



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Department, HC 44

Tuesday 23 November 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 23 November 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Steve Brine; Alex Davies-Jones; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Damian Green; Simon Jupp; John Nicolson.

Questions 128-261

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Ms Nadine Dorries MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; and Sarah Connolly, Director, Security and Online Harms Directorate, DCMS.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Ms Nadine Dorries MP, Sarah Healey and Sarah Connolly.

Chair: This is the DCMS Committee, and this hearing is about the work of the Department. We are joined today by Sarah Healey, the permanent secretary at DCMS, and the right hon. Nadine Dorries, Secretary of State at DCMS.

As the Secretary of State settles, I will go around the table to hear about any interests.

Julie Elliott: Relevant to this hearing, I am vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary Channel 4 group.

Damian Green: I have none.

Alex Davies-Jones: I am a member of the Musicians' Union.

Chair: I am chair of the Lords and Commons Cricket Club, a former BBC journalist and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on new and advanced technologies.

John Nicolson: I am a former BBC reporter and presenter, a former ITV presenter, and a former member of the National Union of Journalists.

Steve Brine: Long ago, I was a BBC journalist. Because it may come up, Chair, this year I attended the Brit awards.

Simon Jupp: I am a former BBC and ITV journalist and manager.

Clive Efford: I am chair of the Samuel Montagu Youth Club, which is a charity in my constituency.

Kevin Brennan: Relevant to this hearing, I am a member of the Musicians' Union, from which I received support at the last election. I am also a member of the Ivors Academy and I have some small earnings as a musician.

Chair: Thank you. Our first questions will come from John Nicolson.

Q128 **John Nicolson:** Welcome, Secretary of State. Why has the search for a new Ofcom chair been such a disaster?

Ms Dorries: I don't believe that it has been. In the Department, we have over 400 appointments and re-appointments. It is fully to be expected that certain appointments attract a lot of attention and are not always as straightforward as we would possibly like them to be, but I don't think it has been a disaster. It is important to state at this point that the selection of the Ofcom chair has been run fully in accordance with the governance code and under the scrutiny of the commissioner for public appointments.

Q129 **John Nicolson:** Okay, but you launched the competition on 12 February and interviewed in April. It is now November. You were obviously



HOUSE OF COMMONS

desperate to get Paul Dacre into this job. He is a right-wing zealot, but he just wasn't up to the job, was he? He failed his interview. You seem to have bent over backwards to make it as easy as possible for this entirely unsuitable man to get this very important post.

Ms Dorries: Well, my predecessor, before I arrived, decided to rerun the competition, quite rightly, for the head of Ofcom. That process ran. There is no way we can exclude anyone from applying, whether they were found unsuitable first time around or not. It was important to ensure that we had as wide and diverse a field of applicants as possible, which is why we recruited a firm of recruitment specialists—head-hunters—to search for applicants to apply for the role. That has taken place and the process is running now.

This is a process that is running. This Committee has itself found in the past that it is not helpful to speculate on appointments when a process is ongoing. That is also a finding of the former commissioner for public appointments, so I am not sure—

Q130 **John Nicolson:** Sure, but Mr Dacre cannot stop talking about it, can he? You changed the job description to help him out. You even changed the wording so that he no longer had to display familiarity with the world of regulation. That word was removed from the job description because he had made such a mess of his interview, apparently. Shouldn't the boss of Ofcom be familiar with regulations?

Ms Dorries: I am not going to discuss an ongoing process, but what I would say—

Q131 **John Nicolson:** Why not?

Ms Dorries: Because it is not appropriate to do so.

Q132 **John Nicolson:** It is appropriate. You are before the DCMS Committee and we have to comment on this application, and a lot of this stuff is in the public domain, not least because Mr Dacre himself has talked about it. He even wrote in *The Times* about it, so it seems strange for you not to talk about it, given that you are the high heidyin and the boss of this whole affair.

Ms Dorries: As I said a moment ago, the Select Committee itself found that it is not helpful to speculate on a process that is in full swing.

Q133 **John Nicolson:** Not helpful to No. 10, because No. 10 was so desperate to give him the job. Mr Dacre stomped off complaining about his treatment. In a way, that showed his very unsuitability for the job, because he gave a rant about how civil servants run the country, not politicians. Looking back, it was odd, was it not, for you to do so much to try to help him, because he is so unsuitable? The manner of his departure has shown how unsuitable he is—quod erat demonstrandum, perhaps.

Ms Dorries: I did not have the opportunity to finish my last answer before you started the next question. Perhaps you would like me to finish the answer to your previous question and address your implication that the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

job application was altered. It was actually not altered as such, but it was made more diverse and broader, so that we could attract a broader range of more diverse candidates.

Q134 **John Nicolson:** Of course. If this Committee rejects the chair who is eventually appointed, will you go ahead with the appointment, or will you listen to the Committee?

Ms Dorries: Well, this Committee has no veto over appointments. It never has had and never will do.

Q135 **John Nicolson:** So it is a done deal, and there is not much point in us even talking to the person who is sent before us?

Ms Dorries: It is not the Committee that is legally answerable to Parliament for appointments. That is me. It is not the Committee that is answerable to parliamentarians; it is not me but the office of Secretary of State. Therefore, it is right and proper that the office of Secretary of State—

John Nicolson: That's just great for parliamentary scrutiny, isn't it? I will be back later with some other questions. Back to you, Chair.

Q136 **Chair:** Thank you. To pick up on that, the Information Commissioner, when he came in front of us, made a very welcome disclosure when we asked him whether, if we found that he was unsuitable for the role, he would withdraw from the role. He said he would—I think in answer to Kevin Brennan. If we ask the same question of your successful candidate at Ofcom, what do you think the answer should be? Do you applaud what the Information Commissioner said, in terms of trying to ensure that those who take up these roles pass scrutiny by this Committee?

Ms Dorries: I think the Information Commissioner is fully entitled to her opinion. Again, this process is ongoing. So as not to prejudice or influence the process, I think I will leave my answer at that.

Q137 **Chair:** You said, "her opinion". Do you mean the next Information Commissioner's predecessor?

Ms Dorries: Yes. They are entitled to their opinion, but I do not feel I should comment on that process.

Q138 **Chair:** You don't welcome that sort of disclosure and, frankly, their having the guts to say to the Committee that if we do not think they are up to the job, they will not proceed with it?

Ms Dorries: As I have said, this is a live process that is ongoing.

Q139 **Chair:** You also stated to John that you can't exclude previous candidates. You said "can't". In the private sector, it is very common to see a job advert that says, "Previous candidates need not apply." It is in virtually every private sector advert these days. What advice have you had to say that you cannot exclude people who failed their previous interview?

Ms Dorries: I have not actually been through this process myself. I once again refer you to my substantive answer. I have to say again that this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

process is ongoing. This process was actually begun before I took up my post. I do not know whether Sarah would like to answer.

Q140 **Chair:** Sarah, can the Secretary of State exclude previous applicants—yes or no?

Sarah Healey: The governance code for public appointments is clear that all appointments should be made in as open and fair a way as possible. Allowing previous applicants to apply is consistent with that.

Q141 **Chair:** So no adverts have gone out for senior roles such as this—this is an incredibly senior role—stating that previous applicants should not apply?

Sarah Healey: The governance code for public appointments is clear that we should try to make all public appointments as open and fair as possible, and that is what we have done in this instance. The commissioner was clear that the rerunning of the competition was in line with the code.

Q142 **Chair:** Okay, but in essence, my question to you is whether, in your time, any previous advert has said that previous applicants need not apply.

Sarah Healey: Not in my time.

Q143 **Chair:** In terms of the timing, obviously there is all the publicity over Mr Dacre, and the feeling to a certain degree is that it may have been a stitch-up—admittedly before your time. Are you now considering whether or not the deadline should be extended from 29 November? It is only a matter of days away. Along with the director of the FCA, this is probably the biggest regulatory job—or one of the two, with the chief executive—in British regulation. Therefore, do you think it is appropriate, with his shadow now taken out of this process, to consider extending the deadline until Christmas time?

Ms Dorries: I will have to reiterate that this is an ongoing process. It is important that we get as broad and wide a field of applicants as possible. I fully concur on the seriousness of this role, not least given the online harms Bill that is coming and the regulatory framework, which Ofcom will have to both administer and work with, but that is not a discussion that I have had yet. It is certainly something I will consider, but I don't see at this point in time the need to extend. I am hoping that we will get to the deadline date with a wide and diverse field of applicants, so that we can continue. I think it is important to get somebody in place very soon.

Chair: I agree with that. Clive Efford?

Q144 **Clive Efford:** Can I just ask you about the appointment of the chair of the Charity Commission? We were told that the Government had a preferred candidate in October, but they have yet to be announced. When will we have an announcement of who that person is?

Ms Dorries: It will be very soon.

Q145 **Clive Efford:** So do you have a preferred candidate?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ms Dorries: No, I don't have a preferred candidate, but the process will allow us to give you an answer as to who will be the new chair of the Charity Commission soon. Again, it is an ongoing process and one that I cannot discuss, I'm afraid.

Q146 **Clive Efford:** But we were told that the process was completed in October and that there was a preferred candidate. Has that candidate withdrawn?

Sarah Healey: I am so sorry, but who were you told that by?

Ms Dorries: Who said that there is a preferred candidate?

Clive Efford: Well—

Ms Dorries: I can reassure the Committee that there is no preferred candidate from where I am sitting, from my perspective and that of my office. Again, it is an ongoing process.

Q147 **Clive Efford:** It has been reported quite widely that there is a preferred candidate. I am sure you are aware of that, but you are saying that there isn't. There has been no correction of that understanding by the Department in the meantime.

Ms Dorries: With the greatest of respect, I cannot correct every misreporting that comes out about the Department. From my perspective, there is certainly no preferred candidate.

Q148 **Clive Efford:** When it comes to looking for a preferred candidate, then, do you agree with your predecessor that whoever takes up the role should move the focus away from any woke agenda?

Ms Dorries: I have never heard that comment being made. I am not aware of it at all. From my own perspective, as the present Secretary of State, that post is very much under the code of governance, which says that the chair of the Charity Commission is there to carry out the core mission of the commission. I would expect that person to be broadly in step and in line with Government objectives, as all appointments are, but I do not see any particular instructions that the chair of the Charity Commission should be attacking—or whatever word one would apply—a woke agenda. I do not think that is the role of the Charity Commissioner. Again, I should not be getting into this conversation, because it is an ongoing process.

Q149 **Clive Efford:** Okay. Sarah Healey, can I ask you about the Secretary of State's predecessor? He said, "I have instructed those leading the search to ensure that the new leader of the Commission will restore charities' focus to their central purpose and empower Trustees to be robust. With interviews beginning next week, candidates will be tested on how they will harness the oversight powers of the Commission to commence this rebalancing." He also said that he was concerned that the Charity Commission had been "hijacked by a vocal minority seeking to burnish their woke credentials". Has your Department received any instructions about what sort of candidates they should be seeking for the Charity Commission post?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sarah Healey: It is consistent with the duties of the Charity Commission to ensure that charities focus on delivering their core charitable purposes. In so far as they undertake campaigning activities, those should be solely in pursuit of their core charitable purposes. I believe that that is what the former Secretary of State was underlining, and that he was keen to see that whoever became the chair of the Charity Commission was committed to making sure that charities follow the legislation in that regard.

Q150 **Clive Efford:** Secretary of State, you use the term “snowflake lefties” quite often—

Ms Dorries: I think I might have used it once.

Q151 **Clive Efford:** What is a snowflake leftie?

Ms Dorries: Probably my kids.

Q152 **Clive Efford:** Really? Are they from Islington? What is an Islington leftie?

Ms Dorries: Again, one of my kids.

Clive Efford: Really? Because these are terms that you use quite a lot. When you were asked about—

Ms Dorries: I think I might have used it once as a general term, but I have certainly never used it as a Secretary of State, which is what I am here as today.

Q153 **Clive Efford:** When you were appointed, the arts sector criticised your appointment. At Tory conference, you accused them of “left-wing snobbishness and elitism”. Is there an obsession with people who disagree with you being lefties?

Ms Dorries: The arts sector is a pretty huge sector; I do not think they all opposed my position. There were certainly a vocal number, mostly—in fact, probably wholly—male, who frequently comment, and continue to do so. Were they all people from the left? Yes, I think there were a number of people who, sadly, used my appointment as a means of political attack. That did happen, yes. Were these people quite obviously on the left? Yes.

Q154 **Clive Efford:** You accuse the BBC of favouring “strident, very left wing, often hypocritical and frequently patronising views that turn people away.” Again, there is the left-wing thing. Is that a bit of an obsession? Do your children work for the BBC?

Ms Dorries: No, they don’t. The BBC has itself accepted that it has a problem with impartiality and has put forward a 10-point plan in response to the Serota review to address issues within the BBC—fundamental issues of impartiality—so I rest my case.

Q155 **Clive Efford:** Did the Serota review refer to anyone being extreme left-wing or having a left-wing bias?

Ms Dorries: Well, the BBC framed it in the context of having a problem with a lack of impartiality.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q156 **Clive Efford:** But your interpretation of that is that it is left-leaning. To me, the idea that Nick Robinson and people on the “Today” programme are left-wing is quite a step.

Ms Dorries: Isn't that always the point? It has been an old chestnut for many years between MPs that whichever side of the House you are on, you think that people are not reporting in your favour. For clarity, on the Nick Robinson point, because I think I might be able to anticipate what you are going to say next, I have never criticised Nick Robinson. I did not hear the interview that I was supposed to have criticised, and I never made the comment. I will just put that one out there, in case that was where you were going next.

Clive Efford: There was a comment that was attributed to you, but I will take that—

Ms Dorries: It was attributed to me, but nobody can actually say I said it.

Q157 **Clive Efford:** Okay. One other thing is the appointment of Jess Brammar as the head of news at the BBC, who had expressed views opposing Brexit. Would you have agreed that appointment, given the views that you have expressed?

Ms Dorries: I am not going to get into a hypothetical situation that is historical and not relevant to my role as Secretary of State.

Q158 **Clive Efford:** If someone is in that position, which you would consider an influential and sensitive role, who had expressed anti-Brexit views, do you think that is an appropriate appointment?

Ms Dorries: Again, I am not going to get involved in a hypothetical and historical speculation about somebody who has applied for a job.

Q159 **Clive Efford:** So you won't be seeking in any way whatsoever to influence future appointments by the BBC, or to Ofcom or the Charity Commission—to check the political credentials of any candidate in any way.

Ms Dorries: I am not part of the recruitment process. I haven't gone through a process, by the way, in the eight weeks that I have been there; I am about to, but I haven't been through a process yet. My responsibility is to sign off, once the process and due diligence has been done, and interviews have been carried out by a panel that includes an independent member, in accordance with the governance code for public appointments, which is overseen by the public appointments commissioner. My role is to sign off on a final candidate. I don't get any involvement in that process along the way, in terms of the due diligence you are speaking about.

Clive Efford: Okay. I will leave it there, Chair.

Q160 **Chair:** Thank you. I want to check something on timings. It is interesting to hear you say that there is no preferred candidate for the Charity Commission. Sarah, we have been holding a date on 9 December for that appointment and we need to have the documents by 2 December—six



HOUSE OF COMMONS

working days. The Secretary of State has just said that she has not gone through the process yet. Why are your officials getting us to hold a date when, clearly, you are not anywhere near making an appointment?

Sarah Healey: Because interviews have taken place and the process is ongoing. We have given you a date that we anticipate we will be able to meet.

Ms Dorries: Chair, I should clarify that what I have not done yet is gone through the process of signing off a successful candidate who has been through—

Chair: The signing off. Okay, so you have got the candidate. I understand you will not discuss that—that is absolutely correct.

Ms Dorries: I haven't actually gone through the process of, "Yes, we accept this candidate." That is not something I have done.

Q161 **Chair:** So we can still expect that date, Sarah.

Sarah Healey: I have no reason to believe that you shouldn't be anticipating using that date.

Q162 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you, Secretary of State and Ms Healey, for joining us today. Serious concerns have been raised about the impact of any changes to the licence fee settlement, specifically on regional broadcasting. I am obviously worried about Wales and the impact that it will have there, especially as S4C is being included in negotiations for the first ever time this round. What steps are you taking to ensure that regional content is protected, going forward?

Ms Dorries: I do appreciate how important S4C is. I know how popular it is in Wales and I know how much the Welsh MPs love it. I don't want you to think I don't. It is a small station, but it is very important in terms of its Welsh-language speaking. I am aware of that.

In terms of the licence fee settlement with the BBC, I fully understand your concerns. I am very aware of them. I can't discuss what are ongoing discussions with the BBC at the moment, but I want to reassure you that I am very aware of your concerns and where you're coming from.

Q163 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Okay. Thank you. Hopefully when you can discuss them, you will be able to come back and we can question you on the settlement a bit further then.

On to Channel 4. Channel 4 contributes £20 million gross value added in Wales and it supported over 200 jobs in 2019. It has made £77 million of investment in Wales over the last 10 years, which goes to support small production companies, such as Chwarel in north Wales, which provides local jobs, and SMEs in Cardiff.

Whatever you decide in the consultation, will you require a private owner to maintain the same level of investment in Wales?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ms Dorries: I can't speculate on that at the moment, because I haven't made a decision about whether we are going to go to that position yet. As you said, the consultation is ongoing. I think we had 60,000 responses. That is a huge number of responses, and detailed responses as well. The Department is working hard and fast to get through that consultation process. Once it does so, we will then take that, which is going to be a big body of work, into consideration, but there are a number of issues that I have to consider before I make the decision over the future of Channel 4. Again, I hear your concerns. It is very important that those devolved Administrations—

Actually, this is one of my issues, you know—that Channel 4 does not just broadcast to London; it is UK-wide. That is something that I am very aware of in everything that I do in the Department. It is not just about London—it is about 60 million people as well as the 6 million people in London. I just want to reassure you that that is very much the ethos in the Department now. I cannot discuss what is going to happen to Channel 4 in the future because I just have not made my mind up. I am happy to answer questions on why I think it might be needed, why it will not be needed. I am happy to do all that, but I cannot actually discuss a decision that I have not made yet.

Q164 **Chair:** On that point, why do you think it might be needed and why do you think it might not be needed?

Ms Dorries: Again, what is the situation with Channel 4 moving forward? I cannot look at where we are today with Channel 4, which I know is in a very good, sustainable position. We cannot look at where we were yesterday, but what I am interested in is how is Channel 4 going to survive in the future? It is actually both fascinating and interesting how rapidly both the broadcasting and the digital landscape are evolving and changing: firesticks, Amazon Prime, Netflix—all of that landscape is going to move very quickly as we move even further forward. Is Channel 4 sustainable today? Yes. How much of its advertising comes from digital content? I think it is 17% of advertising on its digital platform, its digital content. That is not sustainable for a channel moving forward, so there are a number of issues that I will have to consider, moving forward.

Q165 **Chair:** I hope you have read the report that we did into public service broadcasting on areas such as looking at the digital footprint of Channel 4 and the idea of what we termed a super-BritBox, if you like. Do any of those ideas in relation to Channel 4 and the wider public service broadcasting landscape appeal to you?

Ms Dorries: Yes; actually the report is in the mix. Thank you for the report, because that is in the mix with the considerations. I made a point recently when I gave evidence to the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill that my portfolio particularly is very wide and deep—it is huge. And I see the findings of this Committee, and the findings of the Sub-Committee and the Joint Committee, very much as teamwork.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sometimes when I sat on a Select Committee, I felt as though the report just went into the ether, but actually in DCMS it is not the case because some of these issues are incredibly important, and particularly when there are commercial interests like Channel 4. The report that the Committee produced will be in the mix as part of the consideration making, certainly informing me as to what we do. All those ideas are interesting. The recommendations are interesting and will go into the mix of the considerations.

Q166 Chair: Just on that point, the Joint Committee is obviously on online harms and online safety, and our Sub-Committee is on effectively the same thing and disinformation. This was the report that we produced.

Ms Dorries: Yes, I was using that as an example of teamwork moving forward on the portfolio in general. Reports on something as important as the future of Channel 4 will play a role in my decision making.

Q167 Chair: Was there any particular point, though? You have obviously been very complimentary about the work of the Committee in that regard. Is there any part of that report that you read and thought, “Yes, actually that is a really interesting idea to explore”?

Ms Dorries: I read it eight weeks ago, and it was the summary because I had a lot to catch up on eight weeks ago. One of the issues you highlighted in the report which struck me was the concern about independent commissioning of independent content. So I have asked a few questions in relation to the comments that the Committee made on that. I have been reassured, actually, and I think you will be yourself in terms of, again, how fast this is moving. There are lots of public service broadcasters and other broadcasters who commission independent content. “Downton Abbey” on ITV was independently commissioned. In terms of the jobs market for independent production companies at the moment, there is no shortage of work.

In fact, as you know, we are building new film studios. We produced more films here in the last quarter of 2020 than they did in Hollywood. There is no end of work for people working in production and independent production companies at the moment. So the future of those people working in that industry is not something which is concerning me at the moment, and that is one of the issues that I know you raised in the report in relation to Channel 4 that I have asked for further information on and looked at. So that is one bit of the report that I did take away. But the rest of it—in terms of your recommendations and the work you have found to support them—when we come to the point to make the decision on the future of Channel 4, that will be in the decision-making process.

Q168 Chair: Just to clarify, you stated that you read the summary of the report eight weeks ago. I understand that you are very busy and have to get your head around so many topics, as you are well aware, but have you read the rest of the report in the past eight weeks?

Ms Dorries: Not all of it, no—I skimmed it. I had all the reports, a history of reports, when I first took up the job. You have done quite a few.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: You have a media Bill coming up, that sort of thing—

Ms Dorries: Yes. The work we will be doing on the media Bill, again. I don't want you to think that what you are doing is not going to be part of the decision-making process, because it really is. Particularly—to do a bit of a love-in here—on the Online Safety Bill, some of the witnesses you interviewed, the statement you took last week from Azeem Rafiq and all the information gathering that you do definitely feeds into and informs what happens.

Chair: I know you are very busy and I know it is a long report, but I would recommend that you do more than skim-read it.

Ms Dorries: No, no, we will. When it comes to making the decisions on Channel 4, that will be in there as part of my reading.

Q169 **Damian Green:** I want to ask about Channel 4 as well, but just to clear something up, you both said that there is not a preferred candidate for the Charity Commission, and yet I think you then said, basically, that you had to take the final decision and sign off the papers.

Ms Dorries: When I am presented with the shortlisted candidates, at that point—

Q170 **Damian Green:** Do you get presented with a shortlist?

Ms Dorries: I have not gone through that process yet.

Sarah Healey: The process is that the interviews have taken place and then a report is put to the Secretary of State listing the appointable candidates who have been determined by the panel. Then it is for the Secretary of State to make a decision. Once we have that preferred candidate, that is the person whom you would see in this Committee.

Q171 **Damian Green:** Sure. But we are at the stage of a shortlist—that was what was not clear. It felt like a candidate had come through the process, but the Secretary of State had not signed them off yet.

Sarah Healey: We have not been through all the processes yet to be able to announce the preferred candidate.

Q172 **Damian Green:** Thank you. But you expect to do so, so that the timetable—

Sarah Healey: As I say, I anticipate no delay to the timetable that we have agreed with the Committee.

Damian Green: Unless the Secretary of State disagrees with the list.

Chair: Kevin wants to come in with a question.

Q173 **Kevin Brennan:** How many candidates do you expect to put to the Secretary of State? Presumably, it has been judged how many are above the line. How many will you put forward to the Secretary of State?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sarah Healey: We wouldn't normally comment on that kind of detail of an appointment process.

Ms Dorries: The process is still ongoing.

Sarah Healey: I wasn't personally involved in that particular appointment process, so I couldn't tell you exactly how many candidates will be put forward in this instance.

Q174 **Kevin Brennan:** It is normally more than one, isn't it?

Sarah Healey: We absolutely try to give Ministers a choice of candidates. That is written into the code—that ideally it would be good for Ministers to have a choice of candidates.

Q175 **Damian Green:** I am genuinely puzzled. Your predecessor Minister—indeed, Ministers, the previous Broadcasting Minister too—took the view, which I will therefore take as a departmental view, that as you set out, Channel 4 is clearly strong and viable today, but the market out there is uncertain and changing fast, so it might not be viable in five or 10 years' time—something like that. That is a point of view. But Channel 4 is a commercial operation, and Channel 4 itself says, "Yes, we have looked ahead into the future. We know as well as anyone how the digital world is going to change, and we think that we are viable, long term." Just as a point of principle, therefore, why do politicians and civil servants think that they have a better view of the future commercial market than a commercial operator? For you and I, Secretary of State, that offends against every canon of what we believe—commercial operations know about commerce better than civil servants or politicians, don't they?

Ms Dorries: Well, that may be your opinion; I couldn't possibly comment from where I'm sat—but no, they can't. I think it is right that a public service broadcaster, in the rapidly changing digital environment that we are in at the moment—the future and longevity of that broadcaster—should be brought into question. Particularly when it is in receipt of taxpayers' money, it is our responsibility to evaluate whether taxpayers are receiving value for money and whether that model is sustainable in the future. I think it is absolutely right and proper that we should do that, and that is the process we are going through. I would not argue that just because Channel 4 has been established as a public service broadcaster, and just because it is in receipt of public money, we should never audit the future of Channel 4, and never evaluate how Channel 4 looks in the future and whether or not it is a sustainable and viable model. It is quite right that the Government should do that.

Q176 **Damian Green:** But Channel 4 is not like the BBC. It is not in receipt of licence fee money. It makes its money from commercial operations.

Ms Dorries: Yes, but—

Sarah Healey: There are a range of views. Channel 4 has taken a particular position on the future.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ms Dorries: Can I just say that the discussions about what we do with Channel 4 and how we evaluate Channel 4 also happened before I arrived in my post? I was looking to Sarah to clarify what you just said on the funding. I have picked this up as a live issue in the Department.

Your question to me was whether I think that Channel 4 should just continue, and that we as politicians and civil servants should not have a say in the future of Channel 4. I think as a public service broadcaster, it is our responsibility to check the viability. We do that in a different way with the BBC—we have the mid-term review, the charter review, the licence fee settlement. So the BBC is under scrutiny almost constantly, and Ofcom. The BBC is heavily regulated and heavily scrutinised. What are we doing in terms of looking at the future of Channel 4? We are kind of doing the same thing—asking is this going to be viable in the long term, as a public service broadcaster? That is all we are doing.

I know there is a lot of speculation about the decisions being made—that we are going to privatise Channel 4. But we are not; we are evaluating the future of Channel 4 and whether it is a sustainable model. A decision hasn't been taken. When we get to the point of possibly taking a decision and when we get to the point of considering all the evidence, we can probably have this discussion then. But at the moment, it is right and proper that we evaluate the future of a public service broadcaster.

Q177 **Damian Green:** I am glad you are so firm that the decision has not been taken, because I have not got any quotes in front of me, but the impression I absolutely got from what your predecessor, and everything he and John Whittingdale said in public, was that it is not a case of whether, but how. And the basis of that—

Ms Dorries: I am not saying that.

Damian Green: Excellent. Thank you

Ms Dorries: I am saying that I want to see all the evidence; I want to read your report; I want to see a full commercial evaluation of Channel 4. And I want to see what the future looks like for public service broadcasters. Then I'll take a decision.

Damian Green: Good. That is very welcome. But the point about Channel 4, obviously—

Ms Dorries: Could I just say, what is the point of having a consultation that 60,000 people respond to if I had already made my mind up what I was going to do with Channel 4? That would be an abuse, I think, and a waste of money and effort on behalf of a large number of civil servants. I would really like to see what those 60,000 responses say first.

Damian Green: That is completely correct, but I think we have both seen Government consultations in the past where it is perfectly obvious that we know what the result is.

Ms Dorries: You may have been involved in some.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Damian Green: I may have been on the other end of some of them, yes indeed, but moving swiftly on. The point about Channel 4 is that it is a commercial operation that does not receive licensing money and does not get taxpayer money, as it were. It makes its money from advertising.

Ms Dorries: What I meant was public money.

Damian Green: Yes, money from the public rather than public spending. Therefore, it has to be viable to do that. I absolutely get that that is a live debate. The point I was making was that in principle, on the whole, commercial organisations know about commerce better than civil servants and politicians.

Ms Dorries: I take that point.

Q178 **Damian Green:** But also, Channel 4 obviously has different responsibilities. You have heard about some of its regional responsibilities and the fact that it supports many in the small creative sector. I would guess that the vast majority of those 60,000 responses are the creative sector saying, "Hang on—without Channel 4 doing what it has always done, we are in trouble as well." I hope that would weigh in the balance.

If you privatise it, a commercial operator would have obligations to shareholders, which would be perfectly proper. How can you imagine that there will be the same diversity and risk-taking and spread around the country, all of which mitigate against Channel 4's pure commerciality? How can you write laws that would enable that to take place long term?

Ms Dorries: I hope you don't mind if I hand over the substance of your question to Sarah. She has been through the evaluation on all of this before I got there. On your first point, about business, and business knows best for business, I understand that. Business nearly always gets it right for business. I would be the last person to say that the Government should interfere. We are not talking solely about a business but a public service broadcaster. That is slightly different; it is not just a commercial organisation, but has a public service broadcasting remit which we as a Government have a responsibility to evaluate and order. I just want to make that clear.

I understand Alex's point, and I understand your concerns about the regions. Within 24 hours of arriving within the Department, I put my stamp on that ethos. The Department is viewed through a London-centric lens. That is not the Department's fault, but many cultural organisations and their headquarters, as well cultural, arts and creative industries are all based in London. It is very important that the outside perception is that we are equally concerned about the regions as we are about what happens in London. I take Alex's point about S4C to heart, because I am very aware of it and of what happens regionally. Sarah will give more substance to the answer, because that question may already have been considered as part of the Department's work on getting ready for the consultation process.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sarah Healey: I do not actually have very much to add to the Secretary of State's response on remit. It is clear that this is not about removing the remit of Channel 4 but looking at what it is. That includes regional presence. Were Ministers to make a decision to go ahead with a privatisation option for Channel 4, obviously we would need to work through the process of what obligations would be placed on the channel and whether any changes would be made to its remit in that process. Clearly, we would also have to look very closely at the value to the taxpayer, and obviously I would have particular duties as accounting officer on that in assessing the nature of the remit with which we would privatise Channel 4 and assuring that any sale were value for money for the taxpayer.

Steve Brine: Hello, Secretary of State.

Ms Dorries: You never thought you'd say those words, did you, Steve?

Q179 **Steve Brine:** I just did. There are many words I never thought I would say, such as "Spurs win the league". I just said them, but I will never say them again.

Secretary of State, do you think that the privatisation of Channel 4 is more or less likely in the changeover from the previous incumbent of your position to you?

Ms Dorries: I am not going to answer that question, because I cannot give you an answer, because I have not made a decision. Actually, I do not really know the position or thoughts of previous incumbents on Channel 4; I have got no idea really. I have not discussed it with them.

Q180 **Steve Brine:** Channel 4 produces incredible drama like "It's a Sin", which was one of the most downloaded programmes in British history.

Ms Dorries: It was amazing.

Q181 **Steve Brine:** An amazing piece of work. Is there a difference between that Channel 4 and "Channel 4 News"?

Ms Dorries: There is a difference between "Downton Abbey" and "News at Ten", and a difference between "Strictly" and BBC news. They are two completely different outputs and different content, and different editorial teams.

Q182 **Steve Brine:** You know why I am asking. The criticism of Channel 4 is that "Channel 4 News" is *The Guardian* on television. When was the last time you appeared on "Channel 4 News"? When was the last time any of the current Cabinet appeared on it? Does "Channel 4 News" cloud the judgment of the whole channel?

Ms Dorries: Interestingly, Cathy Newman has asked me numerous times to appear on "Channel 4 News"; I have just chosen not to. I choose not to appear on news, but that is my personal choice; it is not like I have not been asked. I have.

Q183 **Steve Brine:** What sits behind that personal choice?



Ms Dorries: I don't do any news, unless I am absolutely forced to.

Q184 **Steve Brine:** More widely on public service broadcasting—it was a weighty piece of work and I would encourage you to look at it if you can—what are your ambitions? On the wider, whole idea of public service broadcasting, my constituents and yours can be sent to prison for not paying a licence fee in a multichannel, multimedia, diverse media and entertainment market where one part of that market is taxed—we are taxed to pay for it. To my children—who are a lot younger than yours—is that the future? What is the future of public service broadcasting, in your mind?

Ms Dorries: You are talking about the BBC licence fee and the whole issue around decriminalisation, which again was a decision which took place before I arrived in post. I think you also caught in that question the U-turn on over-75s on pension credit not paying the licence fee. Just to siphon out the BBC issues from your question, my overarching answer is that public service broadcasting in the future—in the changing digital landscape that we are in at the moment—is up for review.

Was I disappointed? Am I hugely disappointed by the decision regarding over-75s on pension credit and the licence fee? Absolutely. I am very disappointed. But decisions on that cannot be made until charter renewal in 2027. Mid-term review discussions will begin, I believe, in the spring of next year—very soon—but of course the mid-term review is about the regulatory framework and other issues which govern the BBC. We do not have an opportunity to look at the future of BBC broadcasting until 2027, when the charter review comes up for renewal, although those discussions will take place before then.

I think that between now and 2027, there will be that landscape that we talk about that we cannot see at the moment; we are just working on what is coming down the line at us. We are working on gigabit and other means of people being able to get technology into their homes much faster and with much more ease. Who will use that and what will they use it for in terms of entertainment? These are quite ethereal conversations that we are having at the moment, because it is something that we cannot see but we know that the tech world must be working on it in terms of entertainment. Netflix is just an early example of where that may go.

I think it is quite serendipitous that the charter renewal does not come through until 2027, because I think that by then we will be in a place where we will have a much clearer view of what the future looks like for public service broadcasting. At the moment, we are kind of in the foothills of how that looks and how it is going to change. I think we could all be accused of being dinosaurs if here and now we said, "It isn't going to change. Everybody can just carry on doing what they are doing. It's all going to be fine. Everybody is going to carry on going into their house and switching on 'News at Six' on the BBC, or the news at seven"—whatever it is. We know that there are huge changes coming.

Q185 **Steve Brine:** Were you disappointed about the decriminalisation decision



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that the Government took before—

Ms Dorries: That happened before I arrived in the Department, so I do not have—

Steve Brine: Would you make the same decision?

Sarah Healey: The issue—

Steve Brine: No, that was for the Secretary of State. Would you make the same decision?

Ms Dorries: I would think very seriously about making a decision like that, frankly.

Q186 **Chair:** What is your personal view? We can guess.

Ms Dorries: I would think very seriously before I came to that decision. I am going to ask Sarah to nuance this, because there are very good—I think the Department did not just take that decision lightly. I think there was a huge amount of soul-searching before that decision was taken. I think sometimes it might take a degree of leadership to probe and push a bit further on things to perhaps reach a different outcome. Sarah, I am going to ask you to give the history—

Q187 **Steve Brine:** Sarah can come in in just a second. The reason that I am very rudely cutting Sarah out is to dig into your mind, Secretary of State, about the future of the whole concept of public service broadcasting. There are some who say that it is an anathema now, let alone in six years' time. There are some who say that we should put our fingers in our ears and leave it alone, which you are saying we cannot do, and I agree with you. In the unlikely event that you are Secretary of State in six years' time, bearing in mind that you are the 10th in 10 years—there is a churn in this role; that is a matter of fact—where is your mind between those two positions. Anathema or fingers in ears; where would you say you are?

Ms Dorries: I will repeat what I have already said about the foothills of change. I think that gigabit broadband is going to open up, and 5G. Actually, we are already discussing moving on further into super-computing and further up than gigabit. I think that just opens up massive opportunities for what people can have streaming down to their homes. There will be tech entertainment companies and others that will be working right now on how they maximise what is going to be national gigabit broadband coverage, how they are going to maximise that, and how they are going to make money from it in terms of producing content to be streamed into people's homes.

We are at the foothills of that, as I have said. We cannot see what it is going to look like, but we know that we are putting the infrastructure in place, and it is therefore, I would say, 99% likely to happen. I would be very surprised if it did not. Within that context, part of it is, "Right, we need to tread carefully and see what is happening," but the other part is,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

“We need to look at public service broadcasting; how is it going to compete, and how it is going to survive in that future environment?”

Steve Brine: Sarah, I did not mean to cut you out. Please do come in.

Sarah Healey: That is fine. All I would say is to underline the fact that we conducted a review on decriminalisation of the licence fee, and it remains open to Ministers to decide to proceed with that. As the Secretary of State set out, the actual fundamental changes to the licence fee are not possible until the point of charter review in 2027.

Q188 **Steve Brine:** While I have the floor—time is tight—I want to ask you about the Brit awards, Secretary of State, which I attended this year and last. They made an announcement yesterday that they are no longer, from next year, going to be doing best male and best female. I wonder if you have a view on that. There is a clear read-across there, to the BAFTAs, to the Oscars, isn't there? Should there be best actor and best actress awards? What is your view on that decision by the Brit awards?

Ms Dorries: I have to say that this is the first that I am aware of it. I think it sounds quite a sad decision. I would like to see how that would work in terms of fair gender representation.

Q189 **Steve Brine:** The argument that they gave is that it excludes non-binary artists, and therefore, for next year, they will just have the one category; they will combine them.

Ms Dorries: Again, I cannot give an opinion on that, because hearing it from you is the first that I have heard about it. Women have been used to, for a very long time—if you look at who used to win awards for novels and many things in the past—men always dominating, and my concern would be that women were not fairly represented moving forwards. I would just be concerned on the gender balance issue. Although we know that we will get best female artist, best female producer, best female whatever, I would be concerned that in the future, women were not fairly represented in those awards.

Q190 **Chair:** Secretary of State, do you recognise that, as Mr Whittingdale said in his last hearing before us, the decision to row back on the super gigabit broadband target effectively means that the licence fee is here to stay for the long term, because you cannot turn off the licence fee if not everyone is able to receive super gigabit broadband-capable broadcast?

Ms Dorries: I do not know when Mr Whittingdale gave evidence, but as you know, we were on 9% gigabit roll-out two years ago. We passed the 60% mark last Monday. We are moving very fast. We have just procured a whole new challenge—I think it is 5 million homes—to move out the next section now. We are moving very quickly.

Q191 **Chair:** You are not going to be at the target, though: 100% by 2025 is not going to be met. That has been admitted on the Floor of the House.

Ms Dorries: I would not say that. I would not agree with you. There are things happening, including tech-wise in terms of what is happening in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

OpenRAN, 5G and lots of areas. On this idea that the tough 15%—people living on a hill farm in the dales somewhere, on a peak in Scotland or Wales, on top of Snowdon or wherever it is—are not going to be able to have it, you are talking about 2025, and, again, I say things are moving very quickly. I was interested to see what happens in Switzerland, where of course the vast majority of homes are remote and on a very undulating geographical landscape, but in Switzerland, again, they have 85% roll-out. If they can do it—

Q192 **Chair:** Lucky Switzerland, but it is not about the effectiveness—

Ms Dorries: It is how it is delivered, and the technology is changing very rapidly as to how we can deliver. I think it is really important at this point to say—because not a lot of people know this—that in the Peak district today, five individuals in five rooms in one house, as a result of superfast broadband, can download five Netflix movies at once. It is important to talk about where we are and the capability people do have, and we are at 92%.

Sarah Healey: It is 97%.

Ms Dorries: Yes, 97% of the country on superfast broadband. That is quite a lot of capability that people have going into their homes; in fact, people say that they cannot actually use the whole width of their superfast broadband, but of course, what gigabit is important to is the future. It is important to the 5G network; it is important to that landscape we were talking about—what tech companies can do with that capability.

Where I live, my village has gigabit capability. There is only one person in the village who is signed up to it, who is a graphic designer. The rest of us are all using superfast broadband—of course, I will be signing up very soon, but everybody else is using superfast broadband, so I think it is important to talk about what we have at the moment and the capability people have in their homes, which is 95% of the country on superfast broadband. It is a pretty dysfunctional family that wants to download five Netflix movies in five different rooms, but that is the ability that people have today.

Q193 **Chair:** Just to row back two minutes, if I may, are you recommitting the Government to the 100% target?

Ms Dorries: What I am saying is that the target is 85% coverage.

Q194 **Chair:** The election target was 100%, and then it was effectively cut to 85%.

Ms Dorries: That is our ambition.

Chair: It is your ambition. You did say that we were wrong, and that actually you thought that 100% by 2025—

Ms Dorries: No, it is our ambition to have gigabit broadband in as many homes as possible as fast as possible. We are, of course, hampered by the number of hands we can get on to shovels and the number of skilled



HOUSE OF COMMONS

people we can have with telecommunications skills. In fact, I think Minister Lopez recently went to visit a new training school, and I am opening a new training school. Providers are opening training schools as fast as they can to get people in and skill them up on the telecommunications skills, getting people on shovels to actually put the trenches in the ground. It is not that we cannot go fast enough: the workforce to be able to deliver gigabit broadband across the country to 100% of homes is one of the issues, as well as the geographical location of some of the homes. It is not that the Government do not want to get 100% broadband—

Chair: No, but we promised it. It was an election promise. Julie Elliott.

Q195 **Julie Elliott:** Again—I just want to comment on this—please do not forget dark spots in city centres. It is not all just rural uphill where people are not connected. In this building, for instance, we do not have brilliant connectivity.

Ms Dorries: And, actually, in some blocks of flats where a landlord is in the Cayman Islands, and the provider is trying to get in and not getting a response.

Julie Elliott: Blocks of flats, industrial estates, private homes—

Ms Dorries: But we are doing something about that.

Q196 **Julie Elliott:** Please don't lose sight of it.

I want to go back to public service broadcasting and particularly Channel 4—a hugely successful and profitable company. If the decision is made to privatise, is the Department concerned about some of the commitments to public service broadcasting loss-making programming, such as news and current affairs? Is there any concern as to how that will be kept if it is privatised?

Ms Dorries: I haven't even evaluated that, because I have not made a decision.

Q197 **Julie Elliott:** It is not about making the decision. It is about how you—

Ms Dorries: I am waiting for the evaluation of the consultation, which will be given to me in a report. I am waiting till I have that evidence, and I am waiting till I have taken other evidence, which includes your report, in detail. I am waiting till I have all that information before me. As part of the evaluation, that will be considered, because it will go into the decision-making mix.

Q198 **Julie Elliott:** There are a couple of things. If the decision is to privatise, and Channel 4 is sold or privatised in whatever form, and then, two years down the line, it is sold on again, how will you make sure that commitments to public service broadcasting are kept?

Ms Dorries: Well, I will ask Sarah to answer that question, because I haven't got to the point of evaluating that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sarah Healey: This goes back to the answer that the Secretary of State gave earlier about the remit of Channel 4 and the obligations that we would place on any purchaser. Depending on how you put those obligations on, they also follow on to any future purchaser of Channel 4. The remit of the broadcaster is the issue and, as I said earlier, Ministers have been clear that it is not about removing the remit, but it may be about reviewing it.

Q199 **Julie Elliott:** If you go down that line, will the Government ensure that commitments to public service broadcasting will be maintained, whoever owns it—one sale on, two sales on, or 50 sales on?

Sarah Healey: Ministers have been clear that their intention is that Channel 4 is sold as a public service broadcaster, so that is what the obligations would need to make clear.

Q200 **Julie Elliott:** We have talked a lot about regional programming and programming in Wales, but there are also a lot of jobs being moved to the north of England, particularly around the Leeds area. What commitments will the Government be looking for, if the privatisation happens, to keep those jobs in those areas?

Ms Dorries: Again, that is a hypothetical question for me, because I haven't got to that point yet.

Q201 **Julie Elliott:** You haven't got to the point of making the decision, but—

Ms Dorries: I haven't got to the point of the report from the consultation, looking at the evidence, reading the Select Committee's report and speaking to the many organisations and people involved. That will be part of the evaluation process, and it will be fully considered. The impact of privatisation will be considered in the context of the move to Leeds and what is happening in Leeds. That is obviously a very important issue, because what is also important to me is the fact that it has moved to Leeds, it is out in the regions and it is not in London. That is an important consideration, but it is not one that—

Q202 **Julie Elliott:** It is still down south, but we will let you off.

Ms Dorries: To you. It is up north to me.

Q203 **Julie Elliott:** So you will consider that at that point.

Ms Dorries: Yes. It will absolutely be evaluated.

Q204 **Simon Jupp:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State, and thank you for joining us. I am really concerned about the state of local journalism. I am a former local journalist myself—I mentioned at the start of this meeting that I worked for the BBC and ITV in a previous life. Nowadays, many local newspapers have closed. Those that are left have a skeletal staff—maybe one person running a newsroom. It is very difficult to keep on top of local stories. One of the things that needs to be protected is BBC local radio and television services. I will use a recent example, from yesterday: BBC Essex, the local radio station for that county, covered the memorial service for David Amess in minute-by-minute coverage. It was impressive



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and cannot be done by any other broadcaster; a commercial operator simply would not do it. That is the role that these services can provide, if done well. I have Radio Devon and “Spotlight” to hold me to account in my patch, and that is valuable. It is a bit weird being the other side of the microphone nowadays, but it is important.

Yet whenever the axe is wielded at the BBC, it is the services closest to those who pay the licence fee that always seem to face the salami slicer first. In your discussions with the BBC about the future of the corporation, how much has local radio and local television featured? What are your thoughts—in any discussions about future policy, the future framework of the BBC—about protecting those services that cannot be provided commercially?

Ms Dorries: I do not know whether you are aware, but I wrote an op-ed recently on the importance of local journalism. You are quite right: local journalism plays an important role. You gave the really sad example of David’s funeral, but there are many people within society who depend on their local newspapers and local TV channels to know what is happening locally and to know what is going on in their community. Those are a really important cohesive element of local communities and, even on a wider basis, in local regions. It is incredibly important.

To put this into historical context, just in case you are thinking, “You wrote that op-ed because you came into this job and you thought it was the right thing to do,” a number of years ago when I was a fairly new Back Bencher, the BBC—I cannot remember the exact context in which it was doing this—was doing something that was going to really crowd out local newspapers online because of the dominance of BBC content. I remember lots of local newspapers coming down to Parliament, going to Downing Street and coming to talk to MPs to campaign for local news content not to be crowded out by the bigger giants of public service broadcasting, because it is incredibly important to communities.

I think we have done quite a bit. You asked a specific question, and I cannot talk about what we are doing in the discussions or what is being discussed. The best way for me to answer your question is slightly similar to the way I answered Alex’s question. What happens at a regional and local level, and moving things out of London, is really important to me, and it is part of the ethos within the Department. The best way for me to answer your question is to reassure you that regional and local news is certainly very important.

Q205 **Simon Jupp:** You have an opportunity through the discussions you are having with the BBC to say to them that the services closest to those who pay for them, those that are not in London—those based in places like Plymouth, Bristol and Southampton—should be protected, because they are closest and they reflect the communities that pay the licence fee in the first place. Surely that must feature in your discussions with the BBC.

Ms Dorries: It very much features in our ongoing discussions. Obviously I cannot talk to you about what we are discussing at the moment, but that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

very much features. Local news and local television feature very much as part of the discussion.

Q206 **Simon Jupp:** You mentioned local papers coming to Westminster many years ago, and I would love to know how many of those local newspapers still exist.

Ms Dorries: Actually, that is interesting, because the one I was campaigning for has since gone.

Q207 **Simon Jupp:** Local newspapers in my region have closed in the last couple of years, too.

Ms Dorries: We know. The sustainability of the press and local news is an incredibly important issue. I think we have lost, is it 30% of journalists over the last 10 years? Journalism and news reporting, as a career and as an important function of society, are obviously against what is coming down via online platforms such as Facebook, which are almost competing by carrying news and information. We are in that kind of environment now where local news, news itself, and journalism as a profession, and therefore our democracy, are slightly undermined. What do we depend on as a democracy to inform us and to provide us with the news? It is very much journalism and local news, and I think the sustainability of the press is very much an issue that is going to come on to the horizon in the future.

Q208 **Simon Jupp:** We have discussed, and other colleagues have brought up during the session, potential thoughts about bias when it comes to the BBC. Do you have the same concerns about local BBC services as you do about some of the national services and its national output? Do you think there is a bias there, too?

Ms Dorries: Because we are in discussions at the moment, all I will say is that the BBC accepts that it has a problem with impartiality. Those are the BBC's words, not mine. It hasn't said, "We have a problem with impartiality in London." It has said there is a problem with impartiality in the BBC. Taking that a step further, I would imagine that the answer to your question is yes, but that is based on what the BBC has said, not what I am saying.

Q209 **Simon Jupp:** One of your predecessors in the Department introduced the local democracy reporting service, a fantastic scheme that means that there are still journalists going to council meetings to pick up on those Jackie Weaver moments that we have all found engaging.

Ms Dorries: Thanks, Jackie Weaver!

Simon Jupp: Journalists from local newspapers used to go to these meetings and sit through endless planning consultations and things like that.

Ms Dorries: For hours and hours.

Simon Jupp: Following the demise of local newspapers, the local democracy reporting service plays a crucial role. Do you think that role will



be made stronger? Could it be enhanced?

Ms Dorries: I would say yes; I do not see why it could not or should not be. That was the training ground for journalists, wasn't it—sitting in those village halls, night after night, and reporting the minutes of those meetings in their local newspaper the next day? Gosh, we are harking back to a time—it makes you feel very old—that doesn't exist any more. I think the same thing happens to a degree through the citizen journalist, but there is the issue of the monitoring of citizen journalism; the misinformation, disinformation and bias—that whole issue—needs to be questioned.

When it comes to local democracy and local reporting, we need a revival. Can we have a revival of journalism? They were the good old days of honest reporting that was not overlaid with or filtered through opinion, which is something we see a lot of now.

Q210 **Simon Jupp:** Finally from me, earlier this year, you told *The Daily Telegraph* that the BBC needs “a less elitist and a less snobbish approach” to recruitment. I am sitting in front of you in this Committee as a Conservative MP, but I was not educated privately, and I didn't bother with university; I spent seven years with the BBC and became one of the youngest managers in BBC local radio. Now that you have your feet under the table, are a bit more into the role, and presumably have met more people from the BBC, do you still feel the same way?

Ms Dorries: I think the figures speak for themselves. The proportion of people they employ from professional and managerial backgrounds is at, I think, 70-something per cent. The proportion from working-class backgrounds is, I think, 20-something per cent.—actually, that could be Channel 4. I can get the numbers up while we are talking. The BBC accepts that this is an issue that it has to deal with.

That is very much the ethos that I have brought to the Department. If you were to ask, “What changes have you brought to it, as Secretary of State?”, that is very much it for me. It is about ensuring that everybody from every background has access to the arts, whether it is music, theatre or sport, because things are different from how they were. When I grew up in the '60s, somebody I grew up with on my very deprived council estate in Liverpool went on to be Cher's music producer, and people went into the theatre. If you wanted to, you could. I remember my drama teacher, Mrs Lyons, getting me an audition at the Elliott-Clarke school of dance and drama and telling me about it on a Saturday morning, but I couldn't go because I didn't have the bus fare; but if you had the bus fare, you could move on.

Now, kids from where I grew up would never dream of being a journalist. They wouldn't think there was an opportunity for them. Theatres are not places that they go to—or museums, or any element of the creative industries or the arts. They just don't think that those opportunities of employment or enjoyment are open to them. That is something that we very much have to change. I would put journalism in there, too.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The BBC is doing work on apprentices. Through our discussions, I hope we get to a position where it will do more. What ITV is doing is very interesting; it is considering reopening a training school for apprentices. Getting people from those backgrounds into those sectors is incredibly important. Anything I can do while I am Secretary of State to facilitate that, I will.

Q211 **Chair:** Just to follow up on the question over local democracy reporting, that obviously is a BBC decision, as it is BBC funded. How will you actually see that that is expanded? Is that something you will be discussing with the BBC? Will it be a pre-requisite of the licence fee settlement?

Ms Dorries: I think that is something that is going to be part of the mid-term review and the framework agreement. I don't think it is coming in as part of discussions on the licence fee. When we start the mid-term review discussions next year, we will be discussing the fee.

Q212 **Chair:** You want to see that included in the mid-term review?

Ms Dorries: It is incredibly important. It is part of regional news. It is part of exactly what I have just spoken to—to getting people in.

Q213 **Chair:** I am conscious of time, so I will move on to John in one second. You have used the term "London-centric" quite often during your evidence. Are you going to lead by example? Are we going to see DCMS following the example of the CMA and its digital markets unit and moving to the Treasury campus? Are we going to see DCMS civil servants moving out of London?

Sarah Healey: Do you want me to answer that?

Chair: No, it was for the Secretary of State.

Ms Dorries: Do I see the civil service moving out of London? That is not my decision. I do not run the civil service. Sarah runs the Department.

Q214 **Chair:** Do you want to see that happen? Would you encourage it?

Ms Dorries: I think it is happening in a huge number of Departments. Moving out of London is a really good thing.

Q215 **Chair:** But DCMS?

Sarah Healey: We have opened an office in Manchester, and we have employed staff there.

Q216 **Chair:** Is that part of the digital markets unit in Manchester?

Sarah Healey: No, this is DCMS staff in an office in Manchester. We are also exploring whether we can open in other locations as well. As a major economic Department, we are clearly interested in becoming part of the Government's economic campus as well.

Chair: Thank you. John Nicolson.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q217 **John Nicolson:** Let us stick with the BBC and broadcasting. I think it is worth remembering that the BBC director-general is a former Conservative party candidate, and the BBC chair is a major donor to the Conservative party. I am a journalist, and I am passionate about journalism. You said that you did not know whether the BBC would still be in existence in 10 years' time. I thought that was an extraordinary thing to say. Do you really not know whether the BBC will still be going in 10 years' time?

Ms Dorries: I don't think it is an extraordinary answer. It was an extraordinary question, which was, "Do you think the licence fee will still be here in 10 years?" How can I know?

Q218 **John Nicolson:** I am not talking about the licence fee. I am talking about the BBC.

Ms Dorries: I am telling you what the question was that I answered, and the question was, "Do you think the licence fee will still be here?" My answer was, "How can I possibly know? I don't have a crystal ball. How do I even know if the BBC is going to be going in 10 years?"

Q219 **John Nicolson:** Actually, the exact quote—I have it in front of me—was: "I can't look into the future. Will the BBC still be here in 10 years? I don't know." You were not talking just about the licence fee, but about the existence of the corporation.

Ms Dorries: Well, I don't know, do I? Neither do you. Neither do any of us.

Q220 **John Nicolson:** I think I would stake a significant amount of money on the BBC still being in existence in 10 years' time. It would be a tragedy were it not. You said that soon after the "Today" presenter Nick Robinson—a former chair of the Young Conservatives, I might add—had clashed with the Prime Minister. You will remember that Mr Johnson tried to give one of his just-a-minute incredibly long answers and Nick Robinson stepped in. *The Times* reported that you said that Nick Robinson has cost the BBC a lot of money, which sounds threatening. Could you put on record what you meant by that?

Ms Dorries: I didn't say that.

Q221 **John Nicolson:** So *The Times* is wrong?

Ms Dorries: I didn't hear the interview. I didn't see the interview. I have never commented on what Nick Robinson said.

Q222 **John Nicolson:** That is very clear; so *The Times* has misreported that.

Ms Dorries: Can I also just say for the purpose of minute-taking on this meeting, I am very sure the BBC will be here in 10 years. My point is—

Q223 **John Nicolson:** Oh, really? That is the fastest U-turn I have ever heard, even by this Government's standards.

Ms Dorries: My point is that I don't have a crystal ball, and I don't know any more than anybody else in this room does.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q224 **John Nicolson:** None of us has a crystal ball; that is a truism. You called the BBC “left wing”, “hypocritical”, “patronising” and more in keeping with “a Soviet-style country”. Did you ever visit and Soviet-style country and watch the broadcasting there?

Ms Dorries: Yes.

Q225 **John Nicolson:** And you think it is like the BBC?

Ms Dorries: I am not going to answer questions about tweets that I posted 12 years ago, or whenever it was.

John Nicolson: It is hard to keep track of your tweets.

Ms Dorries: Not as hard as it is to keep track of yours.

John Nicolson: It was quoted in the *Daily Mail* last month. Only the other day, in your capacity as—

Ms Dorries: It might have been quoted in the *Daily Mail* last month. That does not mean I posted it last month.

Q226 **John Nicolson:** Not a hostile publication, though. Only the other day, in your capacity as Culture Secretary, you tweeted at Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC’s political editor, attacking a tweet she had sent. The word you used was “ridiculous”. Do you regret the fact that you tweeted at her?

Ms Dorries: I did not tweet at her.

John Nicolson: You copied her into the tweet.

Ms Dorries: I quote-tweeted her. My point was not that Laura’s tweet was ridiculous. Laura is one of the best, most professional journalists in the business. She has been here a very long time and is probably the best journalist in the business. I realise that some people do not have the ability to interpret a short number of characters in the way that they are intended, which is actually the reason why I deleted it. What I was saying was that the message she had been sent, which she was quoting, was ridiculous, not that Laura is ridiculous.

Q227 **John Nicolson:** Actually, the wording you used was, “You must realise this is ridiculous.” Regardless of the exact words that you used, in your capacity as Culture Secretary, and given how much trouble you’ve got into over your tweets in the past, you must realise that it is inappropriate for you to tackle the BBC’s political editor about the content of a report or one of her tweets?

Ms Dorries: “Attack” is a word you use a lot. I would not call it an attack at all.

Q228 **John Nicolson:** All right. You called everyone who works at the *Daily Mirror*—presumably both women and men—“bottom-feeding scum”.

Ms Dorries: How many years ago was that?

Q229 **John Nicolson:** That was 2013. There is a continuity, unless you are saying that everything you have ever written or said previously has to be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

discounted because there is a statute of limitations? We hear that for very young people. Teenagers, for example, are allowed to say inappropriate things. You were not a teenager when you sent that. You have a history of attacking journalists. I will leave aside your testicle tweet, because we discussed that quite recently. However, you tweeted LBC's James O'Brien, as we know, calling him a "public school posh boy f*** wit." That would fall into the category of abuse, would it not, under your own online safety legislation?

Ms Dorries: Chairman, I am not going to answer any of these questions. I find them to be personal attacks.

Chair: I will say one thing. I questioned John very closely on this. The one relevant point about this is the fact that you are Secretary of State, and should the online harms legislation come to pass in the way in which it seems it will, you will have enormous power, particularly on sign-off and secondary legislative power, so I think it is very credible.

Ms Dorries: Okay, I will answer. I think it is important that I perhaps answer— Mr Nicolson is quite right; he asked me about the journalist tweets in the past, and I will answer that for the purpose of this Committee. I sent that tweet when my daughter's neighbour told me a journalist was outside the house photographing her in the house and had followed her on a dog walk down a path. That was the mother who sent that tweet—

John Nicolson: Yes, but that was nothing to do with James O'Brien.

Ms Dorries: I know you don't want to hear my answer, but I request the right to give it—

John Nicolson: That was not about James O'Brien. That was a different issue. That was a *Mirror* journalist, I think.

Chair: Let the Secretary of State answer the question.

Ms Dorries: I will answer that next. It was the mother Nadine Dorries who posted that tweet. My daughter's neighbour opposite said they were trying to ring my daughter because there was a journalist outside the house photographing her in the house and he had just followed her on the dog walk. I sent that tweet after that. Frankly, I would expect any mother who was distressed to do that. On the James O'Brien tweet—

Q230 **John Nicolson:** I wouldn't, I don't think. I think a lot of mothers sitting listening to this will not welcome the implication that, because they are trying to protect their children, they are allowed to send abusive tweets. I know you used that argument in a previous Committee. However, as I said, that is nothing to do with James O'Brien, so let us move on to your various tweets to him.

Ms Dorries: Because we do know that you love your pile-on tweets and what have you. If you search the number of times I have tweeted James O'Brien, I think you might find it is two. If you search the number of times James O'Brien has persistently tweeted me, to the point where 18 months to two years ago my office had to write to Global, complaining that his



HOUSE OF COMMONS

behaviour was stepping into the realms of harassment—that was the point at which I sent that tweet. If you search James O’Brien’s tweets of me—

John Nicolson: I have searched that.

Ms Dorries: Including the ones that he has deleted?

Q231 **John Nicolson:** At the other Committee you said that you had responded to abuse from him. I have searched that and I cannot find this abuse that you talk about, but I have found you asking for James O’Brien to get the sack. You also implied that he had mental health problems. You said, “I don’t think he is a well man... He needs removing from his platform of abuse”. In a separate tweet you said, “I...have had to email his employer a number of times.” I do not think it is appropriate for you, as a politician, to be trying to get somebody the sack. But let us move on to another tweet that you sent—

Ms Dorries: Can I answer that?

John Nicolson: Please do.

Ms Dorries: Chairman, what I would say is that, along with a number of female politicians, I am subjected to a small number of men who tweet about me obsessively, aggressively and unpleasantly, and James O’Brien is one of them.

Q232 **John Nicolson:** Well, I can’t find those tweets that you mention. Here is something that you did retweet about him, and I will quote it: “I believe James O’Brien of LBC fame is a Hate preacher, a liar, a misogynist, a UK hater & an apologist for Islamist atrocities.” You are in no position to talk about James O’Brien saying offensive things about you. You tweeted that. Apart from being actionable and defamatory, it is grotesque. *[Interruption.]* I am glad you agree.

Ms Dorries: I don’t agree with you and I am not here—

John Nicolson: Do you think that is appropriate?

Ms Dorries: I haven’t come here today to answer about tweets that I sent years ago. I do understand the context in my role as a Secretary of State, but, as I said, as a female politician I quite often—

John Nicolson: It is nothing to do with being a female politician.

Ms Dorries: As many females do, I quite often have to respond assertively to numerous aggressive, unpleasant tweets. Looking at your own tweet history, I wouldn’t say that was something to be particularly proud of either.

Q233 **John Nicolson:** Oh, you’ll find no abuse in my tweet history, otherwise I am sure you would have produced it today. I don’t think it is a defence—

Ms Dorries: I am actually—

John Nicolson: There is no abuse in my tweet history. I don’t think it is a defence to say that because you are a woman you are allowed to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

accuse people of being Islamic atrocity supporters. That does a grave disservice to women politicians. Quite apart from the fact that you hold enormous power in this current role, do you think it is appropriate that somebody who behaves so consistently in an intemperate way should be in charge of online safety legislation in the way that you are going to be? You have a pattern, going back many years, of saying things that are inappropriate, tweeting things that are inappropriate and often deleting them.

Ms Dorries: I am not going to answer that question. That is nothing to do with my role as Secretary of State or with DCMS.

John Nicolson: Well, I think it is. Chair.

Chair: Kevin Brennan.

Q234 **Kevin Brennan:** Welcome, Secretary of State, and congratulations on your appointment. Earlier on, you were talking in a way that may have resonated with a number of people, about the need for those opportunities that were once there in the arts and culture to be available to working class kids today. My brother's experience would be very similar in that he is a professional actor, but he got his first opportunity through getting a discretionary grant from his local authority to be able to attend drama school. Would you support that kind of initiative, bringing back those kinds of opportunities through local authority funding, to help talented working-class kids to get into some of the top drama schools? These days, they often require a fee just to do an audition.

Ms Dorries: That is really important. How do we do it? Do we do it through local authority grant funding? Do we do it by setting a narrative? I went to the Young Vic this week, which does lots of outreach programmes for kids from underprivileged backgrounds. I went to see a rehearsal, and I spoke to some of the young people working in the theatre, from costume to production, from acting to mentoring programmes. The theatres themselves are reaching out to those communities.

Q235 **Kevin Brennan:** There is a huge amount of cultural capital in a place like London for that kind of opportunity to happen for working-class kids, which is not true in other parts of the country. Opportunity is not evenly distributed.

Ms Dorries: No. That is exactly why I am looking at things like Arts Council funding, 40% of which is spent on 6 million people in London and 60% of which is spent out in the regions. It is looking at that balance, where the funding is spent and what is happening in terms of outreach programmes. That is one area that I am looking at.

Yes, local authority funding. From the day I arrived in the Department—I think it was in my first all-staff address—I gave an instruction that every policy that we sign off, everything we do, needs to have a filter laid over it: does it help children and young people from socially deprived backgrounds to access the areas that we are responsible for, which includes art, culture, theatre, digital—everything? Are we doing what we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

can to facilitate that? To me, that is what levelling up is about. It is about people.

Q236 **Kevin Brennan:** That sounds very welcome, but of course the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Will you commit to making a statement to the House or coming before the Committee, once you have had a chance to get your civil servants to come up with the plans to achieve real results of that kind—I know that it does not happen overnight—to lay out some kind of clear plan for how you are going to do that?

Ms Dorries: We are actually discussing that now.

Q237 **Kevin Brennan:** Sarah, is that something that you have—

Sarah Healey: Obviously, we are contributing to processes of levelling up across government, but also the Secretary of State has asked the Department to work up how we can contribute to her goal as well as think about it in everything that we do. I am sure that we would be happy to talk to the Committee about it in future.

Q238 **Kevin Brennan:** Have you had a chance to look at this Committee's report on the economics of music streaming, which was published earlier this year? Do you agree with the Committee about the need for action to help musicians?

Ms Dorries: I have looked at it. One of your recommendations was that the CMA look at the dominance of the three main music producers in the space. One of the first decisions I made was to ask the CMA to look at that as a priority in view of the timescales that the CMA operates on. I also asked it to look at the IPO in terms of copyright issues. While that is happening, I am talking to lots of people in the sector, including not only artists but the other side. Just last week I met a number of representatives of artists and musicians. I am quite shocked by some of the stories that they tell. Diana Ross is still gigging to make money, for example. Some of the stories are incredible.

I think the Committee said in the report that we have to be careful what measures we introduce because we could hurt other musicians in the process. We are looking carefully at what we do and how, while the IPO and the CMA are doing their work. We are also doing work in the Department and we have told the CMA to prioritise the recommendation in the report. We will see where we get to.

Q239 **Kevin Brennan:** I am glad that you have met some artists. Often Secretaries of State only get to meet the big umbrella bodies and so on. Would you be willing to meet the Broken Record Campaign run by Tom Gray, a fellow Merseysider—you might have something in common—who is from Gomez as well as the Musicians' Union and the Ivors Academy to discuss their perspective? Sometimes it feels as if the Government's doors are not as open to them as they might be to some of the larger players.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ms Dorries: Absolutely. If you want to arrange that through the Department, I am very happy to do it. In fact, I think they may already be in the system for a meeting to be arranged.

Can I just ask, Mr Chairman, if you have points of order in a Select Committee?

Chair: Yes, of course.

Ms Dorries: Mr Nicolson told me that he never tweeted abuse. Having been the Minister for Mental Health for two years, I do take objection to him in 2017 having tweeted that I was unstable. I find that highly offensive. *[Interruption.]* Well, he asked for evidence and I thought I would present it.

Chair: That has been put on the record. We have very limited time. Kevin Brennan.

Kevin Brennan: I wonder if I might just pursue my line of questioning—

Ms Dorries: I am sorry, Mr Brennan, but I was asked the question, so I thought I should.

Kevin Brennan: And I am sure that there will be plenty more tweeting later on.

Ms Dorries: And who cares?

Q240 **Kevin Brennan:** I want to get to some policy substance; obviously, that is what I am driving at. I am glad you made that commitment to meet those representatives.

You will be aware that I have got a private Member's Bill, which will have its Second Reading in the House of Commons, and which is based largely on the recommendations that this Select Committee made in relation to the economics of music streaming. It will be published overnight, so I am aware that you have not had a chance to read it fully, and it will be available.

The Government have so far indicated that they are not inclined to support any legislation in this area at this time; I acknowledge that they have not ruled it out entirely. But will you undertake to have a look at the Bill when it is published?

Ms Dorries: Absolutely. And I am aware of your Bill.

Q241 **Kevin Brennan:** And will you undertake to be a champion for musicians, songwriters and other creators in the time you have in that role, however long or short that may be—we have discussed the lifespan of Secretaries of State. But are you prepared to make that commitment?

Ms Dorries: You might be disappointed with me; I might be here for a while.

Q242 **Kevin Brennan:** Well, if you become a champion for musicians, songwriters and creators, and you produce far more opportunities for working-class children in the arts and culture, then you won't have any



HOUSE OF COMMONS

argument from me—if it is more than a one-night stand, which I am afraid is what it has been from the Government for the last decade or so, as far as being Secretary of State for DCMS is concerned.

Ms Dorries: I totally understand that. And I am aware of your commitment to musicians—struggling musicians and those musicians who are not being paid—and I am aware of your Bill. I am happy to look at it and to give you time on this.

I should declare my interest—I know this was mentioned at the beginning—because I am an author, so I really understand the concept of being paid for content. I am quite lucky; my books sell quite well and I have no complaints. But because I also work in that field, I am aware of many authors who struggle incredibly, both to be paid for their content and to sustain the right amount of ongoing royalties and payments that they are paid.

I know that it is a different world, but the principle is the same and I am very aware of it, so I am really happy to give you time and talk to you about this.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful for that; thank you, Secretary of State. Can I just ask Sarah a question?

Chair: Order. Just to clarify, at this point Sarah Connolly has joined us. She is director of security and online harms at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Q243 **Kevin Brennan:** I should say “Permanent Secretary” rather than “Sarah”, as there are two Sarahs in front of us.

Do you think of yourself as part of “the Blob”? And do you own a Peloton exercise bike? I mean, on a serious point, what did you make of what Paul Dacre said about you to the press, following his withdrawal from the appointment process for chair of Ofcom?

Sarah Healey: I think the only thing that I would say in response to that question is that I am really proud of what everybody in DCMS does to support Ministers. I think they are an incredibly professional Department. I think they work exceptionally hard. They are very, very committed to what they do. I know that that is how the Secretary of State feels and how the former Secretary of State felt about the support that they received—

Q244 **Kevin Brennan:** Do you agree with that, Secretary of State?

Ms Dorries: May I just say this for the record? Sarah and the civil servants in my Department—absolutely 100% support for Sarah. May I also just say that I think that comment about Sarah exercising on her Peloton, which is the subject of many jokes in the Department—you know, there were many male permanent secretaries who went for their jog each morning, or for their cycle ride, or walked their dog? Nobody has anything to say about that.

Kevin Brennan: Do you think Paul Dacre is a misogynist then?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Okay, Kevin, we will have to move on from there. There is such a thing as MAMILs, as they would probably be described—the male permanent secretaries who are going cycling.

Kevin Brennan: Chair, leaving that aside, may I briefly introduce a final point on the online harms Bill as we go on to it?

Chair: One minute.

Kevin Brennan: It is a one-minute question. Secretary of State, you may not have had the chance, as it has only just come out, but there is an all-party parliamentary group on the future of work report about algorithms and their impact, and the harm that they can bring to people's wellbeing at work. I would just ask that you undertake to make sure that you familiarise yourself with its recommendations and perhaps incorporate some of them, if you can, into your thinking on the online harms Bill.

Chair: That is not a question.

Q245 **Alex Davies-Jones:** On the Online Safety Bill, you have mentioned this morning that you have been a victim of misogyny, targeted harassment and abuse. We know that women and girls are subject to that on a daily basis—it is horrendous. You are in a position of power now. As a victim of it yourself, what can you do as a solution to stop it happening and to protect women and girls from atrocious online abuse?

Ms Dorries: If you look at the online harms Bill and the measures we are taking, there are three buckets to it. The protection of children and young people is the most important. That is the fundamental element of the Bill that has to be right—protecting children and young people.

The other two buckets are legal but harmful content and misogyny, harassment and ongoing abuse, which is something that I have been subjected to since 2000—and whenever it was when Twitter and social media first launched. It always tends to be, particularly with female MPs, a few who continue the unpleasant output. I will ask Sarah Connolly to qualify anything that I am saying, because she has been working on the Bill since its origination.

That will all be captured in there, because that is legal for someone to tweet, but it is harmful. If it is harmful and it causes psychological harm or personal injury, which is not so relevant, we will expect platforms to take action immediately. If you look at the terms and conditions of these platforms, they are arbiters of ensuring that people do not suffer from psychological, physical or any other kind of harm.

Q246 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Before you bring Sarah Connolly in, the Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee that he would be willing to ensure that violence against women and girls was added to the Bill, specifically recognising the impact that women and girls experience online—

Ms Dorries: It is in the scope of the Bill already. It is in there already. Can I just say something, Alex, to reassure you again? When I arrived in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Department eight weeks ago, the Bill was in its draft form which is what you have all seen and worked on. It is in a different place now from what it was eight weeks ago. A huge amount of work has been done and more work is to be done. I am waiting for the recommendations from your Sub-Committee and from the Joint Committee. There is more work to be done.

It will be in a much tougher and stronger place, particularly around protecting children and young people, but also on the point that you have mentioned. I am very aware of the pile-ons that are often on women, the abuse that is often focused on women and the harassment that is focused on women. I am probably the only Secretary of State who is as aware of that—totally aware of that—having been subjected to it myself. Online platforms have the ability to stop that now, they just choose not to. The Bill will ensure that they do.

Q247 Alex Davies-Jones: I am glad to hear that the Bill will be in a different place in eight weeks' time, because at present, some of the platforms that you have mentioned fall into category 1, but the vast majority of platforms do not fall into that category and they contain the majority of misogyny, racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and abuse. Platforms such as Telegram, OnlyFans, 8chan, 4chan, BitTube—the list goes on and on—are currently out of scope of the Bill.

Ms Dorries: I will ask Sarah Connolly to come in, because my information is that the majority of abuse actually takes place on the main platforms that are in category 1, which is why they are in category 1, because that is where most of the abuse takes place. This is not a Christmas tree Bill where you can just put everything on it, but my information is that the majority of abuse takes place on the category 1 platforms. That has been evaluated and looked at very carefully. Sarah, would you like to take that over?

Sarah Connolly: I think the Secretary of State is absolutely right. There is a high-risk or high-reach point that we want to make sure that we capture. That is the test—high risk or high reach. I think that quite a lot of the platforms that you just name-checked would fall under the scope of the Bill—certainly as user-generated content platforms. Whether or not they are category 1, and whether or not the legal but harmful provisions apply to them, will be decided by Ofcom and the Department working together to determine what should fall under that. Some of the platforms that you name-checked would certainly merit looking at carefully in that respect.

Q248 Alex Davies-Jones: Nobody wants a Christmas tree Bill—we want a Bill that is actually going to work. That is the worry—

Ms Dorries: So do I. There is no point taking a Bill to Parliament that is not going to work. What would be the point? We are not putting all this hard work into trying to make the online environment safer—to protect women and girls, and particularly to protect children and young people—just to go to Parliament to find out it is not going to work. That is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

absolutely what we are trying to do. That is why I would not have wanted to take the Bill in the form that it was—the draft form—to Parliament. We have done a huge amount of work since I arrived. I think it is in a much stronger place now.

We are awaiting the recommendations from the Joint Committee, because there is a huge amount of expertise in the Lords on this, and the recommendations from your Sub-Committee. There will be even more work done. My objective is to make sure we get the Bill to the House in March, so timeframes are limited, but we are in a very different place than we were before.

Q249 **Chair:** So we are now at March for the Bill, instead of Christmas?

Ms Dorries: I know the Prime Minister said that—

Chair: It was a very difficult day, so I do understand.

Ms Dorries: It is not that it was a difficult day, Mr Chairman. The Joint Committee said it would not be providing its recommendations until 10 December. As the House rises on 20 December, it was just impossible. If we were going to do justice to the Joint Committee, and if we were going to duly consider its recommendations and, if possible, include them in the Bill, it would just be impossible to do it in those 10 days.

Q250 **Chair:** It is sort of the theme of the moment, talking about Twitter. I did point it out on Twitter, almost straight away—

Ms Dorries: Ah, the wonderful Twitter.

Q251 **Chair:** —that it was nigh on impossible to do that in that time. The more realistic timing for the Bill is March—we are conscious of time, yes? Thank you. In terms of other things the Prime Minister has said on this particular Bill—

Ms Dorries: Actually, can I just say, if we can get it sooner, we will get it sooner. It depends on what the recommendations are from the Joint Committee.

Q252 **Chair:** Normally three months is about the working premise on Joint Committees, and then the Bill will come to the Floor of the House. The Prime Minister spoke about cyber-flashing, saying he wanted to see that, specifically, outlawed, potentially in the Bill. Do you support that?

Ms Dorries: I certainly do. Not only cyber-flashing—I am not even sure if cyber-flashing is the term you would use for the new software which takes photographs—only of women—and transposes that image into that woman being naked, and then circulates it on the internet. I am not sure if that comes under cyber-flashing. However, my information is that much of that is now within the scope of the Bill, and is included in the work we are doing. Again, I would ask Sarah Connolly to comment on that.

Sarah Connolly: There is Law Commission work in this space, as well, with the intimate image abuse. I know that the Ministry of Justice is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

thinking about the various offences in that space, as recommended by the Law Commission.

Q253 **Chair:** We are aware of the Law Commission. Are you saying that, effectively, it is going to be left to the Ministry of Justice, or will it be in the Bill?

Sarah Connolly: If we can bring it into scope—as the Secretary of State says, we are looking at the scope generally. There are certainly offences in the space around intimate image sharing, and that is with the Ministry of Justice. The advantage of that is, as soon as something is made illegal, it is naturally brought into scope, because of the illegality regulatory system that we have. As soon as we take a decision that we are going to make something an offence, it is then incumbent upon the platforms to remove it, because it would, at that point, be illegal. So those are the mechanisms we are looking at in this space.

Q254 **Chair:** Should there be criminal sanctions against platforms that persistently fail in their duty of care?

Ms Dorries: Absolutely, yes. I think the draft Bill put criminal sanctions at two years, but I am looking at shortening that very dramatically, hopefully to three months. Because those online platforms can actually change their behaviours now. They can comply with their own terms and conditions now. They can remove harmful algorithms right now. They do not need to wait for the Bill to come to the Floor of the House before changing the way they behave. Therefore, they do not need two years.

As I have said before, rather than putting 20,000 engineers on to the metaverse, Facebook should really be putting them on to making its platforms comply with its own terms and conditions, removing misogynistic, abusive and harassing content, removing algorithms that direct children to suicide chatrooms or pro-anorexia chatrooms, or whatever other harms the algorithms cause. They should be doing that right now.

Q255 **Chair:** Do you want criminal sanctions effectively to be in primary legislation, on the face of the Bill, or do you want to put them in secondary legislation, at your discretion, three months later?

Ms Dorries: That is a change that I have brought in since arriving, and I am awaiting advice on that, including from parliamentary counsel. So we are looking at that.

Q256 **Chair:** So you are looking at primary legislation, not just secondary legislation?

Ms Dorries: I want it to be on the face of the Bill when it comes to the House.

Q257 **Chair:** That is really helpful; thank you. On ongoing scrutiny of the Bill—we have only a few moments left, so we will try to deal with this as quickly as possible—you stated in front of the Joint Committee that you thought there was a need for an ongoing presence, as such. What were



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you thinking there? Were you thinking of a new Committee being set up, or were you thinking, “Well, actually the Committees of the Lords and Commons could effectively do that job”, which we do already?

Ms Dorries: With this Bill, there are a number of issues that came together, really. The first is that the powers vested in the office of Secretary of State by the Bill are substantial, as you have alluded to, Chair. The powers vested in an independent organisation such as Ofcom are, again, substantial. I am aware from feedback I have had from parliamentarians that some of them are quite uncomfortable about the number of powers vested both in my office and in Ofcom.

Added to that, there is the possibility that online platforms, the moment the Bill becomes an Act, will start changing the goalposts and shifting the landscape, so that the regulatory framework we give to Ofcom will no longer be fit for purpose, because they will change their terms and conditions and how they operate.

How a Committee is formed—the processes by which that happens—is obviously up to the Speaker. I am exploring the option of a Joint Committee, which would involve the House of Lords, to provide ongoing scrutiny, to reassure parliamentarians that the powers will be scrutinised on a very regular basis—I am not going to say it should be weekly because, again, it is up to the House. It should be substantial scrutiny of Ofcom and its new regulatory framework, of the platforms and how they operate, and of the office of Secretary of State in deploying secondary powers.

You asked what my thinking was, and that is my thinking. As I said in an earlier answer, there is a huge amount of expertise in the Lords on issues—

Q258 **Chair:** Is your plan to put that in primary legislation, on the face of the Bill?

Ms Dorries: Yes. Well, again, you are asking me a question. This is a work in progress, and I am looking at whether that is possible.

Q259 **Chair:** That is quite extraordinary, because your own officials have used the example of the Human Rights Act, but obviously that was brought forward as separate legislation, so effectively you are proposing to bring about a new Committee of Parliament by putting that on the face of the Bill, for the first time in our constitutional history.

Ms Dorries: Well, this Bill is nothing if not novel and groundbreaking, and we are legislating for a sector and an environment that have never before been legislated for, in terms of monitoring online platforms. I want to pass that over to Sarah.

Sarah Connolly: I think I am right in saying that the ISC is on the face of legislation. I think it was brought in in 1994—

Q260 **Chair:** But it is not a parliamentary Committee; it is completely different. This is a parliamentary Committee. The difficulty that we have, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

probably many other parliamentarians—I say this respectfully, Secretary of State, in this wrapping-up moment, because we will have votes in a moment—is that it feels like this was an innovation that was put up with very little thought behind it, frankly, and effectively it has led to a situation in which there will be a really novel change to the way in which Ministers and parliamentarians interact with one another. I would urge you to think very strongly and very carefully about that going forward, because what is being proposed, at least in proto form, is effectively potentially damaging to parliamentary scrutiny rather than enhancing it. That is something that my Committee feels the same about, and, speaking of the other place, the Lords will think the same about that. I would like you to take that away today, and perhaps we can discuss that offline at a later date.

Ms Dorries: I am absolutely happy to discuss things at a later date. I'm not someone who is going to resist change because this is something that has not been done before—

Chair: Resist it though if it is not democratic.

Ms Dorries: I think it is more democratic to have—this doesn't take away from what this Committee does or the scrutiny that this Committee applies, or indeed your sub-Committee. It just uses—it is just a platform to harness, also the expertise in the House of Lords, and to provide an ongoing, regular scrutiny of the Bill once it becomes an Act. It is there as a permanent watching brief of the behaviour of platforms—

Q261 **Chair:** You mean like a Select Committee? Like a parliamentary Select Committee?

Ms Dorries: It is a Joint Committee.

Chair: We are just about to have a vote, so I will adjourn now. Thank you very much, Secretary of State, and thank you, Sarah Healey and Sarah Connolly, for your evidence today.