its branches, with only five branches remaining in the constituency.

Five bank branches would sound almost luxurious to many colleagues, but Hexham is the largest constituency in England, reaching from Throckley on Newcastle's western edge to Gilsland in Cumbria, and from Blanchland on our border with County Durham to Byrness, which is a stone's throw from Scotland. These bank branch closures do not just mean an inconvenience to my constituents; they present a toxic cocktail that both damages quality of life and holds back the growth of our rural economy.

The services that bank branches provide to our constituents are wide-ranging and impactful, and many rely on these services during life's big moments. Obvious examples include help with large payments and support with mortgages, but there is also help during life events such as bereavements or securing power of attorney. The compassion, expert support and guidance that bank branches provide to our constituents cannot be allowed to disappear as an inevitable consequence of having better digital services. Closures let down our young people who want to start businesses but find it hard to do so due to their inability to have face-to-face discussions, as well as our older people who find access to cash hard to come by; in some cases, they have to trek across rural Northumberland on public transport to reach their closest branch.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is absolutely right that everyone in the House tonight will have experienced bank closures. I have lost 11 branches in my constituency. Does he agree that before a bank decides to close a branch, it should have an alternative in place, such as a banking hub, an ATM or alternative services through a post office?

Joe Morris: I very much agree that before a bank branch closes, we need to mitigate the consequences. We need to make sure that the rural economy has space to grow, so that people like my constituents do not face such long journeys, which are particularly hard to navigate on public transport.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Northumberland is a wonderful county, but does he agree that it is not just rural Northumberland that is suffering? We have banking deserts in Bedlington, Blyth, Ashington, Newbiggin and other areas. Vulnerable people

are suffering greatly where the banks have just up and left without any accountability. Does he agree that we must take immediate action to look after these vulnerable people?

Joe Morris: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know how hard he fights for his constituents across Blyth and Ashington, and I know how much bank closures have impacted his part of the world, and more urban parts of Northumberland. I completely agree that we need to fight for these services in all our constituencies. I am reminded of a 74-year-old constituent who was forced to travel from Wark to Morpeth on three separate occasions in order to have a face-to-face conversation.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this incredibly important debate, and for the powerful arguments he has made. In my constituency, the impact of bank closures is felt acutely in the Seaton Valley area. People from villages such as Seghill, Seaton Delaval, Seaton Sluice and Hartley have to travel on several buses to find the banking services to which they so desperately need ready access. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is unacceptable that the vulnerable and elderly residents he described have to travel, sometimes for hours on multiple buses, to access such services?

Joe Morris: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank her for giving me an unintended promotion. It may seem like we are just saying names on a map, but consider the vast scale of my constituency in our wonderful county of Northumberland. These places are separated by huge distances, and have a public transport system that does not always seem to work as it should. It is simply not fair that vulnerable people in my constituency are forced to travel for as long as an hour by car or 90 minutes by public transport, either way. It is unfair to expect our constituents to put up with a second-class service because they live rurally. Unfortunately that has been the case in large parts of our county. It is incredibly important that we address these issues.

We all recognise that many of these communities, particularly in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), have historically voted Conservative, but they put their faith in the Labour party for the first time at the last election. We were elected to deliver meaningful change for our constituencies. I applied for this debate having spent my time as a candidate listening to the concerns of people across the constituency, but there is one area I wish to highlight. In Haltwhistle, and the towns and villages around it, the loss of Barclays last year is still damaging the local economy. I have been in touch with the chair of Haltwhistle chamber of trade, Ian Dommett, who told me directly that the loss of banking facilities in rural towns such as Haltwhistle has had a negative effect on every business. His members have been affected; most had accounts at Barclays because of its presence in the town.

The replacement of an active branch with a peripatetic community hub has removed the relationship between business and branch. Many businesses deal in cash—Ian's business is a bed and breakfast, with many guests paying in cash, and a lot of Haltwhistle's passing trade is from tourist spend on Hadrian's wall—but they have

lost the ability to pay directly into the bank, with the nearest Barclays' branch being 20 miles away. Haltwhistle businesses say that the bank has simply told them to use the post office, a separate business over which it has no control.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate on an issue that is important in both his constituency and mine. I draw attention to the correlated issue of post offices. In Wooler in North Northumberland, where there are no bank branches, the post office, which provides the only banking services for that community, is also at risk of closure. Thankfully, an incredible community response, led by the Glendale Gateway Trust, is fighting to retain it. I will do everything in my power, too. Does my hon. Friend agree that banking hubs more generally, and the Post Office specifically, must be part of the solution to the lack of access to banking services in Northumberland?

Joe Morris: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. For many businesses and constituents, the post office represents a lifeline, albeit one that unfortunately for many businesses is accessed far too infrequently to operate with security. The decision to close rural branches is taken in head offices, with little or no understanding of the rural economy and the impact that such decisions have on our constituents, their businesses and their daily lives.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend securing this important Adjournment debate. Whitehaven in my constituency, not dissimilarly from Haltwhistle, is on the brink of becoming a banking desert. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should not have to wait for towns to become banking deserts before banking hubs become an option? A better system would be to change the rules for banking hubs, so that they are a "last plus one", rather than there having to be a complete banking desert before the option becomes available.

Joe Morris: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. We have seen far too many rural towns and rural economies facing a precipice when a bank closes. Businesses are left to deal with uncertainty and a deprivation of banking services, which has an ongoing effect on the economy, before anything else comes in. I hope that we can consider taking any steps necessary to mitigate the impact of those closures, and I agree that a move to a "last but one" system may be a more efficient way of dealing with things. Whitehaven on the Tyne Valley line is a town that shares many of the challenges that I am talking about, and that demonstrates the incredibly important nature of this debate.

In constituencies such as mine and those of my hon. Friends, many residents and businesses already travel out of town for banking. When they are there, they do other shopping. They shop in the major towns or the cities, where they have access to other shops or services. That has a massive impact on the passing trade in Haltwhistle and other towns across the Tyne Valley. Ian Dommett, the chair of the chamber of trade, said:

"For Haltwhistle, this has meant that every shop in the town has lost this trade and everyone of the Chamber of Commerce members who are retailers say they have seen a decline in business as it is now done in towns with functioning banks."

[Joe Morris]

I would argue that Haltwhistle as a town has been and continues to be let down by the Conservatives. This is a stunning indictment of policy failure. The businesses that want to drive economic growth are being hamstrung. In some cases, shops have stepped up by offering some elements of consumer banking, such as cashback services and having ATMs in store, but they should not need to do so. Businesses should not be deprived of business banking when, ultimately, it is they who are the engines of our rural economy. We need to move away from the significant economic disruption that towns such as Haltwhistle have experienced for 12 months, since August 2023.

I was incredibly proud this summer to be asked to become a patron of the Northumberland Domestic Abuse Services. Speaking with the staff there, I mentioned that I had secured this debate and was told that access to in-person banking services can be a lifeline for victims of domestic abuse. In a rural setting in particular, this can be absolutely vital. I urge the Minister to consider introducing plans for banking hubs in Haltwhistle in my constituency to ensure that residents can access in-person banking services, and to work with organisations to explore the impact that banking deserts can have on acute domestic violence.

I was proud to stand for election on a manifesto prioritising rolling out banking hubs to banking deserts, but banking hubs should not be seen as a replacement for bank branches. They should not be seen as an opportunity for bank branches to be shut down, leaving others to pick up the pieces in our communities. When decisions are made far from the communities that they impact, those decisions are inevitably worse. One of the most meaningful ways that we can support towns to grow economies, and provide opportunities for young people and security for elderly residents, is to make sure that, at the very least, they have a banking hub in place—one that does not just serve one town, but that serves communities across the rural hinterland. I ask the Minister to ensure that the Treasury strongly considers and prioritises Haltwhistle as a location for a future banking hub, to reflect the opportunities and investment that that could bring, and to provide the opportunity for businesses to grow.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I represent a thriving market town in Somerset called Frome, and even there it was announced in May that we would lose our last bank. Given that banks play such an important role in our communities and our businesses, does the hon. Member agree that there should be some obligation placed on banks to ensure adequate provision across communities in any given constituency? We can see from the discussion this evening that it is critical to so many aspects of our public life that we have proper banking provision.

Joe Morris: I agree with the hon. Lady. It is important that banks recognise the almost unique role that they play on our high streets as anchor institutions; they need to be far more responsible when conditions dictate that bank branches need to close. This is not about asking them to play a charitable role; it is about asking them to play a responsible role in our economy and our society. As an MP for many picturesque market towns, I recognise the problems that the hon. Lady is having in her constituency.

It is important that we represent the impact that the infrequent availability of post office services has had on individuals in my constituency, and in particular on elderly customers, who now have to use the post office as their primary banking facility. It would be great if the Minister could join me in encouraging the Post Office to expand its participation, particularly as I know that the Government are looking to expand the pension credit take-up campaign. Finally, will she comment on how the Government are working already, and will work in future, with our fantastic North East Mayor Kim McGuinness to improve economic prosperity across some of the most rural and remote areas of our incredibly proud region?

10.15 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Tulip Siddiq): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing this important debate, which I think is his first Adjournment debate. I also congratulate him on being the first Labour MP for Hexham. His Wikipedia entry famously boasts that he broke a 100-year streak of Conservative MPs to be in this place. If that is not an accolade, I do not know what is. Just before I came to this debate, I was having dinner with my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I mentioned to him that I was answering a debate called by our hon. Friend the Member for Hexham; our hon. Friend will be pleased to know that he said that Hexham is the most beautiful place he has ever been to in his life—I would say other than Hampstead and Highgate, obviously.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this important debate. The fact that they have stayed behind at a quarter past 10 on a Monday, on their first day back to Parliament on a one-line Whip, demonstrates their commitment. I know that this issue affects many of our constituents, and hon. Members are absolutely right to champion it.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing the debate. Does the Minister agree that the conditions in rural areas make it particularly difficult for people to take up the alternatives given by banks, such as digital access? Despite the fantastic work of Broadband for the Rural North in my constituency, many of my constituents do not have access to broadband, and access to digital banking is simply out of reach for many.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I know that she is a doughty champion for her constituents. I hear what she says about her rural constituency. Mine is not a rural constituency, but I speak to people across the country who are really struggling with digital connectivity, as she outlines. It is something that the Government are taking very seriously, and we are aware of the obstacles in the way of people trying to access services online.

I am pleased that this is my first parliamentary debate as the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, because this is an issue that is close to my heart, and one that I am determined to try to address. It is a privilege to be able to use this office to tackle some of the country's most important issues, as my hon. Friend just said. Ensuring

access to banking and supporting financial inclusion featured very highly in our manifesto, which all Labour Members were elected on. We want to ensure that our constituents manage to access the services that they deserve.

Before I get on to the meat of the topic, I will briefly provide the context. Although many people have benefited from changes to the UK's banking landscape, such as the ease and convenience for some people of remote banking, it is clear to me that others have found it a lot more challenging. According to the consumer organisation Which? over 600 branches in the UK have closed since 2015. Bank branch closures have significantly impacted those in communities who need access to in-person banking services. I am really sorry to hear about some of the specific cases that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham talked about his 74-year-old constituent who has to travel so far. That example particularly stood out to me, because that should not be the case.

I assure my hon. Friend that the Government understand the importance of face-to-face banking, and banking access, to our communities. Not only is it key to the health and vibrancy of those communities, but as he pointed out, it helps them to drive forward and benefit from our country's economic growth, and the rural economy. To anyone listening to the debate, please be in no doubt that the Government share the objective of enhancing access to banking services, and we will be prioritising the delivery of that accordingly.

Work has already started. Obviously, we have not been in Government for very long, but even before the election we committed to working closely with banks to roll out at least 350 banking hubs, which will provide individuals and businesses up and down the country with critical cash and banking services.

Ian Lavery: Banking hubs are in many ways very helpful. However, will the Minister consider reviewing the criteria? I have an issue in my constituency where the distance of the nearest bank is one tenth of a mile too short to get a banking hub. Because of that, they are considering not putting a banking hub in place. Is there potential to review the criteria, to support the most vulnerable people in our communities?

Tulip Siddiq: I absolutely hear what my hon. Friend says about protecting vulnerable people in our constituencies. That is why a lot of us stood for the Labour party: because we want to protect the most vulnerable. I will come on to LINK, which provides the banking hubs, but if he does not mind writing to me and laying out exactly what the issue is, I can write to him about the topic and about the criteria, because it sounds as if there is a very small matter that needs looking at and I am happy to do so. I will talk later about LINK, but I ask him to make representations as well.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the Minister on attaining her office and wish her well in it. I think she referred to 350 banking hubs, which I presume means across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—I hope so. If not, I ask her to confirm that the same progression and the enthusiasm that she is showing will also happen in Northern Ireland. I ask her one other thing, about which I spoke to the

hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) beforehand. Setting up banking hubs seems to take forever. We all want them in place. Is that something that the Minister can help us with?

Tulip Siddiq: No Adjournment debate would be complete without an intervention from the hon. Member, so I am glad he intervened; I was waiting for him to do so. I share his frustration about the slowness of the roll-out—I pushed for it when I was in opposition and asked why it was taking so long. I will address this point in my speech, but I can reassure him that with as much influence as I have in our office, we have been asking for the banking hubs to be set up and ready. We are hoping to achieve 100 banking hubs by the end of this year, but I am conscious that they take a long time to set up. It is to do with the planning process, but that is not an excuse. I would like to speed up the roll-out, because I feel it has been dragging on for a long time. I absolutely share his frustration.

As the hon. Member might know, 60 banking hubs have already opened. As I said, we anticipate that 100 will be open at the end of this year, but I agree that it is frustrating to have to wait and watch. We want them to be up and running so that our constituents can make good use of them. We want to ensure that the hubs mean that people and businesses can withdraw and deposit cash, because we know that people still use it. They will deposit cheques, pay bills and make balance inquiries. They will also contain dedicated community bankers from the largest banks in the area on a rotating basis, to help people and businesses carry out wider banking services.

The decisions on the locations of future banking hubs will be made by LINK, which is the banking industry's cash co-ordinating body. It will consider criteria such as population size, the number of retailers in the community and the availability of alternative bank branches. Communities can ask LINK to carry out an assessment of the local area; I urge my hon. Friends the Members for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and for Hexham to make to LINK the case that has so convincingly been made to me. At the end of the day, we have asked it to make the decisions, but I can help in the process as well.

Looking forward, I expect the banks to consider carefully whether the needs of a local community are being adequately served when thought is given to where the banking hubs should be rolled out. However, I also want the industry to ensure that the range and quality of banking services provided in hubs are delivering for customers up and down the country. There is no point in having a banking hub if it does not meet the specific requirements of the town.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to her place. If you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I suspect that the Minister will want to note, as I do, the passing of Nicky Gavron, who was a Deputy Mayor of London, a very good friend of mine and a constituent of the Minister's. She died on 30 August, and I wanted to ensure that it was acknowledged in the House.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) on securing this important debate, in which I have two quick questions to put to the Minister. First, will she outline what conversations she has had with the

[Adam Jogee]

banks to ensure that they put people over profit? I am very proud to represent Newcastle-under-Lyme. I know that she has not visited; if she had, she would agree that it is the most beautiful place in our country. Secondly, how can we ensure that the importance of accessibility is acknowledged not just in words but in deeds?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and associate myself with his comments about Nicky Gavron, who was my constituent and a great friend. She worked with us in London Labour when my hon. Friend was—dare I say it—a very young man. We worked with her for many years, and it was very sad to see her go.

I can assure my hon. Friend that I speak to the banks every day to ensure that they know what our values are and how we want them delivered. Beyond banking hubs, I am saying to them that communities need key banking services to ensure that they have accessibility, cash withdrawal and deposit services—particularly our local businesses and charities, which often deal in cash and need convenient ways to deposit their takings, but also everyone who uses cash to make everyday purchases.

According to UK Finance, cash remained the second most popular payment method last year, so it is not right to dismiss and question the idea that people still use cash. Overall data shows that cash coverage in the UK remains good. According to Financial Conduct Authority analysis, over 99% of the UK urban population is within one mile of a free withdrawal cashpoint, and over 98% of the UK rural population is within three miles of one. I hope that that reassures hon. Members.

However, it is important that coverage is maintained, so I welcome the FCA's forthcoming rules on access to cash, under which designated banks and building societies will be required to assess the impact of a closure on a community's ability to access cash. If a closure results in a gap in provision, firms will be required to put in place a new service that meets the community's needs. That could mean a new ATM deposit service or a banking hub. Where a new service is recommended, firms will need to ensure that it is place before they are able to close the existing service, to avoid gaps emerging in access to cash. Those rules will come into force on 18 September, which I am sure will be welcomed by Members across the House.

We recognise that banking has changed through a shift towards online and mobile access, which mean that customers have more ways to access banking services

conveniently and securely. Banking users have clearly taken up those opportunities; recent FCA data shows that almost nine in 10 adults bank online. However, that does not mean that everyone has the means, confidence and skills to use those services, as many hon. Friends have said. We recognise that although we live in an increasingly online world, part of the population, including in my constituency, remain digitally excluded.

As a Government, we are committed to improving connectivity and digital access for all constituents. We will continue to support the roll-out of a modernised broadband infrastructure through Project Gigabit, closing the digital divide for remote areas of Britain. The Government have already started the renewed push to reach full gigabit coverage by 2030. This month we have announced funding of £800 million to improve broadband for over 300,000 rural homes and businesses. Thinkbroadband reported in August of this year that approximately 84% of the UK can now access a gigabit-capable connection. Although the majority of premises will be covered by commercial activity or Project Gigabit, the Government are considering alternative ways to improve connectivity for the parts of the UK where that is not possible. If constituents or Members write to me, we will bear their areas in mind.

I thank everyone for their thoughtful contributions, but this will not be my last speech on this matter. I want to take my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham, and other Members who have spoken, along with me on my journey, working together with the financial services sector and the public to deliver financial services. I want to mention quickly the post office network—[*Interruption.*] I don't have time, do I, Madam Deputy Speaker? You are looking at me. I will just say that the Government are committed to looking for ways to strengthen the post office network. The Secretary of State met the chair of the Post Office to discuss that and other important issues, and the Government protect the post office network by setting minimum access criteria to ensure that 99% of the UK population lives within three miles of a post office, with around 11,000 branches in the UK.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you have been very kind and allowed me a bit more time, so I will finish by thanking my hon. Friend once again—

10.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Written Statements

Monday 2 September 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Exports to Israel: Military Operations in Gaza

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): The UK Government have been absolutely clear that Israel must, in taking military action to support its legitimate right to self-defence, do so while adhering to international humanitarian law.

Following a rigorous process in line with the UK's legal obligations, the UK Government have concluded that there is a clear risk that military exports to Israel, where used for military operations in Gaza, might be used in serious violations of international humanitarian law. To continue to permit these exports would therefore be inconsistent with our strategic export licensing criteria.

The Foreign Secretary has now considered detailed assessments and has determined that, while Israel has the capability to comply with international humanitarian law and the most senior Ministers and officials have affirmed Israel's commitment to do so, there are significant doubts about its record of compliance. Consequently, he has advised me that there is a clear risk that some UK exports to Israel might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

A thorough process has now been followed and the summary of the Government's assessment is being published.

I have therefore instructed officials to suspend licences for exports to Israel, where we have assessed those items are for use in military operations in Gaza. This includes approximately 30 export licences for items which could be used in the current conflict. This includes components for fighter aircraft—F-16s—parts for unmanned aerial vehicles, naval systems, and targeting equipment.

The Government condemned Hamas' barbaric attack on 7 October and supports Israel's right to defend itself in line with international law. The Government are also working intensively with international partners to encourage wider regional de-escalation in the context of recent events.

This is not a blanket ban, but targets relevant licences that could be used in military operations in Gaza. Assessments of Israel's commitment to international humanitarian law will continue, including with regard to the provision of food and medical supplies to civilians in Gaza and the treatment of detainees, and may change over time to allow reinstatement of these licences.

Affected exporters will be notified of that suspension.

The UK stresses that there is no equivalence between Hamas terrorists and Israel's democratic Government. The UK remains committed to supporting Israel's self-defence. But to license arms exports to Israel, the UK must assess their compliance with international humanitarian law, notwithstanding the abhorrence of their opponents' tactics and ideology.

In the context of this suspension, I have also considered the particular issue of the F-35 strike fighter programme. I am grateful to the Defence Secretary for his advice on this issue.

The F-35 is an aircraft that operates globally, forming a key capability in the militaries of many of our allies.

The F-35 programme has a significant dependence on the UK, which provides unique and critical components. Due to the nature of the F-35 as an international collaborative programme, it is not currently possible to suspend licensing of F-35 components for use by Israel without prejudicing the entire global F-35 programme, including its broader strategic role in NATO and our support to Ukraine. This Government have an unwavering commitment to the security not just of this country but to our allies around the world, especially at a time when we face increased global insecurity and volatility.

In this context, with a view to ensuring international peace and security, exports to the global F-35 programme will be excluded from this suspension decision, except where going direct to Israel. This is in line with the written ministerial statement that issued the strategic export licensing criteria on 8 December 2021, which provided that application of the criteria would be without prejudice to the application to specific cases of specific measures as may be announced to Parliament from time to time. This will be kept under review.

The UK continues to call for an immediate ceasefire to the conflict in Gaza, the release of all hostages and a significant increase in the amount of aid to civilians in Gaza.

The Foreign Secretary and I will provide further updates to Parliament as appropriate.

[HCWS64]

UK Accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership: Entry into Force

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership is set to enter into force for the UK by 15 December 2024. This follows Peru's ratification of the UK's accession protocol to the agreement.

The accession protocol sets out that the agreement will enter into force for the UK 60 days after all parties and the UK have each notified the CPTPP depositary. Notification would follow the completion of relevant domestic procedures. However, after 15 months have passed since signature (which falls in mid-October 2024), the mechanism changes and the protocol can enter into force 60 days after a minimum of six parties and the UK have each notified. If at least six parties and the UK have already notified within 15 months of signature, entry into force would take place 60 days after the October date. Given that Peru is the sixth party to notify its ratification, we currently expect the UK's accession to CPTPP to enter into force by 15 December 2024.

Before Peru, five other CPTPP parties had already ratified the terms of the UK's accession, including Japan, Singapore, Chile, New Zealand and Vietnam. This means that the agreement will come into force between the UK and those parties by the end of the year, and with other parties depending on when they ratify. The UK continues to work closely with remaining parties, who are completing their own processes as quickly as possible.

This Department is helping British businesses ready themselves to take full advantage of the opportunities CPTPP presents. As the first country to accede to this agreement, the UK will be perfectly positioned to shape its future development, from influencing the future development of the CPTPP rulebook to championing the group's expansion to new economies.

[HCWS56]

UK-Ukraine Digital Trade Agreement: Entry into Force

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): I am pleased to announce that the UK-Ukraine digital trade agreement entered into force on 1 September, following the completion of the necessary domestic procedures on both sides. This historic trade agreement will help Ukraine rebuild its economy and support livelihoods following Russia's illegal invasion.

This is the deepest digital trade agreement that the UK has negotiated. Digital trade is rapidly becoming the dominant form of trade. Seizing the opportunities in this area is fundamental to our prosperity. UK and Ukrainian businesses of all shapes and sizes, and across all sectors of the economy (whether trading in goods or services), will benefit from the agreement.

Ukraine's recovery from Putin's illegal and barbaric war will be a symbol of the power of freedom and democracy over autocracy. Our DTA with Ukraine creates a digital UK-Ukraine free trade agreement by modernising our bilateral trade in the digital era and deepening our economic ties with Ukraine.

Greater digitalisation of the economy is a key priority for President Zelensky's Government. This agreement will boost productivity, jobs and growth, and allow us to help Ukraine deliver on their digital ambitions by:

Ensuring open digital markets, including through commitments such as a ban on imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions.

Supporting cross-border data flows, including financial data, and prohibiting the unfair imposed localisation of data as well as committing to high standards of personal data protection.

Championing digital trading systems to cut red tape and make trade cheaper, faster, and more secure for Ukraine and UK businesses.

Upholding consumer benefits and business safeguards in trade, including cyber-security and online consumer protection.

This agreement further cements the UK's commitment to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukrainian allies in response to the ongoing conflict and play our part in securing Ukraine's future as a prosperous, stable and democratic partner in Europe. I hope the House will join me in celebrating this important milestone for UK and Ukrainian businesses.

[HCWS59]

CABINET OFFICE

UK Covid-19 Inquiry Response Costs: Quarter 1 2024-25

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The covid-19 pandemic impacted each and every person in the UK. The work of the UK covid-19 inquiry is crucial in examining the UK's response to and impact of the covid-19 pandemic. There are evidently lessons to be learned from the pandemic

and the Government are committed to closely considering the covid-19 inquiry's findings and recommendations, which will play a key role in informing the Government's planning and preparations for the future.

The Government recognise the unprecedented and wholly exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, and the importance of examining as rigorously as possible the actions the state took in response, in order to learn lessons for the future. The inquiry is therefore unprecedented in its scope, complexity and profile, looking at recent events that have profoundly impacted everyone's lives.

The independent UK covid-19 inquiry publishes its own running costs quarterly. Following the publication of the inquiry's financial report for quarter 1 2024-25 on 29 July 2024, I would like to update colleagues on the costs to the UK Government associated with responding to the UK covid-19 inquiry.

Figures provided are based upon a selection of the most relevant Departments and are not based on a complete set of departmental figures and are not precise for accounting purposes. Ensuring a comprehensive and timely response to the inquiry requires significant input from a number of key Government Departments, including, but not limited to, the Cabinet Office, the Department for Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency, the Home Office and HM Treasury, many of which are supported by the Government Legal Department. While every effort has been made to ensure a robust methodology, complexities remain in trying to quantify the time and costs dedicated to the inquiry alone.

It should be noted that alongside full time resource within Departments, inquiry response teams draw on expertise from across their organisations. The staff costs associated with appearing as witnesses, preparing witnesses and associated policy development work on the covid-19 inquiry are not included in the costs below.

Breakdown of staff & costs

The Government's response to the UK covid-19 inquiry is led by inquiry response units across Departments.

Number of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: 280 full time equivalents (Q1).

Cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: £5,049,000 (including contingent labour costs) (Q1).

Total inquiry response unit legal costs

Inquiry response units across Government Departments are supported by the Government Legal Department, co-partnering firms of solicitors, and legal counsel. These associated legal costs (excluding internal departmental advisory legal costs) for April-June 2024 are below.

Q1 legal costs: £4,236,000.

[HCWS53]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

FCDO Services' Ministerial Targets 2024-25

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): FCDO Services operates as a trading fund of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I have set the following performance targets for 2024-2025:

An in-year surplus before interest, tax and dividend;
 Achievement of the return on capital employed of at least 6.5% (weighted average);
 A productivity ratio of at least 82%, measuring actual billable hours versus available billable hours;
 An in-year customer satisfaction rating average of at least 82;
 An average Civil Service People Survey score for “Employee Engagement” of at least 61%; and
 An average Civil Service People Survey score for “My Manager” of at least 65%.

FCDO Services will report to Parliament on its success against these targets through its annual report and accounts for 2024-2025.

FCDO Services is a trading fund of the FCDO. It provides a range of integrated, secure services worldwide to the FCDO and other UK Government Departments, supporting the delivery of Government agendas. Services include protective security, estates and construction, cloud computing, communications and monitoring, logistics, translation and interpreting. This is combined with a portfolio of global maintenance work. FCDO Services also manages the UK National Authority for Counter-Eavesdropping, helping protect UK assets from physical, electronic and cyber-attack.

[HCWS61]

EDUCATION

Opportunity Mission: Education Reforms

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

With immediate effect, single headline grades will no longer be issued by Ofsted when it inspects state-funded schools, to drive high and rising school standards for children and increase transparency for parents.

For state-funded schools inspected in the 2024-25 academic year, parents will see four grades across the existing sub-categories: quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management.

The change delivers on the Government’s mission to break down barriers to opportunity and demonstrates the Prime Minister’s commitment to improve the life chances of young people across the country.

Where schools are identified as struggling, Government will prioritise rapid planning and action to improve the education and experience of children, rather than relying purely on changing schools’ management.

The reform paves the way for the introduction of school report cards from September 2025, which will provide parents with a more complete picture of how schools are performing and where there is a need for improvement. The design and content of report cards will be developed over the coming months, including through extensive engagement with parents and schools.

From early 2025, the Department will introduce regional improvement teams to work with teachers and leaders in struggling schools to quickly and directly address identified areas of weakness.

For schools whose performance is causing the most serious concern—which would previously have been rated “inadequate”—the Government will continue to intervene. Ofsted is under a legal duty to identify schools causing concern (defined as schools requiring special measures or requiring significant improvement) and

notify the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State is under a legal duty to issue an academy order to a local authority maintained school in either of the categories of concern. The removal of headline grades will not affect the legal position. The Secretary of State will also continue to use, where appropriate, the power to terminate the funding agreement of an academy identified as a school causing concern.

For schools that have previously received two or more consecutive judgments that were less than “good” and, as of today’s announcement, are due to become academies or transfer to a new trust by 1 January, that process will continue. For schools that have received two or more consecutive judgments that were less than “good” but are due to convert or transfer in the new year, the Government’s intervention approach will change. The Government will now put in place support for these schools from a high-performing school, helping to drive up standards quickly. Schools with current Ofsted grades of below “good” which are in receipt of a “requires improvement” sub-judgment in leadership and management or quality of education in their next Ofsted inspection will also be eligible for this support.

The Government are committed, in time, to replacing single headline grades in all the remits that Ofsted inspects—namely private schools, early years settings, colleges, initial teacher education and children’s social care providers. Government and Ofsted will work in partnership with sectors over the next year to develop alternative reporting arrangements. New arrangements will take account of the unique characteristics of each sector but will broadly reflect the report card approach that is being taken for schools. Providers in other sectors will continue to receive single headline grades in the meantime.

Today’s changes build on the recently announced children’s wellbeing Bill, which will put children at the centre of education and make changes to ensure every child is supported to achieve and thrive.

Today’s announcement is the first step towards a school accountability system that sets the highest expectations on standards while making inspection a more powerful, more transparent tool for driving school improvement. The reforms represent a major step in the Government’s mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child at every stage. In doing so, the Government will put education back at the forefront of national life and restore teaching as a valued profession which delivers for our children and our country.

[HCWS54]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): The Minister of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath OBE, made the following statement today:

This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Ecotricity (Heck Fen) Ltd for the construction and operation of a solar photovoltaic electricity generating station situated in Lincolnshire.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

The statutory deadline for the decision on the Heckington Fen solar park application was 9 August 2024.

Ecotricity (Heck Fen) Ltd has requested that the Secretary of State extends the statutory deadline to allow time for further negotiations with landowners and to ensure the necessary permissions can be obtained. I have decided to allow a short extension and to set a new deadline of no later than 27 September 2024 for deciding this application for these reasons.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS52]

Publication of Statutory Consultation and National Energy System Operator Licences Jointly With Ofgem

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Our nation stands at a pivotal moment in our energy and net zero journey. As we navigate the challenges of energy security and the urgent need for a sustainable future, I am proud to announce the publication of the joint Government-Ofgem response to the statutory consultation on national energy system operator licences and other impacted licences.

NESO will be a trailblazing, independent entity, serving as a trusted voice at the core of our energy sector. It will spearhead strategic planning for our energy systems and networks, manage the electricity system with precision and play a crucial role in achieving our overarching energy strategy and objectives.

NESO's independence from commercial interests and operational control of the Government will enable it to provide unbiased, expert advice on critical decisions that will shape our energy landscape for decades to come, including our "clean power by 2030" target.

As we move forward, NESO's role will be instrumental in achieving our net zero and energy security goals. By fostering innovation, enhancing system resilience, and promoting transparency, NESO will help navigate the complexities of our evolving energy system. We are enormously grateful for the valuable input from industry stakeholders, whose insights have been integral to shaping the future of NESO.

NESO will be regulated by Ofgem through two new licences, and this consultation response marks a significant milestone in establishing NESO's regulatory regime. The final step will be for the Secretary of State to grant NESO these licences under the powers conferred by the Energy Act 2023. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and Ofgem are aiming to establish NESO this year.

Our response addresses thematically the feedback raised by stakeholders to the consultation on the contents of these licences published in March 2024. The key themes include NESO transparency and industry feedback, incentives and performance, energy resilience and critical

national infrastructure, network planning, NESO transitional service agreements, future roles, uniform network code arrangements, and NESO's advisory role. Alongside this response document, we are also publishing updated versions of NESO's licences.

The establishment of NESO is intended to apply only to England, Scotland, and Wales. Energy is generally devolved in Northern Ireland. I will place copies of the statutory consultation response on national energy system operator licences in the House Libraries.

[HCWS57]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccination: Autumn 2024

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): His Majesty's Government are committed to protecting people most vulnerable to covid-19 through vaccination as guided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

On 2 August 2024, the JCVI published advice on the covid-19 vaccination programme for autumn 2024. Their advice is that a covid-19 vaccine should be offered in autumn 2024 to those in the population most vulnerable to serious outcomes from covid-19 and who are therefore most likely to benefit from vaccination. These groups are:

adults aged 65 years and over;

residents in a care home for older adults;

persons aged 6 months to 64 years in a clinical risk group, as defined in tables 3 and 4 of the covid-19 chapter of the UK health security green book on immunisation against infectious disease.

HM Government have accepted the JCVI advice, and the above groups will be offered vaccination in England this autumn.

The JCVI also advised that health and social care service providers may wish to consider whether vaccination provided as an occupational health programme to frontline health and social care workers is appropriate in future years and that ahead of such considerations, health departments may choose to continue to extend an offer of vaccination to frontline health and social care workers and staff working in care homes for older adults in autumn 2024.

HM Government have decided that frontline health and social care workers and staff working in care homes for older adults will continue to be offered vaccination in the autumn 2024 programme in England.

The JCVI has also advised which vaccines may be used in the autumn 2024 covid-19 programme and in line with this advice the vaccines that will be supplied are the Moderna mRNA (Spikevax) vaccine and Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA (Comirnaty) vaccine.

Future programmes

The JCVI has advised that infection with SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19 disease) continues to occur throughout the year. The current trend indicates intermittent waves occurring every few months which are consistently peaking at lower amplitude. Winter remains the period of greatest threat from covid-19 both in relation to the risk of infection to individuals and the pressures on health systems. Should population immunity to SARS-CoV-2 be maintained, it is anticipated

that most people will experience relatively mild symptomatic or asymptomatic infections. JCVI will continue to review and advise on the optimal timing and frequency of covid-19 vaccination beyond autumn 2024.

Notification of liabilities

I am now updating the House on the liabilities HM Government have taken on in relation to further vaccine deployment via this statement and accompanying departmental minute laid in Parliament containing a description of the liability undertaken. The agreement to provide indemnity with deployment of further doses increases the contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

I will update the House in a similar manner as appropriate, as and when any future decisions impact the contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

[HCWS60]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):

Today, I can update Parliament on fire safety and evacuation proposals; on the recognition of CE (“Conformité Européenne”) marking for construction products; and on updates to the statutory guidance to the building regulations to remove references to outdated national classes fire testing standards and make provision for sprinklers in new care homes.

Fire safety and evacuation

The Home Office will bring forward proposals in the autumn to improve the fire safety and evacuation of disabled and vulnerable residents in high-rise and higher-risk residential buildings in England in response to the Grenfell Tower inquiry’s phase 1 recommendations that relate to personal emergency evacuation plans, or PEEPs. These proposals will be called “residential PEEPs”.

Through them, residents with disabilities and impairments will be entitled to a person-centred risk assessment to identify appropriate equipment and adjustments to aid their fire safety/evacuation, as well as a “residential PEEPs statement” that records what vulnerable residents should do in the event of a fire.

The Government have committed funding next year to begin this important work by supporting social housing providers to deliver residential PEEPs for their renters. Future years’ funding will be confirmed at the upcoming spending review.

The Government have made progress on delivering recommendation 33.22(d) of the Grenfell Tower inquiry’s phase 1 report, on evacuation alert systems (“sounders”) for new builds, through amendment to statutory guidance to the building regulations in relation to high-rise residential building design (requiring sounders to be fitted in new buildings over 18 metres in height).

We will consider further the second part of the recommendation, relating to existing buildings, in the light of further evidence or recommendations in the phase 2 report. This will, like the work on fire safety improvements nationally, be part of the important task of reducing the likelihood and impact of future fires.

CE marking

Construction products are a pivotal part of the housing and infrastructure supply chain and make up 13% of the United Kingdom’s entire manufacturing base by turnover. Ensuring continuing supply of products is critical to delivering house building targets and wider infrastructure ambitions. These products must be safe. Evidence to the Grenfell Tower inquiry revealed the scale of concern about construction products—products which are vital to all our buildings and infrastructure—and the system that oversees them remains inadequate.

A subset of construction products fall within scope of the current construction products regulations. These existing regulations set out rules for placing construction products on the market, providing a common technical language to assess the performance of products. Products within scope of these regulations must undergo an assessment of conformity with the relevant standard or technical assessment. Such products must also be affixed with a UKCA (UK Conformity Assessed) or a CE mark. Current Government guidance sets out that recognition of CE marking will end in June 2025.

I can announce today that the Government will extend the period of recognition of CE marking for construction products. The CE mark will continue to be available when placing construction products on the market across the UK.

We have listened to the findings from the independent review of the construction products testing regime. This was clear that there is currently insufficient testing and certification capacity in the UK alone to provide the volume of conformity assessment that would be required were CE recognition to end. We are also clear that ending recognition of CE marking without reforming the domestic regime would create trade barriers and negatively affect the supply of products that meet recognised standards.

I am also determined to address the inadequacies across the wider construction products regime. Residents and communities need to be confident that their homes will be safe and well-built now and in the future. To ensure this, the Government will want to take into account any recommendations from the forthcoming Grenfell inquiry report to inform proposals for reform. Therefore, I am making this extension, and the longer-term future of CE and UKCA marking, conditional on this Government committing to system wide reform of the construction products regulatory regime.

The Government recognise the role of UK conformity assessment bodies in ensuring compliance of goods on the market. As part of the reforms the Government will work with UK conformity assessment bodies, the UK Accreditation Service, and the wider industry to strengthen the conformity assessment market.

Lastly, I recognise the need for industry to have sufficient certainty to support supply chains. I can confirm that any subsequent changes to the recognition of CE marking would be subject to a minimum two-year transitional period.

National classes and sprinklers in care homes

I am also announcing, today, publication of two updates to the statutory guidance that accompanies building regulations. First, we are introducing a provision for sprinklers to be installed in new care homes. Secondly, we are completing the withdrawal of the outdated national

classes fire testing standards, ending a long period of dual specification in favour of the more robust European standard. This implements the recommendation, made in the Hackitt report, for a clearer, transparent and effective testing regime. Alongside guidance for second staircases in tall residential buildings that are more than 18 metres in height, which was published on 29 March 2024, these measures conclude the new policy responses to the sprinklers in care homes, removal of national classes, and staircases in residential buildings consultation, which ran from 23 December 2022 to 17 March 2023.

Withdrawing the national classes fire testing standards from “Approved Document B” will end the dual classification system that has operated since the early 2000s in favour of the more rigorous, internationally recognised European standard (BS EN 13501). The current testing standard tests for both reaction to fire and fire resistance. I am aware that a small number of manufacturers who have only ever tested to national class standards will need time to re-test their products. We are providing industry with a transition period of five years for fire resistance and six months for reaction to fire. This is a generous yet critical approach and has been put in place to facilitate a smooth transition to the European standard that is not disruptive to supply chains.

A compassionate society protects its most vulnerable. Today, I am also publishing an update to “Approved Document B” that makes provision for sprinklers in all new care homes. Sprinklers enhance fire protection where residents may be reliant on others for help and assistance, especially if a building evacuation is needed. Many care home providers already include sprinklers in new designs. For those that do not yet provide for sprinklers, again, I recognise that businesses and investors seek certainty. So, care homeowners and developers will benefit from a six-month transition period until the guidance comes into effect and will then have a further six months to enable work on current development projects that are under way, or about to start, to continue.

[HCWS62]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts: Contingent Liability Notification

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention two new contingent liabilities for the activities of the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology and the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts, hereon referred to as ECMWF.

The UK has agreed to fully fund the construction of a new headquarters for ECMWF on the University of Reading campus. This was a political commitment made to member states at the ECMWF council meeting in December 2021. To enable this, an agreement for lease has been negotiated with UoR to secure land and rights to build.

ECMWF is an independent international and intergovernmental organisation supported by 35 states, including the UK. ECMWF are considered experts in their field and attract talented scientists and engineers

from across the world. The provision of the new ECMWF HQ will ensure approximately 270 to 300 skilled roles remain in the UK along with significant investment in the UK economy over the life of the building, generating a net present value of £97 million. The continued hosting of ECMWF will help to maintain the UK’s reputation as a world leader in weather and climate science.

Two indemnities are required by the university. The first is due to the university having incurred costs on the basis that the Department will subsequently complete the project. The costs cover relocating their art department to make space for the HQ and carrying out significant works in clearing the site by, amongst other things, demolishing existing buildings, removing asbestos and other contaminants and decommissioning services so that the site will be ready for development. The university are seeking an indemnity to ensure they would be partially reimbursed, should the project not be completed. They will not move forward with the project without this protection so, without these indemnities, the deal to secure the site would be jeopardised along with the project as a whole.

This indemnity will be triggered should the Department not achieve specific planning and construction milestones by specified deadlines. Since the planning requirements are nearly fulfilled with the grant of planning already in place, the risk of this indemnity crystallising is considered to be very low. The maximum costs to the Government are £14.4 million including VAT. If crystallised, the cost is likely to be the full capped value.

The detailed planning consent application was made in October 2023, with the grant of planning received on 24 July 2024. A six-week period following grant of planning permission during which the decision to grant planning permission could be judicially reviewed will expire in early September 2024. In the event that that period expires without an application for judicial review being made, this indemnity will fall away entirely. This is considered to be likely given that the planning application was not contentious.

The second indemnity relates to vacation and handover of the HQ at the end of the 50-year lease. If ECMWF does not vacate the premises at the end of the contractual term of the lease, or if the lease is otherwise determined before the end of the contractual term, and UK Government cannot return the building to UoR with vacant possession because ECMWF do not vacate, UK Government would be liable for UoR’s associated costs. Given ECMWF’s privileges and immunities, the inviolable status of its premises and the uncertain basis of its occupation of the property under domestic landlord and tenant law, UoR are concerned about their ability to recover vacant possession after the end of the lease if ECMWF were to remain in occupation. This risk is being held by UK Government as part of the lease agreement.

The UK would be under an obligation as host nation to provide alternative accommodation to allow ECMWF to move before the end of the tenancy, unless they depart the UK. There is a strong possibility that the university would agree to extend the lease or agree a new lease. UK Government and ECMWF are obliged to work together to avoid this kind of situation.

Costs in the event of this occurring are uncapped. Property and legal costs are estimated by the Government Property Agency to be around £500,000, or £600,000

including VAT. Other costs cannot be estimated at this stage due to the uncertainties involved. Costs comprise liabilities, expenses—including solicitors' and other professional costs—claims and damages. Losses, including any diminution in UoR's interest in the property arising as a result of the breach of covenant to provide vacant possession at the end of the lease, would also have to be covered. The Department would be responsible for such costs.

Although the agreement for lease and lease will be entered into by the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department as ultimate sponsor and funder of the project will have budgetary responsibility within Government for them, and will be responsible for any payments due under the first indemnity and second indemnity. The Department are seeking approval of the indemnities as ultimate sponsor and funder of the project.

The Government will be subject to the new contingent liabilities, and I will be laying a departmental minute today containing a description of the liabilities undertaken.

[HCWS55]

WALES

Port Talbot Transition Board

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): Today I can confirm that on 15 August I announced the release of £13.5 million in funding to support supply chain businesses and individuals affected by Tata Steel's decision to transition to greener steelmaking.

This initial tranche of £13.5 million in funding demonstrates that this Government will act decisively to support workers and businesses in Port Talbot, working with Welsh Government, unions, and the wider community.

This funding, which is the first release from the Tata Steel/Port Talbot Transition Board fund, will target local businesses that are heavily reliant on Tata Steel as their primary customer, allowing them to turn towards new markets and customers where necessary.

The funding will also be available to workers affected by the transition, allowing them to retrain or to learn new skills for the employment market. We are also harnessing the generosity of the local community, with 50 employers so far pledging practical support for affected workers.

Negotiations with Tata Steel on the future of the site will continue separately. But this Government will not wait for a crisis to overtake us before acting. We are putting a safety net in place now to ensure we can back workers and businesses, whatever happens.

We have reset our relationship with the Welsh Government and will continue to work closely with them and other partners to ensure we are delivering support on the ground.

Recognising the immediate need, support through the funds will be available imminently.

Businesses and individuals can register an interest or send any inquiries to an email address if interested—tsukqueries@npt.gov.uk.

[HCWS63]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Cost of Living

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): Today we are announcing funding for an extension to the household support fund, which will enable local authorities in England to help vulnerable people and families receive discretionary emergency crisis support as we help people through the winter.

Many councils also use the fund beyond emergency support, including working with local charities and community groups to provide residents with key appliances, school uniforms, cookery classes, and items to improve energy efficiency in the home.

The scheme will be worth £421 million in England and will run until the end of March 2025. The devolved Governments will receive consequential funding as usual through the Barnett formula to spend at their discretion.

The dire inheritance we face means more people are living in poverty now than 14 years ago, and this Government are taking immediate action to prevent a cliff edge of support for the most vulnerable in our society.

At the same time, we are taking action to fix the foundations of our country and spread opportunity and prosperity to every part of the country through our plans to grow the economy, make work pay, and get Britain working again.

That means delivering the biggest and boldest reforms to employment support for a generation, including through our upcoming White Paper to tackle the root causes of worklessness.

It also means reducing poverty and driving up opportunity through our child poverty taskforce, taking action across Government so every child, no matter where they come from, has the best start to life.

We will also root out the unacceptable levels of fraud and error in our welfare system so that taxpayers' money supports those who need it most.

We are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge given our inheritance. We will not turn things around overnight, but our plan will transform lives.

By growing the economy and unlocking investment through the national wealth fund, launching Great British Energy to drive home-grown clean energy and lower bills, making work pay and developing a new child poverty strategy to give children the best start in life, the Government are looking at all levers available to unlock the potential of millions across the country and give them the platform they need to thrive.

Further details for the forthcoming extension will be published ahead of the launch of the new scheme in the coming weeks.

This funding will work to help those in need. Pensioners and others struggling with the cost of living over the colder months should contact their local council to see what support may be available to them. If applicable, please direct residents in your area to their local authority who will be able to help them access the household support fund in the coming months.

[HCWS58]

Petition

Monday 2 September 2024

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Dental health care

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the current NHS dental contract has failed and that UDAs (Units of Dental Activity) do not match the time required for dentists to provide dental care to their patients; further that in England only £35 is spent per person on dental care, compared to £47 in Wales, £55 in Scotland and £56 in Northern Ireland, making funding and the system unviable for most dentists undertaking NHS work; further that patients must deal with extremely long waiting lists to see a dentist; further that in order to reduce waiting times, more dentists need to be trained up in the UK to meet future shortages through commissioning a number of new dental schools, including the joint universities of York and Hull in other locations, to run alongside their outstanding medical schools; further that there is need to address the workforce challenges within a dental workforce plan; further that preventative dental care through fluoridation should be accelerated, as well as a school check-up service and supervised brushing programme; and further that everyone over the age of 60 should be prioritised since poor dental health can lead to malnutrition and other comorbidities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to discontinue the current unworkable NHS dental contract and instead bring dental services fully back into the NHS through a National Dental Service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rachael Maskell, *Official Report*, 30 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1281.]

[P003005]

Observations from The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock):

The Government are aware of the challenges faced by the NHS Dentistry. This Government plans to tackle the challenges for patients trying to access NHS dental care with a rescue plan to provide 700,000 more urgent dental appointments and recruit new dentists to areas that need them most. To rebuild dentistry in the long term and increase access to NHS dental care, we will reform the dental contract, with a shift to focus on prevention and the retention of NHS dentists. We are also introducing a supervised tooth-brushing scheme for three to five-year-olds, which will target areas of highest need.

From 1 April 2023, the responsibility for commissioning primary care dentistry to meet the needs of the local population has been delegated to all integrated care boards across England. Patients unable to access an urgent dental appointment directly through an NHS dental practice are advised to contact NHS 111 for assistance. NHS dentists are now required to update their website profiles at least every 90 days to ensure patients have access to up-to-date information on where they can access care.

Furthermore, in England there are no plans to reintroduce school screening. The UK National Screening Committee does not recommend population screening for dental disease in children aged 6 to 9 years. Further information can be found here <https://View-health-screening-recommendations.service.gov.uk/dental-disease/>

Written Corrections

Monday 2 September 2024

Ministerial Corrections

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Clean Energy Superpower Mission

The following extract is from the statement on the Clean Energy Superpower Mission on 18 July 2024.

James Wild: Plans for 90 miles of pylons from Lincolnshire to my North West Norfolk constituency and new substations are strongly opposed by local communities. Will the Secretary of State commit to a review of network technologies, and consider a presumption in favour of underground or offshore proposals?

Edward Miliband: I will look at all proposals, but I think the hon. Gentleman knows that underground cables cost six to 10 times more; that is why the last Government did not agree to them.

[Official Report, 18 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 206.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband):

Edward Miliband: I will look at all proposals, but I think the hon. Gentleman knows that underground cables cost **five** to 10 times more; that is why the last Government did not agree to them.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Questions to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The following extract is from Questions to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on 30 July 2024.

Adam Dance: A 25-year-old constituent of mine went missing in Sardinia on the evening of Saturday 13 July. The Italian authorities called off the search on Friday, so will the Foreign Secretary meet me to urge the Italian authorities to help to find my constituent?

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman for representing the concerns of his constituent's family. I recognise that this is a very distressing time for them. He will that know consular officials are providing support to the family and have remained in regular contact with the authorities in Italy, and the ambassador has raised this case with the Italian authorities.

[Official Report, 30 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 1169.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty):

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman for representing the concerns of his constituent's family. I recognise that this is a very distressing time for them. He will that know consular officials are providing support to the family and have remained in regular contact with the authorities in Italy, and the ambassador **will raise** this case with the Italian authorities **later today**.

ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than
Monday 9 September 2024**

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