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Wednesday
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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

HOUSE OF LORDS

WRITTEN STATEMENTS AND WRITTEN ANSWERS

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[I] indicates that the member concerned has a relevant registered interest. The full register of interests can be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-interests/register-of-lords-interests/>

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<i>Minister</i>	<i>Responsibilities</i>
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Lord Collins of Highbury	Deputy Leader of the House of Lords and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Whip
Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on Trent	Spokesperson for NI Office, Scotland Office and Wales Office, Whip
Baroness Blake of Leeds	Whip
Baroness Chapman of Darlington	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
Lord Coaker	Minister of State, Ministry of Defence
Lord Cryer	Whip
Lord Hanson of Flint	Minister of State, Home Office
Baroness Hayman of Ullock	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill	Minister of State, Department for Transport
Lord Hermer	Attorney-General
Lord Hunt of Kings Heath	Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
Baroness Jones of Whitchurch	Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Department for Business and Trade and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and Whip
Lord Kennedy of Southwark	Chief Whip
Lord Khan of Burnley	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
Lord Leong	Whip
Lord Livermore	Financial Secretary, HM Treasury
Baroness Merron	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care
Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Justice, Whip
Baroness Sherlock	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions
Baroness Smith of Cluny	Advocate-General for Scotland
Baroness Smith of Malvern	Minister of State, Department for Education
Baroness Taylor of Stevenage	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
Lord Timpson	Minister of State, Ministry of Justice
Baroness Twycross	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Culture Media and Sport, Spokesperson, Cabinet Office, Whip
Lord Vallance of Balham	Minister of State, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
Baroness Wheeler	Deputy Chief Whip

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Written Statements

Wednesday, 30 October 2024

State Pension and Benefit Rates

[HLWS172]

Baroness Sherlock: My Right Honourable Friend, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (The Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP) has made the following Written Statement:

I have concluded my statutory annual review of state pension and benefit rates under the Social Security Administration Act 1992. The new rates will apply in the tax year 2025/26 and will mainly come into effect from 7 April 2025.

I am pleased to announce that the basic and new state pensions, and the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit, will be increased by 4.1%, in line with the increase in average weekly earnings in the year to May-July 2024.

This demonstrates our commitment to supporting pensioners, protecting the triple lock, which benefits over 12 million pensioners. From April, the full yearly rate of the new state pension will increase by over £470.

Other state pension and benefit rates covered by my statutory review will be increased by 1.7%, in line with the increase in the consumer prices index in the year to September 2024.

This includes universal credit and other benefits and statutory payments linked to participation in the labour market; and additional state pension and pension credit elements other than the standard minimum guarantee.

These increases will apply across Great Britain.

In England and Wales, personal independence payment and other benefits to help with additional needs arising from disability, and the rate of carer's allowance, will also increase by 1.7%. In Scotland, these are devolved matters.

All of social security, including state pensions, is a transferred matter in Northern Ireland.

I will place the full list of proposed state pension and benefit rates for 2025/26 in the Libraries of both Houses in due course.

Although not covered by my statutory review of state pension and benefit rates, I can also inform the House that local housing allowance rates for 2025/26 will be maintained at the 2024/25 levels, following their increase in April 2024; and that the benefit cap has not been reviewed for 2025/26 and will also be maintained at the 2024/25 levels.

Tax Credit, Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Rates

[HLWS173]

Lord Livermore: My right honourable friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones) has today made the following Written Ministerial Statement:

The Tax Credits Act 2002 and the Social Security Administration Act 1992 place a statutory duty on His Majesty's Treasury to review the rates of tax credits and Child Benefit each year in line with the general level of prices. There is a further statutory duty on the Treasury to increase Guardian's Allowance in line with price growth. I have now concluded the review for the tax year 2025/26.

I have decided to increase Child Benefit rates in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for the year to September 2024, which is 1.7%. Guardian's Allowance will also increase by the same rate. This means that, from 7 April 2025:

- the Child Benefit rate for the eldest child will increase from £25.60 to £26.05 per week;
- the Child Benefit rate for other children will increase from £16.95 to £17.25 per week; and
- Guardian's Allowance will increase from £21.75 to £22.10 per week.

I have determined that there will be no need for changes to tax credits rates in the tax year 2025/26, as there will be no tax credits awards after 5 April 2025.

The new rates will apply across the United Kingdom. I will deposit the full list of these rates in the House libraries shortly.

UK-Switzerland Free Trade Agreement Negotiations

[HLWS171]

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: My Rt Hon Friend the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Douglas Alexander MP) has today made the following statement:

The fifth round of negotiations on an enhanced Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Switzerland took place in London between 14 and 18 October 2024.

The talks were the UK's first with the Swiss since the Secretary of State for Business and Trade announced the government's intention to deliver the UK's FTA negotiations programme in July.

Economic growth is our first mission in government and FTAs have an important role to play in achieving this. A stronger trade relationship with Switzerland will contribute to growth, jobs and prosperity in the UK, providing long-term certainty on UK business travel to Switzerland and helping data and ideas flow seamlessly between two world-leading services powerhouses. Total trade between the UK and Switzerland was worth £50.8 billion in 2023.

Talks continue to be constructive, with both countries working towards agreeing ambitious outcomes in key areas, including services, investment and digital. The talks will facilitate UK-Swiss cooperation in areas of mutual interest that support growth.

UK negotiators made good progress in this round and covered almost all areas of the negotiation, including but not limited to:

Services, Investment and Digital

Productive discussions were held on key technical issues, as we work towards consolidated chapter structures and texts. This will allow us to continue to have further technical discussions on remaining issues (including but not limited to digital and business mobility) and move towards economically and commercially meaningful market access proposals.

Intellectual Property

Talks continued to advance this round on a number of technical rights areas, building on the existing high standards in international fora and in our respective domestic regimes.

Government Procurement

Overall, constructive progress has been made on chapter text that builds upon the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Government Procurement (GPA), of which we are both members. Discussions on economically and commercially meaningful market access continue.

Innovation

Negotiators continued discussions on ways to future-proof an enhanced FTA given the rapidly changing nature

of the global economy and the need to respond and adapt to the trade opportunities and challenges that arise from innovation.

Goods, Trade Facilitation and Regulatory Environment

Negotiators exchanged market access offers on goods, with the aim of achieving commercially meaningful outcomes. Discussions continued on technical issues regarding the movement of goods between the UK and Switzerland.

Negotiators also covered issues relating to the overall functioning of an upgraded agreement, as well as on areas of future co-operation.

The government will only ever sign a trade agreement which aligns with the UK's national interests, upholding our high standards across a range of sectors, including protections for the National Health Service.

Round 6 of negotiations is expected to take place in Switzerland in early 2025. The government will continue to work towards delivering outcomes in the FTA that secure economic growth for the UK and will update Parliament on the progress of discussions with Switzerland as they continue to develop.

Written Answers

Wednesday, 30 October 2024

Artificial Intelligence: Regulation

Asked by **Baroness Coussins**

To ask His Majesty's Government whether their sector-specific approach to developing regulation on artificial intelligence will include consideration of the challenges of machine translation, which cuts across all sectors. [HL1709]

Lord Vallance of Balham: Whilst it is true that machine translation has applications across many sectors, the risks posed by machine translation will be driven by the context of where, how and why it is used.

Under our context specific approach, we recognise that our existing expert regulators are best placed to apply rules to the use of AI – including machine translation - in the contexts they know better than anyone else.

We are also committed to ensuring that regulators have the right expertise and resources to make proportionate and informed regulatory decisions about AI in their sectors.

Arts: GCSE

Asked by **Lord Taylor of Warwick**

To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Ukie report *Supercharged: Powering the future of the UK video game and interactive entertainment industry*, published on 11 September, what assessment they have made of the recommendation contained in that report to create a new Digital Creativity GCSE. [HL1689]

Baroness Smith of Malvern: To help break down barriers to opportunity, this government will deliver a curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive and innovative, and ensures that all young people get the opportunity to learn digital and creative skills as part of their education. To meet this ambition, the government announced an independent Curriculum and Assessment Review on 19 July, chaired by Professor Becky Francis CBE. As part of its work, the review will look at whether the current assessment system, including qualification pathways, can be improved for young people aged 5 to 18, while protecting the important role of examinations. The review group has recently launched a call for evidence, which sets out key questions and themes where it would particularly welcome input.

Information about how to respond to the call for evidence, or to register to join a live event, is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/curriculum-and-assessment-review>. The call for evidence is open until 22 November 2024, and the review will publish its recommendations in 2025. Ministers will then consider any changes to curriculum and qualifications in the light of these recommendations.

Beavers

Asked by **Baroness Cavendish of Little Venice**

To ask His Majesty's Government whether they plan to reconsider DEFRA and Natural England's categorisation of beavers as a non-native species in England, in the light of that animal's categorisation as a native species in Scotland and its status as a European Protected Species. [HL1926]

Baroness Hayman of Ullock: This is a devolved matter, and the information provided therefore relates to England only.

Beavers are categorised as a native species in England. Beavers became a European Protected Species in 2022 under Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (the 'Habitats Regulations'). This makes it an offence to deliberately capture, injure, kill or disturb beavers, or damage and destroy their breeding sites or resting place without a licence issued under regulation 55 of the Habitats Regulations by Natural England.

Recognising the potential risk that unmanaged beaver releases into the wild can bring, legislation was introduced in 2015 adding the beaver to schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (the 'WCA') so that releases in England would require a licence.

The Beaver (England) Order 2022 amended Schedule 9 of the WCA to retain the requirement for a licence for release of beavers after the species was given protected status and formally recognised as a returned native species.

Although beavers are a native species whose return is welcomed, licensing their release helps ensure beaver release projects are high quality, follow the England reintroductions code, and take place where benefits can be maximised, and risks minimised.

Bloody Sunday Tribunal of Inquiry: Costs

Asked by **Baroness Hoey**

To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent on 15 October (HL1391), what have been the costs to date of the Cory report, the inquiry headed by Sir Desmond de Silva into the death of Patrick Finucane, the Stevens Inquiries and the Robert Hamill Inquiry. [HL1716]

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent: As mentioned in my previous Written Answer, the Government takes reasonable steps to control the costs of inquiries, including capping legal costs as appropriate.

The Government asked Judge Peter Cory to re-investigate the death of Patrick Finucane. This was not a public inquiry but led to public inquiries into the deaths of Rosemary Nelson, Billy Wright, Robert Hamill and Patrick Finucane.

The Robert Hamill Inquiry is yet to publish its Report and therefore its final costs are not yet available. The Government is in the process of setting up the Patrick Finucane Inquiry and has considered the likely costs and impact on the public finances. The Government's expectation is that the inquiry will avoid unnecessary costs given the work done in all the previous reviews and investigations and the large amount of information and material that is already in the public domain.

Sir Desmond de Silva was appointed to conduct an independent review into the death of Patrick Finucane, but like Cory, this was not a public inquiry. Sir John Stevens' investigation was commissioned and funded by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (now PSNI).

Bus Services: Franchises

Asked by Baroness Randerson

To ask His Majesty's Government, following their announcement on 9 September of the extension of bus franchising powers to local authorities, what steps they are taking to support and ensure that local authorities explore all franchising options, including (1) demand responsive transport, and (2) cross-boundary services. [HL1684]

Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill: The government has set out a plan to improve bus services based on giving local leaders the tools they need to ensure bus services reflect the needs of the communities they serve, including how demand responsive transport and cross-boundary bus routes can improve the experience for bus passengers.

On 9 September, the government laid a Statutory Instrument to open up bus franchising to all local transport authorities (LTAs). It also published a consultation on proposed updates to bus franchising guidance. These measures will speed up and lower the cost of franchising for LTAs. This Government will also bring forward a Buses Bill later in this parliamentary session which will remove the ban on the creation of local authority owned bus companies. This would give LTAs the option to improve connectivity for their passengers by, for example, potentially increasing services that run across local authority boundaries.

The government is also building capacity within the Department for Transport to provide practical support to LTAs throughout the process of delivering public control of buses.

Castlereagh Foundation

Asked by Baroness Foster of Aghadrumsee

To ask His Majesty's Government what progress they have made in setting up the Castlereagh Foundation as set out in the New Decade, New Approach Deal of 2020 and subsequent legislation. [HL1763]

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent: The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 recognises Northern Ireland's rich diversity of identity and language, and benefits both Irish language speakers and those from the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition. The Government continues to work with the Executive on the implementation of the Act.

Counter-terrorism: Greater London

Asked by Baroness Pidgeon

To ask His Majesty's Government what discussions they have had with the Mayor of London and the relevant London boroughs about investing in permanent 'hostile vehicle mitigation' measures on London's bridges, as recommended in the conclusions of the inquest into the London Bridge terror attack. [HL1681]

Lord Hanson of Flint: Hostile Vehicle Mitigation (HVM) is currently provided via the National Barrier Asset (NBA) on five bridges within central London. The NBA measures provide a high level of protection to these bridges, and discussions are ongoing between CT Policing and relevant local stakeholders regarding the installation of permanent structures. Permanent measures have been installed on Westminster Bridge since 2022.

Discussions take place periodically between CT Policing and relevant London bodies, such as Transport for London, to progress this matter.

Department for Business and Trade: and UK Export Finance: Equality

Asked by Baroness Barran

To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Sherlock on 7 August (HL344), how many staff in (1) the Department for Business and Trade, and (2) UK Export Finance, are permitted to undertake diversity-related network time during core working hours; what is the percentage of overall working time they are permitted to spend on such network activity; how many hours are allocated in total; what are the names of each of the networks being funded; and whether they have any plans to increase or reduce such funding. [HL1701]

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: The majority of staff time spent on diversity staff networks is voluntary and unpaid. A maximum of two chairs from each of the 5 networks aligned to DBT's evidence-led areas of focus are allocated up to 10% of their working hours as protected time for network activity. This applies to REACH (race); DisNET (disability); Gender Equality Network; Social Mobility Network; and LGBTQ+ Network. There are no plans to increase or reduce this.

UKEF does not hold the data requested. The majority of staff time spent on diversity staff networks is voluntary and unpaid.

Department for Business and Trade: Remote Working

Asked by *Baroness Neville-Rolfe*

To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Smith of Basildon on 21 October (HL1282), how many substantive disclosures have been issued, since the general election, by the Department for Business and Trade in response to Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI) requests on Civil Service workplace occupancy across the department; and whether they will place in the Library of the House a copy of each FOI disclosure, redacting the name of the applicant. [HL1890]

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: Since the general election on 4th July 2024, the Department for Business and Trade received and issued one substantive Freedom of Information request pertaining to the civil service workplace occupancy data across the Department. A copy of the letter issued to the requestor will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses with relevant redactions to the name of the applicant.

Department for Education: Equality

Asked by *Baroness Barran*

To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Sherlock on 7 August (HL344), how many staff in the Department for Education are permitted to undertake diversity-related network time during core working hours; what is the percentage of overall working time they are permitted to spend on such network activity; how many hours are allocated in total; what are the names of each of the networks being funded; and whether they have any plans to increase or reduce such funding. [HL1702]

Baroness Smith of Malvern: The department does not hold the data requested. The majority of staff time spent on diversity staff networks is voluntary and unpaid.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: Equality

Asked by *Baroness Altmann*

To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Sherlock on 7 August (HL344), how many staff in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are permitted to undertake diversity-related network time during core working hours; what is the percentage of overall working time they are permitted to spend on such network activity; how many hours are allocated in total; which networks are being funded; and whether they have any plans alter such funding. [HL1144]

Baroness Hayman of Ullock: The delivery of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Staff Network activity is agreed between networks and departments as the

employer. This includes permitted time allocation and any funding arrangements. The majority of staff time spent on diversity staff networks is voluntary and unpaid.

Defra does not afford any protected time to network leads or co-chairs or anyone involved in network activity.

Electronic Travel Authorisations: Northern Ireland

Asked by *Baroness Hoey*

To ask His Majesty's Government whether the introduction of the Electronic Travel Authorisation will affect travel from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. [HL1678]

Lord Hanson of Flint: Electronic Travel Authorisations are a new requirement for international travel to the UK. They do not affect domestic journeys, which means they do not affect travel between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Energy: UK Trade with EU

Asked by *Lord Taylor of Warwick*

To ask His Majesty's Government what consideration they have given to amending energy trading arrangements with the EU to create a green energy hub in the North Sea. [HL1687]

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath: The Government has announced work to strengthen cooperation on energy as per the joint statement between the Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission at her visit to the UK in early October.

They agreed to work closely to address global challenges including, among others, climate change and energy prices.

Gender Recognition

Asked by *Baroness Jenkin of Kennington*

To ask His Majesty's Government with reference to the Department for Health and Social Care's publication of the updated Notification of Child Death Form, which Minister, if any, approved the new questions on gender identity. [HL1881]

Baroness Merron: The current process for updating the child death review data collection forms does not require ministerial approval.

General Practitioners: Travellers

Asked by *Baroness Whitaker*

To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they have taken to ensure that nomadic Gypsy and Traveller patients are not wrongfully refused access to GP services. [HL1692]

Baroness Merron: We are very clear that a general practice (GP) cannot refuse registering a patient based on the race or ethnicity, gender, social class, age, religion, sexual orientation, appearance, disability, or medical conditions of the patient. This encompasses patients from gypsy, Roma, and traveller communities.

Additionally, GPs have a responsibility to register people who are homeless, have no fixed abode, or are legitimately unable to provide documentation as proof of living within the catchment area. An individual should not be refused registration or appointments because they do not have a proof of address or personal identification. It is not considered a reasonable ground to refuse registration.

Practices also have a contractual duty to provide emergency treatment and immediately necessary treatment free of charge for up to 14 days to anyone within their practice area who isn't registered with another provider of essential services.

Hammersmith Bridge: Repairs and Maintenance

Asked by Baroness Pidgeon

To ask His Majesty's Government what support they are providing to progress work on reopening Hammersmith Bridge to vehicular traffic. [HL1682]

Lord Henty of Richmond Hill: The Government is continuing to work productively with the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) and Transport for London (TfL) to explore solutions to the ongoing closure of Hammersmith Bridge to motor vehicles, and HMG has provided LBHF with almost £13m of funding to date.

The Minister for Local Transport recently met with local MPs to discuss this project. Work is in progress to reconvene the Hammersmith Bridge Taskforce in due course.

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023

Asked by Baroness Barran

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the letter signed by over 600 academics and seven British Nobel laureates to the Secretary of State for Education calling for the implementation of the remaining provisions of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. [HL1704]

Baroness Smith of Malvern: I, as Minister for Skills, can confirm that I have considered the letter and the concerns raised in it. Officials and I have met with over 40 individuals to discuss the future of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, including academics with concerns about constraints on freedom of speech and academic freedom. A number of these

academics were signatories to the open letter sent to my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education on 15 August 2024. This includes representatives from Academics for Academic Freedom, Committee for Academic Freedom and the London Universities Council for Academic Freedom. Officials have also met with representatives of nine sector mission groups, unions and representatives of minority groups.

This stakeholder engagement will feed into decision making on the future of the Act and this government's longer-term policy on protecting freedom of speech across the higher education sector.

IRA

Asked by Lord Caine

To ask His Majesty's Government whether it remains the assessment of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and MI5 that the Provisional IRA (PIRA) continues to exist, including the Provisional Army Council (PAC) and, if so, whether the relationship between the PAC, PIRA and Sinn Féin remains as was set out in the assessment of the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland published on 19 October 2015. [HL1795]

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent: The 'Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland' report was published in 2015 by the UK Government in order to provide a one-off factual assessment from the UK security agencies and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland. This public assessment, which was intended to inform the then ongoing cross-party talks, has not been repeated.

Although it is acknowledged that some individuals engaged in serious criminality may also have ties to former paramilitary Republican organisations, such activity does not present a threat to national security.

The PSNI and UK security agencies continually assess the threat, risk and harm posed by paramilitary, terrorist and organised crime groups to inform the most appropriate operational response. The threat from Northern Ireland Related Terrorism (NIRT) is assessed by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), after MI5 passed over responsibility earlier this year. JTAC keeps the Threat Level in from NIRT under constant review and formally reviews it twice a year. However, the threat is wholly driven by violent Dissident Republicans who reject the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and not by Groups that support the GFA.

Where any criminality exists, the Government is clear that it should be dealt with fully by the police.

Asked by Baroness Hoey

To ask His Majesty's Government whether they have conducted any further assessment of the Provisional IRA's Army Council, including its influence on the political direction of Sinn Féin and its access to

weapons, since they published their Assessment of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland in October 2015. [HL1876]

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent: The 'Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland' report was published in 2015 by the UK Government in order to provide a one-off factual assessment from the UK security agencies and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland. This public assessment, which was intended to inform the then ongoing cross-party talks, has not been repeated.

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Where any criminality exists, the Government is clear that it should be dealt with fully by the police.

ISG Limited: Insolvency

Asked by Lord Aberdare

To ask His Majesty's Government whether certified payments will be paid to companies who have worked on projects run by ISG Limited on behalf of the Ministry of Justice where there are no funds in the project bank account (PBA); and whether there is a risk that PBAs will have failed to shield some parts of the supply chain from this insolvency event. [HL1966]

Asked by Lord Aberdare

To ask His Majesty's Government whether certified payments owed to suppliers of ISG Limited for contracts undertaken on behalf of the Ministry of Justice will be paid directly to those suppliers when expected monies have not been deposited into project bank accounts; how many suppliers have not yet received certified payments owed to them by the Ministry of Justice; and what is the estimated amount of these certified payments. [HL1967]

Asked by Lord Aberdare

To ask His Majesty's Government what plans they have to pay for works completed on Ministry of Justice projects undertaken by ISG Limited, before it went into administration, to companies in the supply chain working on projects for which project bank accounts

(PBAs) were in place; when and why the Ministry of Justice stopped paying the sums due into these PBAs; and whether this cessation of payment took place before the formal announcement of ISG administration. [HL1968]

Asked by Lord Aberdare

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the value of retention payments which (1) have been withheld, (2) have been released to suppliers, and (3) are still being held in relation to completed projects undertaken by ISG Limited for the Ministry of Justice. [HL1969]

Lord Timpson: Since ISG Construction Limited entered administration on 20 September, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has undertaken a range of activity to understand the full impact on the Department and the supply chain in the construction sector. This has included working with EY, the appointed Administrator, to ensure the sums remaining within Project Bank Accounts are correct. The Department is in contact with a large number of subcontractors to ISG to determine what, if any, direct assistance the MoJ is able to provide. The Department remains committed to the timely payment of invoices in line with our obligations to do so.

The MoJ is undertaking a review of all potential payments arising from ISG entering administration, but given the scale and complexity of the task, this work is not yet complete.

Ministry of Justice: Equality

Asked by Baroness Barran

To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Baroness Sherlock on 7 August (HL344), how many staff (1) in the Ministry of Justice, (2) in the Crown Prosecution Service, and (3) supporting the Law Officers, are permitted to undertake diversity-related network time during core working hours; what is the percentage of overall working time they are permitted to spend on such network activity; how many hours are allocated in total; what are the names of each of the networks being funded; and whether they have any plans to increase or reduce such funding. [HL1699]

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede: With regards to the Ministry of Justice, the delivery of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Staff Network activity is agreed between networks and departments as the employer. This includes permitted time allocation and any funding arrangements. The majority of staff time spent on diversity staff networks is voluntary and unpaid and there is no immediate plan to change this.

The 16 recognised Staff Networks currently operating in Ministry of Justice are:

- ABLE
- Carers
- Christians in MoJ

- Frontline
- Gender Equality
- Hindu
- Humanists
- Jobshare
- International and EU Nationals
- Muslim
- Parents
- Proud
- Safe Space
- Sikhs in MoJ
- Spirit
- Supporting the Workplace in Menopause (SWIM).

The Executive Board of the Attorney General's Office appoints two volunteer members of staff to act as Diversity and Inclusion leads. With volunteer colleagues, they organise events (such as lunchtime talks) and circulate relevant information and materials around the Office. No maximum percentage of overall working time is specified for such activity and the time spent on such activity is not recorded.

As for the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), it has 27 staff who are permitted to undertake diversity-related network time during core working hours across its eight staff networks who are allocated 'network time'. There is no specified maximum percentage of overall working time permitted to spend on such network activity, but the maximum allocated to any one individual in this financial year is 177.6 hours. For 2024/25, there are 3426.5 hours allocated in total.

There are no current plans in the CPS to increase or reduce funding in this financial year, however requests for funding are submitted and reviewed annually.

The names of the networks for the CPS are:

- National Black Crown Prosecution Association (NBCPA)
- Carers Association
- Sikh Society
- Muslim Network
- Christian Fellowship
- LGBTI
- Social Mobility
- Disabled Staff Network (DSN).

Offshore Industry

Asked by The Lord Bishop of Norwich

To ask His Majesty's Government what their policy is for licensed but undeveloped sites for offshore oil and gas drilling, and whether they plan to implement a moratorium on issuing of development consents for those sites. [HL1679]

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath: Oil and gas will continue to be a key component of Britain's energy mix. The Government is taking urgent steps to update guidance for industry in response to the Supreme Court's Finch judgment, which requires developers to assess end use greenhouse gas emissions in Environmental Impact Assessments for new oil and gas projects. Meanwhile, we are deferring the assessment of environmental statements for development consents for offshore oil and gas projects (which have already secured a licence). The Government intends to consult on new guidance shortly, providing clarity to industry, and publish in Spring 2025, when assessments of environmental statements will resume.

Offshore Industry: Licensing

Asked by The Lord Bishop of Norwich

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the effectiveness of the Climate Compatibility Checkpoint, and what plans they have to revise it. [HL1680]

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath: The Climate Compatibility Checkpoint was developed under a previous administration and was designed to run in advance of new oil and gas licensing rounds. There are currently no new licensing rounds planned, and we will consult later this year on the implementation of our manifesto position not to issue new oil and gas licences to explore new fields.

The Government's priority is a fair, orderly and prosperous transition in the North Sea, in line with our climate and legal obligations.

Overseas Students: Fees and Charges

Asked by Lord Lexden

To ask His Majesty's Government how many international students are currently studying in English universities, and what is the total amount these pupils will pay in tuition fees this academic year. [HL1723]

Baroness Smith of Malvern: The Higher Education Statistics Agency is responsible for collecting and publishing data about UK higher education (HE), including on international student numbers and tuition fee income.

In the 2022/23 academic year there were 630,005 international students studying at English universities and other HE providers, generating a total tuition fee income of £10.1 billion.

Primary Health Care: Travellers

Asked by Baroness Whitaker

To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they have taken to improve access to digital primary healthcare services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. [HL1691]

Baroness Merron: We know that patients are struggling to access general practice, and that these struggles can be particularly acute in inclusion health groups such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

We want to ensure digital healthcare services are available to those who need them, and all practices are now required to offer online and video consultation tools, secure electronic communication methods, and online facilities to provide and update personal information.

However, we are clear that all online tools must be provided as an additional option, not as a replacement for more accessible channels like telephone or reception services. This ensures that individuals without access to digital technology, including those from disadvantaged groups, are not excluded and can choose the method of communication that works best for them. All patients should be treated equitably no matter what route they access general practice.

Prisons: Ministers of Religion

Asked by Lord Singh of Wimbledon

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the impact of a reduction in prison chaplaincy service provision on the ability of faith advisers to provide an equitable service to prisoners and their families. [HL1910]

Lord Timpson: There has been no reduction in prison chaplaincy provision or in the role of faith advisers, who continue to play a vital part in advising chaplains and staff on specific matters of faith or belief and the endorsement of nominated chaplains in HMPPS.

Serbia: Politics and Government

Asked by Baroness Helic

To ask His Majesty's Government what representations they are making to the government of the Republic of Serbia regarding the Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People of June 2024, with particular regard to the potential impact of Sections 16 and 17 in terms of Srebrenica genocide denial. [HL1618]

Baroness Chapman of Darlington: The UK has underlined with Serbia's government, including President Vučić, our concerns about June's "All Serb Assembly" and the subsequent Declaration. Events in Srebrenica were genocide, as confirmed by the International Court of Justice. The verdicts handed down are against individuals; no one ethnicity bears responsibility for the crimes committed during the conflict. Genocide denial is abhorrent and must end. Building a stable, prosperous and inclusive future for all citizens in the region requires acknowledgement of the facts. The UK encourages regional co-operation on reconciliation efforts and in finding ways to heal wounds and work together towards a shared future.

St Helena: Asylum

Asked by Lord Blencathra

To ask His Majesty's Government what discussions they had, if any, with the St Helena Legislative Council regarding the decision to move asylum seekers who arrive in the Chagos Islands to St Helena. [HL1756]

Asked by Lord Blencathra

To ask His Majesty's Government which officials were involved in discussions regarding the decision to move asylum seekers who arrive in the Chagos Islands to St Helena; and whether the Governor of St Helena was involved in those discussions. [HL1757]

Baroness Chapman of Darlington: Immigration is a matter for the St Helena Government. The St Helena Government is responsible for local consultation.

Ministers from the FCDO and Home Office have worked closely with the Chief Minister and the St Helena Government, including the Governor. This agreement was welcomed by the St Helena Government in a public statement following the signing of the new Memorandum of Understanding.

Asked by Lord Blencathra

To ask His Majesty's Government what is their estimate of the number of asylum seekers who will be moved from the Chagos Islands to St Helena, and over what period. [HL1760]

Baroness Chapman of Darlington: The new Memorandum of Understanding with St Helena only applies to any new migrants who arrive from the date of the arrangement until the UK's agreement with Mauritius concerning the Chagos archipelago comes into force or 18 months have passed. This will not affect any migrants currently on the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). This is a contingency arrangement and no new migrants have arrived on BIOT since 2022.

Stratford Station: Repairs and Maintenance

Asked by Baroness Pidgeon

To ask His Majesty's Government what discussions they have had with (1) Network Rail, (2) TfL, and (3) the London Legacy Development Corporation, concerning the business case for improvement work at Stratford station. [HL1683]

Lord Henty of Richmond Hill: The government is already funding Network Rail to develop and deliver short-term and medium-term improvements to Stratford station. We are also working with Network Rail, Transport for London and the London Legacy Development Corporation to support the development of proposals for a longer-term redevelopment of Stratford station.

Students: Loans

Asked by **Baroness Royall of Blaisdon**

To ask His Majesty's Government whether they have any plans to start charging interest on student loans from the end of a student's studies rather than on receipt of the loan. [HL1590]

Asked by **Baroness Royall of Blaisdon**

To ask His Majesty's Government whether they have any plans to re-introduce student maintenance grants; and if so, whether a student in receipt of a grant would also be eligible for a maintenance loan. [HL1591]

Baroness Smith of Malvern: The department recognises that UK higher education (HE) creates opportunity, is an engine for growth in our economy and supports local communities. We are determined that the HE funding system should deliver for our economy, for universities and for students, and the government is committed to supporting the aspiration of every person who meets the requirements and wants to go to university. We have already started reviewing options to deliver a more robust HE sector but it will take time to get it right. We will be announcing further details on HE student finance for the 2025/26 academic year in due course.

Terrorism: Northern Ireland

Asked by **Lord Caine**

To ask His Majesty's Government what plans they have to commission an update to the assessment of the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland published on 19 October 2015. [HL1793]

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent: The 'Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland' report was published in 2015 by the UK Government in order to provide a one-off factual assessment from the UK security agencies and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland.

The then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Theresa Villiers) made clear at the time that this assessment was commissioned due to specific concerns, and was intended to inform the then ongoing cross-party talks.

The PSNI and UK security agencies continually assess the threat, risk and harm posed by paramilitary, terrorist

and organised crime groups to inform the most appropriate operational response.

Asked by **Lord Caine**

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the continuing validity of the assessment of the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland published on 19 October 2015. [HL1794]

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent: The 2015 assessment was commissioned due to specific concerns. It was a one-off factual assessment from the UK security agencies and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland and was intended to inform the then ongoing cross-party talks.

The PSNI and security partners continue to work to keep the people of Northern Ireland safe, including continually monitoring the threat from paramilitary and terrorist groups to inform their operational response to these harms.

Universities: Freedom of Expression

Asked by **Baroness Barran**

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the likely impact of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 on the prevalence of hate speech in universities. [HL1661]

Baroness Smith of Malvern: The government fully supports peaceful protest and lawful free speech in universities. However, that does not extend to unlawful free speech, including that which incites hatred and violence, or which causes harassment.

One of the reasons the government has paused further implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 is because the higher education (HE) sector, minority groups and unions representing staff on campus have raised concerns about the Act, believing it to be disproportionate, burdensome and damaging to the welfare of students, and that fears of sanction could push providers to overlook minority groups' safety. All students, regardless of race or religion, should be free to focus on their studies rather than worry about their safety. By pausing further commencement of the Act in order to consider all options, the government is ensuring that HE remains a space for constructive dialogue and diverse opinions, rather than a battleground for ideological clashes.

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